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“Are You the One?” – Part II – On Not Using the Wrong Measure

(Deuteronomy 25:13-15 NRSV) You shall not have in your bag two kinds of weights, large and small. 14 You shall not have in your house two kinds of measures, large and small. 15 You shall have only a full and honest weight; you shall have only a full and honest measure, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

(Matthew 11:2-6 NRSV) When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples 3 and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" 4 Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: 5 the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. 6 And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

Did you know that human hair grows at the rate of five ten-thousandths of a yard per day? Now, that's not only a weird fact to know, it's also a pretty useless one: Whenever I go get my hair cut, I'm always asked: "*When was your last haircut?*" If I were to answer by saying "*I'm not sure, but let me calculate it. Let's see, at the rate of five ten-thousandths of a yard per day...*" I don't think that would be too helpful, do you? Or, let's say someone wanted to measure the width of a hair from his head and I handed him a yardstick, that wouldn't get him very far along in answering his question. When our children were small, I built them a backyard tree-house. Now, I am no carpenter but this particular job I could handle because in most cases if when my

sawing was off by an inch or two, it didn't really matter. You don't need really tight tolerances for building a tree-house. However, I hope, say, that my dentist has a little different measuring standard in mind; being an inch or two off in a root canal could be problematic.

In every aspect of life, it is important for us to use the right measuring stick, to assess situations, people, relationships, opportunities with an appropriate measure in mind. That is even true of our faith and it is true of how we read and understand the Bible. In last week's sermon, I talked about the question of "*How do we know that something, someone, some teaching, some interpretation of faith is from God or not?*" And I closed that sermon with a reference to Martin Luther's statement that "*The Bible is not the word of God; rather, it contains the Word of God.*" I said that for Luther the mark of whether or not a passage from scripture "contains" the Word of God depends on whether it "*shows forth the Christ.*" Surely Luther is onto something here. Take, for example, these two verses of scripture: The first is the familiar and beloved John 3:16 "*For God so loved the world that He sent His only son, that those who believe in him shall have everlasting life.*" The second is this terrible verse from the Psalms: "*Blessed¹ shall be those who take the Babylonian babies and dash them to death against the rocks*" (Psalm 137:9). Surely, surely the first one indeed "*contains Christ*" and surely, surely the second one says more about the terrible frustrations and anger of the writer

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Or "happy."

in that moment of captivity and exile in Babylon than it does about what God truly approves of! For you see, it is just not helpful to life or faith to treat the 30,000+ verses in the Bible as if they were all of equal weight and importance, as if they were simply 30,000 interchangeable pieces of information. But, of course, even so that still leaves us the question, and it is indeed a question of “measurement” – how DO we decide or discover that a particular verse of the Bible, or interpretation of the Bible, or teaching, or claim about what God wants “*shows forth Christ*” or not?

Last week I promised that in this week’s sermon I would try to answer that with a three-pronged test. Now, I’ll warn you that it’s not a simple or certainly simplistic test. And people of good faith can disagree on the results when using it. And, that is probably even more true for us Disciples, about whom someone once said, parodying Jesus’ remark, that “wherever two or three Disciples are gathered, there are five or six opinions.” But even with those risks I am convinced that something like what I’m about to offer can do justice to both life’s complexity and God’s goodness. So let’s see where our three-fold test gets us on this question of how do we know whether a teaching, or a claim about God, or even a verse in the Bible shows Christ or not?

The first part of the test is this: **Is it credible?** Put less abstractly, “**Does it make sense to our God-given minds?**” Is it a rational thing to believe? Let me give you an example. There are folks who believe that the earth was created in the year 4004 B.C. Many, probably most of them are profoundly good people, good Christians, who love

and serve the Lord better than I do. And yet I would have to maintain that that belief simply doesn't make much sense for our God-given minds. For do you realize just how much thinking you have to ignore or stretch to make that assertion? When we lived in Hawaii, 25 miles north of where Kilauea Volcano was making new land from its lava flows every day, one could see that the geologic processes that gave rise to those islands took vast eons of time. Or take the topic of what was happening over those earthly eons; there are those who would claim that life has never evolved. And yet, again, this is contrary to the best thinking that our best minds have done. But think about it: every time you get an antibiotic these days you bear witness to the truth of a form of evolution because it's probably a much stronger antibiotic than it would have been twenty years ago as germs have indeed evolved resistance drugs over the last several decades. If you're a diabetic, you will be very glad to know that the discovery and manufacture of insulin was and is made possible by the fact of evolution in certain micro-biological aspects.² There is a strain of crickets in Hawaii that was being threatened with extinction because of a certain parasite that was attracted to them

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Ed Darrell in private correspondence writes: "So at each step of the way, from diagnosing how the disease is caused, to treating diabetes, first with pig and beef insulin, and then with human insulin extracted from genetically engineered bacteria, the understanding and application of evolution theory has been assumed, the background theory that allowed the discovery of the cause of the disease, and the creation of treatments for it." Cf. also Ed Darrell's testimony before the Texas State Board of Education Textbook Hearings <http://www.texscience.org/files/darrell.htm> as well as the article on "Insulin" from Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Insulin#Discovery_and_characterization

by their chirping; in just five years' time, those crickets have now evolved to be chirpless!³

Now, what does any of this have to do with God or our first test that a statement be intellectually credible, that it make sense? Just this: to believe that God created the world 6000 years ago means that you **also** have to believe that God put all the fossil and geological and volcanic evidence there in order to **trick** us. And moreover, you have to believe that God then gave certain people brilliant minds and talents in geology or microbiology knowing that what they would discover would in fact be wrong and a waste of time. But, my friends, I just can't go there – to willfully ignore the best evidence, the best science that we have, that says that this God-created earth is very old and an amazingly wonderful complex creation of geological processes and that life forms evolve and change in some fashions, is to fail the “make sense” test. So that is the first of this three-pronged test: if you encounter claims that would “require” you to believe things would be at odds with what our God-given minds have learned about the earth and the cosmos, then that is not God, that is not the right measure.

The second test is this: **Is any claim, teaching, or assertion about God moral?** Now this is a tricky one in some ways. Morality is a notoriously difficult subject. Good people of good will, deeply moral all of them, can disagree on what morality

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<http://www.thetelegraph.com/articles/cricket-57396-crickets-female.html>

entails for any given occasion or on any given subject. And yet I think this is a very important test, even if it too is a difficult one. Return with me to the claim that God created the world 6000 years ago and put all the geologic and astronomical evidence of fossils and super-novas there as a kind of trick, to see if people would fall for it. Would you think that such a God is moral? Or take the verse from the Psalms that I talked about earlier; did God truly bless those Hebrew exiles in Babylon who might manage to steal a Babylonian baby and torture it by slamming it against the rocks? If that is true, is such a God moral? Or a monster? In the thirteenth century, the Roman Catholic church started a terrible persecution against what it believed were heretics in southern France. As the persecution got underway, it became increasingly unclear who was a heretic (in the eyes of the church, anyway), who was not, and who was but was claiming not to be. The local abbot gave the order to kill them all and “let God sort them out.” Was that order truly representative of what a moral God would want?

Here is the test that I try to use when thinking about this issue of whether a claim or teaching about God is moral or not: I ask myself what would my reaction be if the claim were about a **human** parent instead of about our heavenly parent? That is, would we ever call a **human** parent good or moral if he or she dashed infants against the rocks? Would we consider them blessed – or awful? Or what would we say of a **human** parent who set things up very carefully to trick his children about the way things are and then waited to see if they would fall for it? I think we'd call that wrong and cruel.

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http://www.manbottle.com/trivia/kill_them_all.../kill_them_all..._answer
<http://www.hendersons.net/straitway/2001/03012001.htm>

Would any **human** parent kill his child because he thought the child held wrong beliefs?
– let alone kill all his children because he couldn't tell which ones were holding the
“right” beliefs! We'd call that monstrous, and rightly so.

So, if the first test of any claim or teaching about God is “Does this make sense,
is it intellectually credible” and the second is “Is it moral,” what is the third test? It's this:
**Is that teaching or claim or even Bible verse consistent with the Good News of
the Gospel?** This is really the most important test of all, and in understanding it it is
absolutely crucial to use the right measure. Have you ever noticed that whenever you
buy gasoline in most states, there is a little sticker on the gas pump that says that the
measure used on that pump is correct and true? It's a matter of trust – the state is
attesting that you can trust the truth of that pump's dispensing. When God told the
Hebrew people, in our Old Testament text for this morning, that they were to have only
honest and true measurements, that they weren't to have one set of measures for
friends and one set for others, it too was a matter of trust. God didn't want anyone
cheated. But I also think that this counsel in Deuteronomy applies to each one of us
when we are thinking about God: if we don't have the right measure of who God is, if we
measure God against something other than the Good News of the Gospel, then we will
have lives that are much worse than they could be. If the measuring stick we use for
God is calibrated in units of fear, then we will approach God as if He is a tyrant to be

appeased instead of a friend to be trusted. No, we need a measure which is true to the Good News of the Gospel. And what is that Good News? If you were to sum up in a sentence the message that Jesus preached and taught, the Gospel message that was to be our measuring stick, what would it be? Well, here's the way I would put it: ***The Good News of the Gospel is that God loves unconditionally each and every person He has made, and that because that is the case God therefore demands justice for each and every person.***⁵ With that in mind, return to the examples we are looking at: Is the Psalmist's claim that the exiled Hebrews will be happy if they kill Babylonia babies consistent with the Gospel? No. Is the claim that God has put geologic or volcanic evidence here to trick us consistent with a God who loves us unconditionally? No. Would the indiscriminate killing of men, women, and children who believed the "wrong" things be consistent with a God of justice? No.

Now, this test – *"Is a claim or teaching consistent with the Good News of the Gospel"* – is not always easy to apply either. And, again, people of faith and good will can differ on how the test, how this measure, as it were, gets applied. And yet it gives us a good and Godly place to talk with one another about what is and is not of God. It can avoid those endless debates about this or that social issue with each side being able to cite an out-of-context Bible verse or two for their positions. It keeps us reminded

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I learned this formulation of the Gospel long ago from Clark Williamson, Professor Emeritus at Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis. In fact, the three-fold schema I am using in this sermon is gratefully adapted from his writings and lectures.

that God is always a God of love but also a God who is constantly challenging us to widen our imaginations and our empathies and to never, ever dehumanize or objectify any person, or race, or class, or religion, or orientation, or nationality, or even just the folks we don't like! For God loves them all. For, think about it: *if God didn't love them all, then why in the world would God love me?*

We began last week with the question that John the Baptist asked Jesus: "Are you the One?" Are you really of God? And we close this week with this three-fold test, this way of trying to always use the right measure to talk and think about God: Does it make sense? Is it moral? Is it consistent with the Good News of the Gospel? And underlying this three-fold test is actually a very simply conviction: **God is a God of both love and justice.** If that weren't the case, then our lives would be much sadder and frightful. But they're not. Because God is indeed love and justice unbounded, even for the likes of you and me. And that is the reason, as the hymn we will sing for communion says, that we can come with joy – not fear, not suspicion, not anxiety, but **joy** – to meet our Lord: forgiven, loved, and freed. That's the right measure. May we use it with thanksgiving for the Gospel that claims us and saves us and makes us whole. Amen.