

Our Heart's Desire

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“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” – John 12:32

My friend and colleague, Dr. Steve Johnson, and I were talking the other day about the peculiar historical fact of Christianity. What we were talking about is the odd fact that Christianity exists. It shouldn't really. I mean, if you think about it, why would anyone be drawn to a religion founded on an itinerant preacher and healer who was executed for a capital crime? And why would anyone believe his first followers who said that he had been raised from the dead after his execution? And why would that second generation of followers make the radical changes in their lives, and take the risks with the authorities that were necessary to be part of this newfangled cult, whose members were first called Christians in the Syrian city of Antioch, according to the book of Acts?

It's all so very improbable. Christianity and Christians were despised by their contemporaries. To a lot of people in the eastern corner of the Roman Empire, where Christianity began, the first Christians looked a lot like Jews. That certainly makes sense, given that all the first Christians were, in fact, Jews. And Jesus never thought of himself as a Christian; he always considered himself Jewish. As did Paul, who was the real architect of the new religion. Paul was a Pharisee, a student of the great rabbi Gamaliel, and he was proud of his heritage. “If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh,” Paul wrote to the Philippians, “I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless” (3:4-6).

And under the law that Paul is referring to – that is, Judaism – Jesus suffered not only a horrible death, but a shameful one, as well. Deuteronomy 21:23 explicitly forbids allowing an executed body to be exposed for longer than a day, and if Jesus' secret followers had not rescued his body from his cross on Good Friday evening, he would have been under the curse that all such victims were under. Crucifixion was a punishment that was meant to be protracted, painful, and shameful. To be crucified was to be cursed.

And yet, in our lesson for this morning, Jesus says that it is precisely when he undergoes just that protracted, painful, and shameful punishment, he will draw all people to himself. Jesus predicts that his death will draw people to him – and not just his closest followers, or even his fellow Jews, but all people. And this was a baffling statement to his contemporaries, and it was the historical curiosity that Dr. Johnson and I were scratching our heads about the other morning.

Because Jesus did, in fact, draw all people to himself after he was lifted up on the cross for our sake. Christianity spread like wildfire throughout the known world of its day, and Paul wrote to the Galatians about twenty years after Jesus' crucifixion that “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree' – “ (3:13), so that the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles.

We are those Gentiles, we and all our non-Jewish ancestors. Paul's hearers were Gentiles. The

recipients of all of his letters were Gentiles. The focus of his missionary ministry was Gentiles. Paul devoted his life to bringing the blessing of Abraham – that is, the good news that God chooses people to be instruments of grace in this world – to the Gentiles. They, too, could be chosen if they would accept not the law of Judaism, but rather the command that God gave to Abraham to “walk before me, and be blameless” (Gen. 17:1).

The righteousness to which Abraham was called preceded the giving of the law to Moses, and so the righteousness to which God calls us is prior to the law. Righteousness does not depend upon the law; rather, the reverse is true: the law depends upon righteousness. The law only works when people are righteous. It's not the laws that make people righteous, it's righteous people who make laws just. That's the truth behind the saying that you cannot legislate morality, whether we're talking about the morality of marriage, the consumption of alcohol, or homicide. Scripture tells us that God's call to Abraham preceded, by many centuries, the giving of the law to Moses, and that Abraham was considered by God to be, in fact, righteous. So Scripture is telling us what the law can and cannot do.

The law was given through Moses to show the Israelites what the righteousness of Abraham looked like, and the first Christians, who were Jewish and who knew, therefore, both the law and the story of Abraham, saw that righteousness uniquely embodied in Jesus. They called Jesus the Christ, the Anointed One, because they believed that only God's Anointed One could embody that kind of righteousness with such power and grace that it could deliver the entire world from its cycle of violence and pain.

That's what some first-century Palestinian Jews believed. Other first-century Palestinian Jews believe differently. They believed that the law was adequate for the purpose of salvation. What the law was for those Jews, Christ became for the Christians, and both the Jewish law and the Christian Christ point us toward the same end, namely, to walk before God and to be blameless. And that's the reason Jews, Christians, and Muslims all claim a common descent as the children of Abraham and Sarah: we have all accepted God's call to righteousness, and we are all, therefore, the children of Abraham and Sarah.

The first Christians, Dr. Johnson thinks, were able to overcome the initial resistance to their new cult by breaking down the traditional barriers of race, ethnicity, class, religion, and gender that were profoundly entrenched in the ancient Near East and in the Greco-Roman world. By the second century of our era, the church father Tertullian could quote pagans as saying, “See how these Christians love one another!” which they demonstrated by being willing to shed their blood for people to whom they weren't biologically related. In the ancient world, that was an extraordinarily inclusive way to live. And that inclusion came from their belief that God in Christ had included them in the promise to Abraham. As Paul told the Corinthians, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor. 5:19), and the first Christians understood that ministry of reconciliation to be entrusted to them. Christians were drawn to each other and to the world because they were drawn to the Christ.

To be drawn to the Christ – to be drawn to the embodiment of righteousness – is not necessarily to become a Christian. Christianity and the Christ are two different things, as Gandhi pointed out so scathingly when he said that he would have been a Christian had it not been for Christians. We Christians will have much to answer for on judgment day because we have done such a poor job of embodying the righteousness of God as Jesus the Christ did. We want to, of course – who doesn't want to be a good person? – but we fail, sometimes spectacularly, to live up to our desires. The Christ is the desire of every human heart to be better than it by nature is. By nature, we live for ourselves; by the grace of God, we live for God, and the Christ, we Christians believe, shows us how to do that. We

desire the Christ because we desire to be what God has created us to be. The Christ, therefore, is our heart's desire, and it is that Christ – that embodiment of compassion, peace, love, and joy – to which all people are spiritually drawn. People are drawn to the beautiful, Plato said, and people recognize, even if they wouldn't necessarily describe it this way, that the good is beautiful. We are drawn to goodness.

Last Wednesday evening, at our Lenten study, I told the group of a conversation I had not long ago with my nephew, Robert, who lives in Alabama. Robert is the son of my late sister Sandy. Robert was driving to a job site when we spoke a few weeks ago, and he pulled off the highway into a parking lot so he could talk to me without being distracted from his driving.

By chance or by grace, that parking lot was across a river from a decommissioned locomotive that served as a kind of amusement ride. As Robert described the scene to me, a young family approached the locomotive and the engineer came down out of the cab and bent down to speak to the little boy who was with his parents. The child shook his head yes and the engineer lifted the little boy up and put him in the cab to drive the locomotive, to the delight of both the child and his parents – and my nephew, who was observing the little domestic drama being played out across the river. “That just made my day,” Robert said to me. “I love it when that kind of stuff happens.”

“Bobby,” I said to him, “you've just witnessed an important fact about life. We'll never fully know the good that we do. That engineer thought that he was just doing his job or just showing the child a good time, and neither he nor the child nor the child's parents will ever know how much good they did for you.”

When you are drawn to the good, you are drawn to the Christ, who is goodness itself. And when you respond to that summons, and embody the good through your actions, you will never fully know what you're doing. You might think you are, but you'll only ever know a small piece of what you're actually doing. You'll never fully know the impact you're having. You'll never fully know whose life you've changed for the better. You'll never fully know for whom you have been the bearer of the good news of Jesus the Christ, even without every mentioning Jesus or the Bible or the gospel. When you do what's right because of your love for God, you'll always do the right thing and you'll never fully know what you've done.

In one of his sermons on the epistle of First John, St. Augustine famously said, “Love God and do as you please.” Actually, what Augustine said was this:

“Once for all, then, a short precept is given you: Love, and do as you wish. If you hold your peace, hold it through love. If you cry out, cry out through love. If you correct, through love correct. If you spare, spare through love. Let the root of love be within you, and of this root nothing can spring except that which is good.”

Not even the most hard-boiled atheist denies that love is our heart's desire. For those of us who are Christian, the Christ is the one in whom we find love embodied. We follow the Christ because we are following our heart's desire. Isn't that good news?