

September 24th, 2023

Ephesians 3:18-19 “God Out of the Box”

Hello. Thank you for being one of the increasing number of Disciples congregations who grant their pastors sabbatical leave. Good on you. You “get it.” Speaking of “getting it,” let me brag about you for a few minutes if that’s okay. First Christian Church in Chico is doing well all things considered. For the last few decades, churches big and small have been declining in attendance. COVID hasn’t helped matters much. Over the course of the pandemic, many churches folded because they just didn’t know what to do. Truth is, none of us did. But some, like First Christian Church here in Chico, found ways to adapt. Here’s something I found out this summer -- People were spying on us during the pandemic. *Stalking* us even, but in a good way. They heard that we never missed a Sunday because we immediately transitioned to online worship. So they tuned in to our services on Zoom, FaceBook Live, and YouTube. Some of these people we knew about, but I discovered we had folks we didn’t know about sneaking in our virtual back door from all over the country – lay people and clergy alike. Like every church, we took some hits during the shut-down, but we remained stable. Many churches did not fare as well. So good job. Thanks for hanging in there.

Here's something else I learned over the course of my Sabbatical – I lead a sheltered life when it comes to understanding how churches operate “out there.” I’m kind of busy on Sunday mornings so I don’t get to visit many churches. It was an eye-opening experience to see what’s going on out there firsthand. I’m thankful for friends and colleagues who have helped me understand what’s trending in churches – good and not so good. There are some great churches out there who “get it.” I’m talking both steeple churches, like us, and non-steeple, evangelical, seeker-friendly mega churches. But I’m also sad to say that there are some churches out there who seem so lost because they’ve traded Jesus’ commission to spread the good news of the gospel for a message that bears very little resemblance to the Biblical witness.

I worshipped at a hard-core evangelical church whose pastors used a generous amount of good, sound, biblical scholarship to get their message across. That’s another way of saying the pastors were Bible nerds like me! It was beautiful. I also bore witness to a hard-core progressive church who, by the end of the service, I was asking, “Wait, where’s the good news and was there like a scripture from the Bible that we were supposed to be paying attention to here?” Anyway, I’m not going to go into all the details about my church hopping adventures. I’ll spread those stories out over time, but I feel like I

need to make a covenant with you. Here is what you can expect from me as your pastor:

I affirm and confess that the Bible is God's word for God's people. It is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. It is the road map for our faith and practice. I promise that my sermons will originate from and be built upon the foundation of scripture. In other words, I will not pick a topic and then come up with a list of out-of-context Bible verses to support or prove my claims. We'll work with one passage at a time and discover what we can learn from these ancient scriptures so we can live hope-filled, Christ-centered lives today in the present.

Let me also throw in a disclaimer here, because it's getting close to November and 2024 is literally just around the corner. As we all know, history is cyclical. It repeats itself. So, let's say the lectionary gives us a text that's all about the rise or fall of some tyrannical king. And there were a *lot* of those many in the Bible, right? Please don't say, "You're being political! You're preaching about ... fill in the blank for whatever favorite modern-day ruler or government leader you think I'm preaching about." No. I'm preaching about Pharaoh. Or maybe I'm preaching about Herod. Or Nero or Nebuchadnezzar or Belshazzar or any number of off-the-rail kings who opposed God or abused God's people. If it *sounds* like I'm preaching about a particular modern-day

ruler that's on you, not me. I'm sticking to the Biblical text. Now I might, for the sake of illustration, refer to a book or movie to make a comparison to the biblical text. I might say, "Yeah, this is sort of like what happened in the *Lion King* when Scar cheated to win the title of king and then the pride-land was overrun with hyenas while the lions lost everything they'd worked hard to build and maintain for generations." Don't say, "See, you *are* talking about (fill in the blank)!" No, I'm talking about King Ahaz from the Bible. And I'm just comparing him to a fictional character from a children's movie to help you understand the original text. I'm just preaching the Bible here because it's God's word for God's people. As our founders used to say, "Where the scriptures speak, we speak, where the scriptures are silent, we are silent." Just know that quite often, when the scriptures speak, it can be loud. There are a lot of churches out there who preach partisan politics first and then cherry pick scriptures to back it up. I was taught that when the Bible is the cornerstone of your sermons, and you let scripture speak for itself, it doesn't take a whole lot of effort or imagination to figure out who God is calling out in the current age and what God is calling God's people to stand for or against. That's an over-complicated way of saying, "Don't shoot the messenger." Remember: The message of the gospel comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. One person's good news is often another's bad news. Sometimes we all have to ask, "Wait ... am I

the Pharaoh in this situation? Am I on King Herod or Caesar's side, or am I on Jesus' side?" Always be willing to consider that some of our old assumptions and attitudes may be wrong. That's my sabbatical take-home lesson for this week. More to come. I promise.

With that, let's tackle today's scripture. We are in Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus which is an ancient Greek city located in modern day southern Turkey. Ephesus is famous for the Temple of Artemis, which is considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. A fair description of the people living in Ephesus in the late first century would be, "educated cosmopolitan." If you want more info, you can read about Paul's visit to Ephesus in the Book of Acts, chapter 18. The church in Ephesus was considered a major hub for the expansion of Christianity throughout Greece and Asia Minor. For the most part, Paul's letter to the Ephesians is an encouraging one, but it's clear they struggled with maintaining their unity in such a diverse culture. In the section Gary read earlier, Paul offers a prayer for those who would follow him in this journey of faith in Christ. He writes -

"I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."

This seems like a beautiful aspiration, but it's also an impossible task. Why? Because God is so much bigger than we can comprehend. One of our biggest struggles as human beings is that we try to fit God in a box. The Hebrew people quite literally tried to contain God in a box because they often misunderstood the purpose of the temple. Rather than seeing the temple as a safe space where God's people could draw closer to God, they tried to make it a barrier to keep God and humans at a distance. God is bigger than any temple. God is bigger than our human words can describe. No matter how hard we pray, or how earnestly we search, or how diligently we study or how sure of ourselves we are, we are either partially or substantially wrong. Whatever God is made of, we don't have the capacity to capture it completely in the minds we're equipped with. No religious tradition, no specific denomination, and certainly no single human being can fit it. And it's not easy for good religious people to admit this, especially when so many of us have been raised to believe that certainty is a virtue and that doubt is a mortal sin. But this isn't God's plan or expectation. Even the disciples, the twelve people who spent three years of their lives following Jesus face to face in real time, could not banish their disbelief. And this is okay. God loves us anyway because God knows the limitations of our minds. Jesus is the one who helps us see the most important aspects and characteristics of God, because he is the

incarnation of God. And we have a hard time getting our minds around that one too. Perfection, or at least our ability to perfect ourselves, was never a part of the plan or even the expectation. We can, however, adjust our thinking. As I said earlier, we are often partially or substantially wrong when it comes to our ability to grasp the “breadth and length and height and depth” that is the fulness of God.

In Mark’s gospel, Jesus told his disciples that his message could be compared to “new wine.” But he also said you can’t put new wine into old, rigid, brittle wineskins. You can’t fit the new paradigm into an old way of thinking. Jesus was asking people to have minds open enough and imaginations flexible enough to consider God beyond the one they currently believed in.

Here's something to consider – You were born *without* a box for God. Even though you may not remember it, you met God before you ever had a religious container. You experienced beauty and wonder without needing the church or a Bible verse or even a pastor to explain it to you. You didn’t need it then, and you don’t really need it now. “Wait, is Jesse saying we need to abandon our religion because we really don’t need it?” No. I’m saying that as you grow older and as you mature in faith, you evolve. Your own evolution testifies to the inevitability of outgrowing your former self. You probably don’t believe

in everything you believed in 20, 10, or even 5 years ago. Which ... you know, if you do that's okay, but the question becomes, "What have you learned? How has God transformed you? How have you grown and matured in your faith?" Our spiritual lives should be something that continually unfolds. New information will always alter our worldview, always challenge our assumptions, always move us away from a former deeply entrenched position. And it will surprise us by coming to us without the old packaging ... the old wineskins. God cannot be contained in a box, and furthermore - our task is not to find a way to build a box just because we don't fully understand the length, height or depth of God. "May the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, fill you with all the fullness of God."