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John 1:1-5; Colossians 1:15-20
June 20, 2021

A Journey into the Country of Grace
Week 3: G-O-D is a three-letter word – Who/What is God?

Introduction:

We began our journey with a pair of complementary questions, one for you to ask yourself and one for you to ask God:

1. *What do you desire for your relationship with God this summer?*
2. *What does God most desire for your relationship with him this summer?*

Way points in the country of Grace

1. *In the country of grace, only little children can enter*
2. *In the country of grace, the gift is the Giver*
 - o Picture of Traeger beside picture of Hug and dancing

Before we dive into our message this morning, I want us to take a minute to acknowledge gratitude for the people who, by the way they lived their lives, have shown us something of the goodness and beauty of God our Father.

These “spiritual fathers in our faith” may or may not be our biological fathers. Your spiritual father might be your mom, an older brother, a cousin, an uncle, a neighbor, a Sunday school teacher, a camp counselor, a youth pastor, a spouse, it might even be your children.

We all have been blessed by people who through their character, compassion, and courage, their sacrifice, self-giving, and selflessness, have given us a glimpse of the grace and love of the Father of Jesus who is also our Father.

It is likely that you may have several people in mind. I want you to choose one and focus on him or her for a moment....

How did that person reflect the heart of a little child? (tell your neighbor, and then group (word or phrase))

- *Imagination*
- *Compassion*
- *Willing to do anything*

- *Curiosity*
- *Simple*
- *Unconditional love*
- *Optimism*
- *Innocence*
- *Joy in the little things*

I would suggest that the reason that person had some capacity to show you the heart of the Father is *because* they have the heart of a child.

Their ability to show you the love of the Father is in direct proportion to their own reception of the Father's love toward them as his beloved child.

Children come to know who they are as they gaze into the eyes of their parents or care-givers. That is how they know they are loved, special, important. So too those who most reflect the love of the Father have come to know themselves through the eyes of love the Father has for them.

Scripture reading:

John 1:1–5 (NRSV) In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with [[pros]: toward (face to face with)] God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Colossians 1:15–20 (NRSV) ¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶ for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Theme: G.O.D. is a 3-letter word (How do we know who God is?)

I have a confession. I didn't want to tell you this earlier because I wasn't sure if you'd come back again.... Here it is: I don't believe in G-O-D. I not only don't believe in 'G-O-D', I have made it my mission in life to oppose G-O-D in any way I can.

In case you are a little confused, let me explain...

- You see, G-O-D is just a three-letter word.
- G-O-D is not God's name.
- G-O-D is a place-holder.
- It is a category, like human or dog.
- To believe in 'G-O-D' is to believe in the generic idea of god, the unknown god of our best guesses and mythological imaginations.
- G-O-D is whatever I want him or her to be.
- It is the god we create in *our* image and likeness.
- We should never forget that Adolph Hitler believed in G-O-D.

As we sang earlier in the song "Good Good Father", There are 1000 stories of what God is like.

If I told you I am married to a human that wouldn't tell you much. My wife has a name, Sharon Lee; and she prefers to be called 'Sharon' than to be called 'human spouse of mine.' God also has a name, and it is not G-O-D.

Personal Knowledge: knowing 'about' is different than knowing personally

How do we know anything about God? How do we know what we know is actually about the God who is and not a g.o.d. of our own making.

How do we come to know a person?

Only through 'personal knowledge.' Personal knowledge requires two things:

Self-revealing of the person we would come to know

Without this self-revealing, all we have are best guesses.

- Ex 2: [picture of some great food I had at a restaurant, and how little that actually tells me about the chef] I can love the gift of the food and know nothing of the cook. I could make guesses based on what I observe in the meals, but they would be guesses only.

- Maybe you and I are eating at the restaurant together and you know the owner who is also the cook. You could tell me all about that person, but I still wouldn't recognize that person if I saw them. My knowledge about the cook is limited unless he or she choose to come out of the kitchen and introduce him or herself to me.
 - o I had that experience one morning in downtown Camas as Chris and I were having breakfast together and talking about these sermons. He knows the owner who is also the cook by name, but I didn't. We were served our meal and ½ way through it when the owner came out to our table to say hello, Chris was able to introduce me. I never would have known her had she not come out from behind the kitchen to introduce herself.

A personal God is only known through that God's self-revelation (i.e. Only God can reveal God)

Shared-Language by which to communicate

Without a common language, we can only go so far

If we don't speak the same language, we need a translator.

- [picture] Illustration from Albania, the mediator of revelation, the 'translator' who communicates (mediates) the 'things of God to us and the things of us to God.' (Albania to English; English to Albania)

So...How does an infinite God establish personal relations with finite rebellious creatures?

The education of the human race: Israel learns to speak a foreign (divine) language

What language have you all learned other than English such that you could maintain a conversation for at least 5 minutes? (name them)

What if you had to learn a language from another world? If you've been married for more than 10 years you've had to learn Venesian... (Women are from Venus....)

- I can say that because its Father's Day. (OK, maybe I can't)

What about the language of God? How does one learn the language of God?

This is one way to understand the history of Israel as the people of God. In the Garden of Eden, when human beings chose separation from God, we also lost our heart language with which we knew God.

So God starts back at square one, and with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, he calls a new people into being and gives them the name Israel.

God's goal is summarized in the promise: "I will be your God and you will be my people."

He is not looking for minions, he is looking for *partners*, image bearers, a people who are capable of representing him before the world.

But for Israel to become God's covenant partners, she would need a shared language to understand what God is communicating.

So begins the long historical dialogue between Israel and God that takes place over the course of 2000 years.

Along the way, Israel had to learn the language of God, and they were starting from the beginning. They had a whole lot of bad ideas about God they had absorbed from the cultures around them, most significantly Egypt.

God had to teach them the basics:

What is God's name?

What kind of God is God? How does God use his power?

What does it mean to be human? Do all humans have value or are some human lives more important than other human lives?

What is God's will for how his people live? (Laws)

What kind of relationship does God want with his people? Does God want slaves or sons and daughters? Does God want to punish or to pardon? Does God want to shame us or bless us?

What does God do when his people turn away from him, or when they sin against one another? How can what has been broken be healed and fellowship be restored? (Liturgy: worship, offerings, sacrifices)

Israel had no categories for God other than those in their culture.

God had to meet them where they were at and slowly teach them a language and set of concepts so that they could grow in their capacity to receive what he wanted to give - a real relationship with the living God that would last more than 5 minutes.

And so God historically acted on Israel's behalf (most notably in delivering them from slavery in Egypt); and God met with Moses on the mountain (and gave them the law). God even spoke to them (through the prophets).

In spite of all this, although Israel had seen God do and say so much, she continued to struggle to trust God and one generation after another turned away from him.

Now all that God taught and revealed to Israel prior to the coming of Jesus Christ was but a shadow of the Reality that was to come.

- The law and the liturgy were merely *pointers* that bore *witness* to God's will for fellowship with humanity.
 - o [picture of La Trappe beer; then a bottle of wine] What is this? (wine) No it is not. It is a picture of a bottle of wine. It is not the real thing. You cannot drink this picture!
- In fact the original tabernacle that Moses had built while they travelled in the desert was officially called the "Tabernacle of *Witness*."

Jesus comes to translate the Father – Revolution in Knowledge

When Israel had learned enough vocabulary and had enough history of walking with God to get around in the country of Grace, we might say "it was time."

When, "the time was fulfilled" Jesus came preaching the Kingdom of God.

Grace himself came in person and moved into the neighborhood.

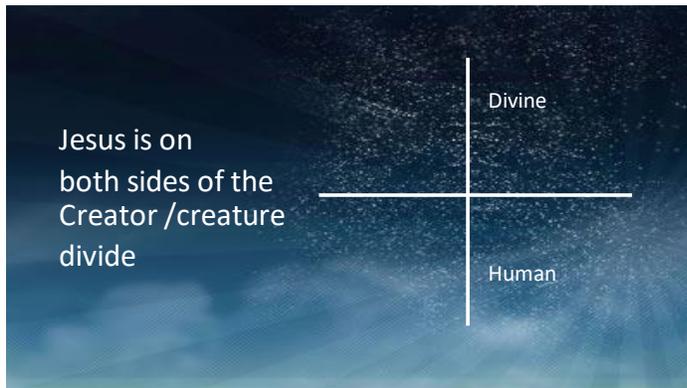
The coming of Jesus into our world represents the greatest revolution in our knowledge of God possible (Greater than the discovery that the earth is round and not flat).

If I were to ask you, what separates us from God, what would you say?

- Sin?
- Yes, but even more foundationally than sin, what separates us from God is that God is Creator and we are creatures. God is infinite and we are finite. That is a pretty significant difference!

In Jesus, God crosses the divide and *becomes* one of us.

Jesus Christ is the unique revelation of God because he is **the one point of contact, the central axis**, the meeting point between heaven and earth.



In the person of Jesus Christ, there is a place, in the space and time of our world, which span both sides of the Creator/creature divide.

This is God's self-revealing in language we can understand – the language of a human being like us, and yet a human being who is also God.

- *He is the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15)*
- *In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell (Col 1:19)*

Jesus is not just the Revelation, but also the God being Revealed. He is not just the speech or communication of God, he is the God who is speaking, the God who is communicating.

In Jesus Christ, real objective knowing of God has been made possible.

If we think that Jesus came to point the way to God, we are missing the point. Jesus is not a pointer, or a sign, or a witness to something or someone else, Jesus *is* the point – or rather, more precisely, *Jesus in his relationship with his Father through the Spirit is the point*. The Trinity is in action on our playing field. That is the revelation, the Gift and the Giver all caught up together.

So when Jesus reveals God, what he is revealing is not just a God 'out there' or 'up there'; what he is revealing is this relationship. The Father cannot be revealed apart from the Son; the Son cannot be the Son apart from the Father. The two cannot be understood apart. When Jesus gives himself, he gives himself IN this relationship with the Father.

It is critical to the gospel that we see this, because this IS in fact the gospel.

John 1:4 "In him was life, and the life was the light of all people."

That's the gospel – the life, eternal life. This relationship of the Father and the Son IS eternal life:

Eternal life is knowing the Father and the Son.

John 17:3 And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

This is how the apostle John puts it in chapter 1:

John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was *with* [[pros]: toward (face to face with)] God, and the Word was God.

That's God: the Father and the Son face to face for eternity.

John 1:16–18 (NRSV) ¹⁶ From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

No one has ever seen the Father, but the Son who is close to the father's heart has. Jesus' mission is to explain the heart of the Father, through word and deed, so that we would come to know him, so that our fearful and anxious hearts might find their rest in him.

(Mt 11:25-30) ²⁷ No one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. ²⁸ "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

In Jesus, the mutual knowing and loving that the Father and the Son have had with the Spirit for all eternity is embodied on our plane, in a human being like us, and it is being shared personally with us in a way that we can see and come to know as well.

What this means is this: *nothing can be said accurately about G-O-D that does not pass through the Jesus-Father relationship filter first.*

Jesus was sent by the Father to us to act as our translator. Like my translator in Albania, Jesus interprets the things of God to us and the things of us to God.

He is not just a picture of a bottle of wine, he is the wine that we get to drink that shares its joy.

John 15:11 "I tell you these things so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be full.

Jesus wants to share the joy he knows with the Father with us.

He is the life of God in a human being, shining in the darkness of our human condition, shining in the darkness of our fear, our anxiety, the messes of our life, and yet the darkness does not overcome it.

This is not mere information about God; this is looking into the face of the Father and seeing his eyes light up because he is so happy to see you seeing him.

What does Jesus see when he looks into the eyes of the Father?

“The joy of the Lord’s life, that which made it life to him, was the Father; of him he was always thinking, to him he was always turning.... Jesus’ thought was ever and always his Father. To its home in the heart of the Father his heart ever turned. That was his treasure-house, the jewel of his mind, the mystery of his gladness.... His life was hid in God.... [With] his eternal childlike gaze, he beheld [all things] from the bosom of the Father.” (*Unspoken Sermons*, “The Way”)

In Jesus, we see what true humanity is meant to look like.

The gospel comes in this personal way, the gift is the Giver, and the Giver himself comes to give the Gift, which is Himself in the form of a person. Likewise, the gospel can only be received in personal ways (through receptivity, invitation, welcoming, embrace, honesty, vulnerability). The gospel is not a legal transaction or an energy drink. It is flesh. It still is.

There are two versions of the Christian life.

1. One form is satisfied with beliefs and **information about God**. They may stand at a safe distance apart, like spectators watching a game on tv; or they may be highly active and busy doing church work, working *for* God, like the older brother in the prodigal son, never taking the time to actually look into the father’s face to see the joy in his eyes, and the longing of his heart.
2. The other group of people have **lives with God**, and as they do life with God, as they spend time before the face of God, they begin to reflect that face, they begin to bear the image of his face, they become the image of God they were created to be – they start to look like God. They become ‘fully human’, complete in Christ.

This is a question each of us must face every day: Today am I going to just get busy and live on my own, maybe for God, but still on my own; or am I going to live it with God the way Jesus did?

Are you open?

What does openness/reception look like? It is not rocket science.

If you are a parent, think about the ways you have found effective at fostering a more open and personal relationship with your kids.

Last week I was sitting around a fire pit with a bunch of other dads and we were talking about some of the ways we connect with our kids.... When are we being great dads?

- Being ready, day or night, to listen when they talk.
- Creating space, dedicated time, without screens or other distractions
- Give them your complete attention
- Ask them if there is anything they would like us to know
- Including them in the things we are doing, making them feel invited and wanted
- Patiently teaching them things as they are ready
- Doing hard things together (like yard work, hikes)
- Invest T-I-M-E with them
- Enjoy leisurely meals together

These are all things we can do with our kids, with a spouse, with a friend, and yes, even with God. Personally knowledge requires this kind of openness and receptivity.

Whatever your relationship with your earthly father has been like – good, bad, or somewhere in between, or nothing – the most important thing is that Jesus has included each of us in his life with his Father and he invites us to join him in his eternal childlike gaze looking into the eyes of the Father who lights up when he sees him because he brings joy to the Father’s heart.

Let’s sit with Jesus’ invitation to show us what he knows about the Father....