
Look to the Center

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 23 July 2023

Genesis 28:10-19 • Romans 8:12-25 • Matthew 13:24-30,36-43



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Someone once asked me, “If we are all one Communion in Christ, what’s the difference between Christianity and communism?”

My first thought was, “Wow, there’s an interesting question. This guy is clearly thinking about his faith and what it means.” I was glad to receive a question like that. I don’t recall that I had a great reply at the time. But what I wish I had said was, “If in Christian Communion we pray to Christ, whom do communists pray to?” Likewise, I might have asked, “What is the central focus of a Christian’s life, and what is it for the communist?”

In truth, there are similarities. Remember in chapter 4 of the Acts of the Apostles how those first Christians lived in community:

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had ... For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money

from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. (Acts 4:32-36)

Does this not sound like “from each according to his ability, to each according to his need?” Indeed, it was like that. This early “commune,” if you will, shared everything, and shared alike. Communism, if it had ever taken root in the Soviet Union (that is, if they'd ever gotten past the Socialism stage), would have been like this.

And yet, not at all like this. Picture a group of people standing in a circle. If they are communists, they are looking at each other, taking and receiving food and other goods, thinking primarily of their own needs being satisfied. The people are in a circle, but the centre of the circle is empty. At the end of the day, for all the sharing of goods going on, Communism is essentially self-centred, for the end goal for each person is to satisfy one's own needs. This is true of all purely economic systems.

But it is not true of Christianity, which is not a mere economic system (although it can, and should, inform all such systems). In Christian Communion, you can picture a group of people standing in a circle, but the circle is not empty. Their focus is not on each other or their own needs. They are focused on the centre of the circle, and that centre is Jesus Christ. Each person in the circle has a direct relationship with Christ, and that relationship is the basis of all other relationships, especially the relationships with the other people around the circle, to whom we have a responsibility. Our responsibility to others counters our natural self-love. To love ourselves is useful and normal. But to love others? That is something we learn. To love someone else as we love ourselves? That is learned through example and through prayer, and through connection with Jesus, who is our great example of compassion and love for others. Our true inheritance from God includes love of neighbour, for if we truly give ourselves to Christ, we will know that love and cease to put ourselves first.

The circle is complete when all those around the circle commit their lives to the centre, which is Jesus Christ. It is a useful image for looking at our Gospel reading today, about the weeds growing up among the wheat. As Jesus explains, the wheat represents the good people of the kingdom of God, and the weeds represent those who follow the evil one — we may simply say those who do not follow Christ. While we are all growing — that is, while we are living in this world — it is not always easy to tell which is which. In our lives, we encounter all kinds of people. Many are Christians, many are not. We are not called to judge others, for that judgment is reserved for God, to be done at the end of time. At that time those who have been chosen by God, and have chosen to follow Christ, will receive their reward, eternal life with God. The rest will not. They will be thrown into the blazing furnace, or the outer darkness — both are terrifying images of places where the love of God is absent. Hell is the place where God turns his back on you.

This parable makes me think about redemption. If you're a weed to start out with, are you always destined to be a weed? Can you change, and become good wheat? Paul and the psalms tell us that we are all sinners, that all have fallen from grace, and that we are only redeemed through God's grace and our faith in Christ. So we are all weeds to start with, all of us standing around this big circle with Christ in the centre. Some of us will continue as we are, not noticing or acknowledging the Creator of all, dealing only with other people, and striving always for our own benefit. But some of us will discover Jesus, right there in front of us, in our midst; and we will give our lives to him. We will become wheat, who by God's grace will inherit the kingdom of heaven.

There will always be weeds among the wheat, but by God's grace, we can choose to be with the wheat. We may even help to bring other weeds along with us, who may join us, if God wills it so. All points on the circumference of a circle are equal, all are the same distance from the centre. Redemption is available to all — we just have to look in the right direction: towards our Lord and Saviour. Amen.