

“How Big Is Your Christ? How Big Is Your World?”

May 28, 2017

A Sermon by the Rev. John C. R. Silbert at Trinity Presbyterian Church; Butler, Pennsylvania
Ascension Sunday and the Seventh Sunday of Easter, Year A

Text: “God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places . . . And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.”

Ephesians 1:20 and 22-23; NRSV



Image Credit: <http://exploringchurchministry.blogspot.com/2016/05/ascension-of-lord.html>

Let us pray: Our Father and our God make us masters of ourselves that we may become the servants of others. Take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire, for we would see Jesus this morning, in his name and for his sake, we pray, Amen.

One Sunday, some time ago, a man named Christian came to church to worship God. He loved the service: the hymns and songs were uplifting and made his heart glad; the sermon was short, but full of inspiration; when he joined his prayers with those around him he was filled with a sense of God’s presence – an enormous presence that picked him up on his feet and out the door to embrace the new week.

Monday morning, Christian’s alarm clock didn’t work – it was set for PM, not AM – he was late for work and his boss chewed him out.

Tuesday afternoon, Christian discovered that he did not understand his teenage daughter as well as he thought: her new green-spiked hair was not nearly as shocking as the freshly pierced tongue-stud in her mouth. Tempers flared and ego's got crunched.

Wednesday, Christian completed a big project at his company. When he turned it in, senior-staff said nothing by way of thanks and asked instead, why it wasn't copied in triplicate. Christian began to think working late each night the week before and half of Saturday to get it done had been pointless.

Thursday night, Christian watched a cable news program that was discussing the rise of crime among adolescents . . . Some of the kids they interviewed had spiked hair and more than one body part pierced. His stomach churned.

Friday, Christian's wife backed the family car over the curb again, but this time something that sounded like metal-on-metal was clunking behind the right rear wheel. Bending down to look closer, Christian's knee soaked up run-off from yesterday's rain storm – *did I mention it was muddy water?* His other suits were at the cleaners. He tried to explain his casual attire to the clients at his 10 AM presentation – they were not amused.

Saturday, didn't start well when Christian's alarm hadn't been changed to the weekend setting. Sorting through the mail, the thick packet from the IRS was too ominous to open; Diesel, the family Labrador ate everyone's lunch off the kitchen counter – subs from the church youth-group fundraiser. Several hours later all \$25.00 of it were thrown up on the Living Room rug that had been professionally cleaned on Tuesday.

Christian's God was pretty big last Sunday afternoon. By Saturday night, God was small enough to put in the freezer with a bang; as small as the ice cream box he went searching for and found . . . empty. Poor Christian . . . the experience of Monday to Saturday had a diminishing effect on the reality of who God is in his life.

The experience of everyday life is often such that the experience of the week is the spiritual equivalent of looking at God through the wrong end of a telescope. Many times, God seems small and horribly distant. For some folks God has become so small that he no longer exists and seems totally irrelevant to everyday life. At least that's how they act the rest of the week.

How big is your God this morning? Maybe I should ask you, how big will your God be on Tuesday night? -- Or Thursday afternoon?

John Calvin once said of God's bigness that "*the whole world is the arena of God's activity.*" He staked this belief in what he knew of Christ Jesus. And it was Jesus who made his Father visible to the world.

What do we know about Jesus? Paul, writing to the Christians in Ephesus said that the God of hope, giver of the riches of his glorious inheritance to the saints and the one of immeasurable greatness and power, put all of this at "*work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come.*" (Eph. 1:20-21 NRSV)

Wow! What a vision! The ceiling of our little church is hardly big enough to make room for all of that!

Yet, more often than not the Jesus we confess with our everyday lives is small enough to put in a box no bigger than the one our mail comes in . . . And when that happens, we couldn't fill a pew with such a vision (among those of us who bother to come to church), let alone try to raise such a vision to the ceiling.

How does such a big Christ become so small?

Perhaps we ought to begin by asking how big we think our world really is? And more, how and in what way is God at work in it?

A lot of people live in a world that can be described like the one Edith Ann lived in: Edith Ann lived in a small little world, bounded on the North, South, East and West by Edith Ann. Do you know somebody like that? . . . Are you somebody like that? When the whole arena of God's activity has to fit into a world that small, all it takes is one bad week to chop the Lord of glory down to size – especially if we believe our interests are not being met.

To envision a larger world – and to see God at work in it – it takes courage to set ourselves aside, now and again, in order to gain perspective. Life holds promise – the world God loves is bigger – if we can see beyond damaged rear axles to see the love that is trying to move the second car, so you can get yours going to work on time; spiked hair and pierced tongues can be beautiful if we can believe that it is the attempt of someone who loves and misses us in all our busyness and distractions trying to say, "Are you there? Do you see me, Dad? Do you love me, Mom? I can't tell." The world is bigger if we can hold in our hearts the belief that the work we do is done as unto God, who loves us unconditionally, even if the report isn't printed in triplicate.

If you can envision that, you can do anything.

Turner Classic Movies is running a marathon of films this weekend relating to our military efforts, depicting that service in a variety of contexts through the years. One of the films screened yesterday was "*Mister Roberts*," a comedy/drama that centers on a young naval officer's desire to join the battle action of the U. S. Navy in the Pacific in the waning days of the Second World War. He is an overworked supply officer on an insignificant supply ship – the "U. S. S. Reluctant" – sailing in the tamer areas of the South Pacific. Through many different actions on and off his ship, Mr. Roberts tries to encourage the crew, while battling an embittered

captain (played with aplomb by James Cagney). Finally, Mr. Roberts gets his chance to serve in combat and is promoted forward to a battleship on the front lines. . . Within a few short weeks, Mister Roberts is killed in a Kamikaze attack on his new ship. Word reaches the crew of the Reluctant who grieve his loss. This news arrives along with a thank you letter sent back to the crew of the Reluctant from Mr. Roberts shortly before his death. In his words to them, he said that he had come to realize how brave the Reluctant's crew really is, even though they sail in the backwaters of the war. Because day-after-day they keep at it in their own way serving a purpose greater than all of them.

On this Memorial Day weekend, we think of all those who served unselfishly and unreservedly knowing they were part of a larger vision in their military service to God and country; and realizing on Memorial Day that many gave the ultimate sacrifice in their service and duty.

Philip Yancey describes visiting Calcutta. A place as he puts it *"of poverty, death, and irremediable human problems."* *There the nuns trained by Mother Teresa serve the poorest, most miserable people on the planet: half dead bodies picked up from the street of Calcutta. The world stands in awe at the sisters' dedication and the results of their ministry, but something about these nuns impresses me even more: their serenity. If I tackled such a daunting project, I would be scurrying about, faxing press releases to donors, begging for more resources, gulping tranquilizers, grasping at ways to cope with my mounting desperation. Not these nuns.*

Their serenity traces back to what takes place before their days work begins. At four in the morning, long before the sun, the Sisters rise, awakened by a bell and a call "Let us bless the Lord." "Thanks be to God," they reply. Dressed in spotless white saris, they file into the chapel, where they sit on the floor, Indian-style, and pray and sing together. On the wall of the plain chapel hangs a crucifix with the words, "I thirst."

The nuns of Calcutta serve a big Christ because they step outside their own little worlds to see how small the world can be for others – and Jesus is in those other worlds, longing to be touched – *"in as much as you do this to one of the least of these, you do it to me."* We see these nuns and marvel at their bigness – their vision for God's power – but it is only because they seek to find Jesus in a world outside themselves, wherever he is; and he – Jesus – is the one who Paul says *"fills all in all."* (Eph. 1:23b)

How big is your Christ? How big is your world?

When we get ourselves out of the little boxes we live in and take Christ out of the even smaller one we put him in, then we are better able to see him at work in the world – a vision that is bigger than this little church's ceiling and certainly big enough to get us through this week, whatever comes.

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

ⁱ Philip Yancey, *Reaching for an Invisible God*, p. 83.