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The ABC's of Faith D – Divine

Colossians 2:6-10 6 As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, 7 rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. 8 See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. 9 For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, 10 and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority

Mark 8:27-33 27 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" 28 And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." 29 He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." 30 And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. 31 Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33 But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Police officers and prosecutors will tell you, despite what we might think, that eye-witness testimony is often the most unreliable. In fact, I have heard prosecutors say that they would much prefer to have solid physical evidence or even compelling circumstantial evidence. It doesn't take much Googling to find many stories of eyewitnesses whose recollections of an event conflicted on the most basic levels – like the kind or color of a vehicle, or what someone was wearing.. There are lots of reasons for this well-known phenomenon, and it has been the subject of many, many psychological studies and philosophical musings. But when all is said and done, most of those studies and musings come to more-or-less the same conclusion: what we "see" is always a function of what is important to us in some way or another. My own best story in this regard comes from many, many years ago, when Barbara and I were first dating, and I, after a long search, purchased a used car. I called her that evening to tell

her. Her first question to me was “What color is it?” And my answer was “I don’t remember – but I can tell you how big the engine is.” And while the philosopher Immanuel Kant lived a century or so too early to have bought a car, he did say something that rings oh-so-true: every experience we have always happens through some sort of interpretation. Those interpretations may be psychological or economic or ideological or political or whatever, but as Kant put it “there simply are no un-interpreted experiences.”

Now, that’s all perhaps very abstract and high-falutin’ but I think something like it is a good way into our topic of the morning, the latest in this sermon series on “The ABC’s of Faith,” and its topic of “Divine.” For what does it mean to say, as has long been said by the Church, that “Jesus was divine?” For millennia, theologians, preachers, and ordinary folks have sought to express what that means. Hymn writers have done so too. And yet could there be more utterly different hymns about Jesus than the ones we are singing this morning? Take our closing hymn this morning, usually sung on Easter, but glorious on any Sunday, “Crown Him With Many Crowns,” with its lyrics like “*Crown him with many crowns, the Lamb upon his throne... and hail him as thy matchless King through all eternity.... Crown him the Lord of peace.... His reign shall know no end.*” It’s soaring, majestic and dignified, isn’t it? And its claims about why Jesus is divine are breathtaking: He is the sovereign ruler of all creation who is enthroned in royal splendor in heaven.

But how very, very different from our Communion Hymn, “What A Friend We Have in Jesus.” I suspect many of you know some of its lines by heart: “*What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear! ... Can we find a friend so faithful who will all our sorrows share? Jesus knows our every weakness....*” It is more, shall we say, casual, intimate, personal. In this hymn, Jesus is divine not because He is far away and Lord of all, but precisely because He is so very close, so very intimate, so

very personal. “Crown Him With Many Crowns” is a testimony to Jesus’ awesomeness and, we might say, His “other-ness,” and “What A Friend We Have...” is witness to Jesus’ nearness and closeness. Both are an attempt to say why Jesus is worthy of worship, why Jesus is indeed “divine.”

But this begs the theological question: what does it **mean** to be “divine”? The dictionary tells us that to be “divine” is to be God-like, and yet, that answer only pushes us back another step, for then we must ask: What does it **mean** to be God-like and **why** is that worthy of our worship, praise, and adoration? And please note: this is not a “factual” question, but a question – to recur to our opening image – of **interpretation**. And, to cut to the chase, the Church, from its earliest days, has offered an interpretation of Jesus that maintains that He is divine BOTH because He is ruler of all, Lord of life, AND because He is near to us, personal, intimate in a way that is utterly perfect. To use a couple of fancy theological words, Jesus is divine because He is both transcendent and immanent. I suspect the first word you’ve heard and know, but the second word you may not. Let’s start with Jesus being divine because He is transcendent.

Did you hear how our scripture from Colossians put it? *“For in Christ the **whole fullness of deity dwells bodily**, and you have come to fullness in him, who is **the head of every ruler and authority**.”* For Paul, or the student of Paul who wrote this letter, Jesus is not only God-*like*, He is indeed the One in whom God fully and completely dwelt but who is now, therefore, with God in being the absolute ruler over all creation.¹ Our opening hymn this morning, *“Immortal, Invisible”* would be a very good match for this scripture’s understanding of Jesus’ divinity, with its lines like dwelling “in light inaccessible, hid from our eyes.” There are many hymns, in fact, that seek to

¹ And, by the way, sometime I will preach a sermon on the topic – which those of you who attended the “Christmas in the Gospels” class may recall that we spent some time on – of what does it mean to say that “Jesus was both fully God and fully human”?

express this understanding of Jesus or God as **utterly different** from human beings: “*How Great Thou Art*,” “*A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*,” “*O Worship the King*,” to name a few.

Throughout Christian history there has been a strong tradition of wanting to maintain that Jesus is indeed different, **extraordinarily** different, from human beings. Where human beings have the capacity to love but also the capacity to fail to love, Jesus is always perfectly loving, perfectly caring. Where human beings can often only achieve an approximation of justice in this or that situation, Jesus is understood to be the one who is **absolutely** just. In every category that you might use to talk about human life, there has been a strong Christian tradition – expressed well and poetically in our first hymn of the morning – that Jesus “**transcends**” all of our human capabilities and characteristics in an infinite way.

Now, at times, though, this sort of view can become oppressive, can’t it? If Jesus is **so** far away, **so** different from me, **so** utterly unlike me, how could I possibly know Him? Or, more urgently, sometimes this understanding of Jesus as utterly transcendent can lead a person to feel like he or she is always and utterly unworthy. When the writer of “Amazing Grace” spoke of himself as a “wretch,” or when Martin Luther, the founder of the Protestant movement was weighed down by his sense of inadequacy, they were feeling the **weight** of that transcendence, that sense that Jesus is *utterly* and completely **other**. But, my friends, sometimes this is not a bad thing. Why? Well, first, such a high, high view is always a reminder to us never to rest too easy in our efforts. A Jesus of perfect goodness and justice is one who never settles – as you or I might – for “good enough” or “it’ll do” when such settling means that there are still those who are hurting, or homeless, or helpless, or hungry, or hopeless. Such transcendence is always a reminder to us against the temptation of prematurely blessing our imperfect social arrangements, our imperfect ways of dealing with both our

friends and our enemies, and claiming that they are “good enough.” For Jesus, the royal ruler of all, is there to remind us that they are **not** good enough at all, and we are challenged to continue to seek to do better.

But the second reason the church has always insisted on God’s transcendence is that – particularly times of crisis or horror or great evil – it can indeed be a comfort to know that there is in fact a transcendent force at work in the universe for good. Many of the survivors of the Nazi concentration camps credit their sanity in the midst of such human vileness to their conviction that God nonetheless was perfectly, transcendently good and that there was indeed a transcendent moral order to the universe. So, while you may have never thought of this way, this very otherness and transcendence can actually be a **comfort** amidst life’s capriciousness, knowing that there is the possibility of an imperfect life getting better.

And yet, it is a comfort that is not complete *enough*, and therefore the church has also wanted to maintain down through the ages that Jesus is not **only** transcendent and utterly other, but also (to go back to our earlier word) **immanent** – which means, loosely put, right here with us, right here beside us, right here showing care for us. It’s indeed the sense that animates that line from the hymn “In the Garden” that *“He walks with me and he talks with me, and He tells me I am his own.”* It’s the sense that animates that beautiful hymn “*On Eagles Wings,*” where the writer says *“I will raise you up on eagles’ wings... [I] will hold you in the palm of my hand.”* It’s what lay behind the prophet Hosea’s writing of God’s warm and tender compassion; it is what is expressed in Jesus’ rebuking Peter in our second scripture this morning when Peter claims that Jesus is divine because he is the warrior king messiah who has come to smite and smack down. Jesus counters Peter by saying, in essence, his divinity consists **not** in his otherness, his sheer power, but in his being fully human and suffering in the same way that we

suffer – which is to say Jesus knows what our life is like!²

For you see, even though the view and understanding of Jesus as utterly different and transcendent can lead us, prod us, push us to always try to do better, it can also sometimes leave us either despairing or simply in need of something warmer, if you will. The Jesus in John's Gospel who could talk about Himself as being the very resurrection and the life (and what could be more transcendent than that?), the Jesus who could throw the money changers out of the Temple with an invocation of God's transcendent righteousness, is also the very same Jesus who could weep with Mary and Martha at the death of their brother and his friend Lazarus.

The two thousand year wisdom of the church is that Jesus is divine because He is both transcendent and immanent, both **unlike** us and yet perfectly with us, both different from us but close enough to understand and comfort us, both far beyond us and our ways and yet as near as our very own hearts. In an episode of the tv show, "The West Wing," President Bartlett stood alone in the nave of the massive Washington Cathedral after a drunk driver had killed his longtime secretary who for the first time in her life – on the last day of her life as it turned out – had done something nice for herself by buying her first-ever new car and accused God of being a "feckless thug." What an example of feeling overwhelmed and oppressed by the transcendence (even as his statement makes an assumption about God that we thankfully know is not true)! Yet, it is precisely in such times that he or any of us facing such tragedy and such a temptation to feel overwhelmed need to remember that God is the One who holds us like a mother would in gentle arms. But, on the other hand, when I see a website for a business that wants to talk about Jesus as being one's very own personal trainer,³ then

²Or, we might recall Jesus comparing himself to a mother hen and wanting to take Jerusalem under his wings for comfort and safekeeping – what an immanent image indeed! Or we might recall other hymns that express the nearness, the closeness, of Jesus like "*Leaning on the Everlasting Arms.*"

³<http://www.godismypersonaltrainer.com/>

I think here is someone who may badly need a little **more** sense of transcendence and to be reminded that Jesus cannot and ought not ever be domesticated. Because after all, even if a personal trainer challenges you, it is because *you* set the terms and *you* are paying the money – and you can dismiss the trainer if you don't like the results. A Jesus like that is **much too** immanent, **much too** near, much **too** small.

Where are you, my friends? Are you finding yourself worried, maybe even a little despairing even, about not being able to measure up? Does the utterly transcendent goodness and otherness of the divine Jesus serve not so much to reassure you but to bring you down? Then I would invite you to pray for Jesus' comforting touch, and that you would be able to find His oh-so-near reminders of grace in the hands and voices of those who love you. Or do you find yourself, on the other hand, wondering if you are letting this or that in your life slide too much? Are you finding yourself more complacent with things that you shouldn't really be complacent about? Do you worry a little bit that you're defining Jesus instead of Jesus defining you? Then I would counsel that you ask Him to show you more of His divine transcendence, His perfect goodness and justice as a spur to you to never settle too short when you can do more for this world that Jesus loves.

Let me sum all this up in this way: a Jesus who is divine either because He is **purely** transcendent or **purely** immanent would be useless: a purely transcendent Jesus wouldn't really ever express care or love or grace or tenderness, and a purely immanent Jesus, domesticated in our own image with all our own faults and foibles, doesn't have the power to either care for us or prod us to make our lives and world better. The wisdom of the church, the wisdom embodied in so many of our songs, in so much scripture, is that **both** are needed, **both** are crucial. May we know that wisdom ever more fully as we follow the one who is indeed our divine Savior. Amen.