

Sermon: Brothers and Sisters in Christ

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles PC, October 3, 2021)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I don't know how you feel when, inevitably, we come across this phrase 'brothers and sisters in Christ', when one spends any amount of time in a Christian congregation. Some use it liturgically, some use it socially, and some use it excessively. I don't know how you feel, but for me, I often get a mixed emotion.

My sister and I fought constantly when we were just kids. We would play this silly game of trying to one-up another, verbally, by saying something like 'I am smarter than you plus one'. Then the other would retort, 'I am smarter than you plus two'. Then we would then go on and on, back and forth...plus three, plus four etc. etc.

When we realized that multiplication is way faster than simple addition, we would inevitably switch to 'I am smarter than you times 10', 'times 100', 'times 1,000' etc. etc. That is until the number became astronomical and too difficult to keep track, then one of us would conclude with 'I am smarter than you times infinity!' I mean it's the infinity, how do one beat that? Well, not so willing to concede defeat, the other would then retort with 'I am smarter than you times infinity...plus 1'!

Yes I know, it's silly and pointless, particularly when my sister and I look back to our childhood. Even though we have pretty much outgrown that silly phase, but a remnant of that sibling rivalry still remains, and has crept back to taunt us from time to time.

Sibling rivalry, whether it is trying to outwit one's own sister or brother, fighting over toys, treats, food, trying to get a bigger slice of the parental attention pie, or the truly ugly spectacle of fighting over inheritance later in life. Sibling rivalry is part and parcel reality of life, a source of tension in many families, a constant reminder to us of humanity's fallibility. Even though my sister and I do get along fairly well now, after all, we are both mature adults who are strong in the Christian faith. Mom still feel necessary to remind us from time to time, to not fight.

Stories in the Bible don't get much better. There are simply too many of them portraying negative pictures of sibling rivalry. The first murder

committed was a fratricide, when Cain ruthlessly killed Able simply because God did not look upon his offering as favourably as that of his brother's. Jacob contended with Esau, over the right of the firstborn, and over their father's blessings. Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery partly over a coat and a dream, and partly due to disfunction in a polygamous family structure. The prodigal son may have his father's forgiveness, but we are not sure if he has his brother's acceptance. Even Jesus' own flesh and blood may have had uneasy relationship with him, to the point that Jesus almost denounced them, asking "Who are my mother and my brothers?"

How then should we make of the statement that the author of Hebrews makes in chapter 2, verse 11-12, "*Jesus is not ashamed to call them (meaning those who are sanctified) brothers and sisters, saying, "I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters in the midst of the congregation I will praise you."*? Should we delight in being called the siblings of Jesus? What does it really mean to be called, affirmed as brothers and sisters to Christ?

In her article collected and published in *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, biblical scholar Tikva Frymer-Kensky argues that it is unremarkable for the Bible to claim that a human being could be an image of God.

Kings and rulers in various ancient cultures had made similar claim. The Egyptian pharaoh Tutankhamun, whose name literally means "Amon's living image". In the most recent Friday Bible study group, we were just reading about atrocities committed by the Seleucid King Antiochus IV, also known as Antiochus Epiphanes (or God manifest), who had a statue of himself erected and worshiped in the temple of Jerusalem during the 2nd century B.C.

The remarkable thing, as Frymer-Kensky argues, centred around the Hebrew Scripture's claim that 'all people' were created in the image of God. That view is strikingly egalitarian.

Not only were humankind created in the image of God, they were viewed by the Lord God to be very good. Not only were they viewed by the Lord God as very good, they were praised by psalmist,

*"What are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
Yet you have made them a little lower than the angels,
and crowned them with glory and honor." (Psalm 8:4-5)*

This egalitarian, high praise for the whole of humanity, when not set in the subsequent context of 'the fall', that is corruption by sin, could lead to a mis-application of theology to all sorts of human self-justification.... "That is how God created me, so deal with it, it must be good!"

I think this is where Christ Jesus comes in. The author of Hebrews informs as in its opening that, "*Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.*" (Hebrew 1:1-2).

In speaking to us by the Son, we should remember that the Son is also the Word (*logos*). "*In the beginning was the Word (logos), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*" (John 1:1) And in verse 14 of the same chapter, "*The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us.*" (v.14)

In the Hebrew mindset, no one can see the righteous and Holy God. To even catch a glimpse of the glory of God is risking being consumed by a holy fire. Not only is God invisible, God is unseeable. Furthermore, making an image or a statue of God is considered, in the language of the Second Commandment, as idolatry.

When Aaron, giving in to the demand of Israelites, fashioned and hoisted that golden calf, he said to them, "*These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.*" (Exodus 32:8). Aaron wasn't trying to fashion another God, he was merely trying to manifest "Yahweh" the Lord God, in the only way he knew how.

Here is a theological truth: **only God can manifest the God-self, on one else could.** This is where Apostle Paul ties it all together in Colossians 1:15, "*The Son is the image (eikon) of the invisible God, the firstborn (prototokos) over all creation.*"

One day, we may see God restoring all of humanity to its original goodness. One day, we may see God subjecting all creation to the entirety of humanity, but for now we see Jesus, whom by his obedience in suffering and death, has conquered death by his resurrection. For now we see only Jesus, crowned with glory and honour, not lower than angels, but seated on the right-hand side of God. It is to Jesus, that those who are sanctified are also called brothers and sisters in Christ—not earthly siblings who are subject to sin's corruption, but spiritual siblings who are incorruptible, who share the right to be called children of God, who shall at once inherit the kingdom of God.

It is to such an understanding that I address you, each one of you as sister, as brother in Christ. I would also like to invite you to turn towards each other, those sitting beside you, around you, and say, “**you are my sisters, you are my brothers in Christ.**”

Thanks be to Triune God, to whom all glory, honor and praise shall belong.
Amen.