

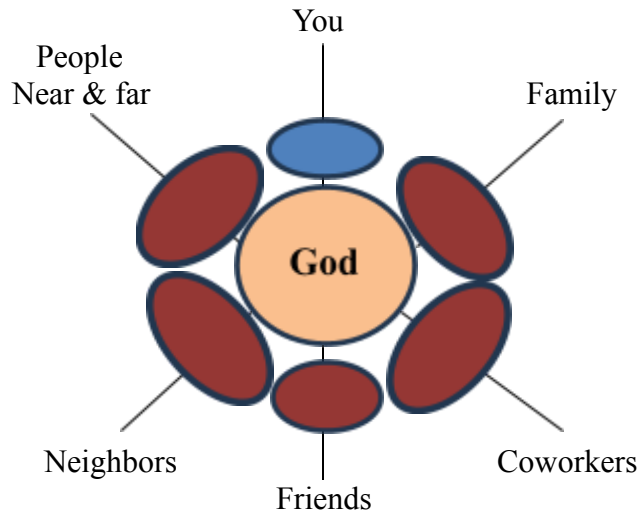
From the Crib to the Cross: Solving Our Second Greatest Problem

1. Warm up: What's your all-time favorite TV Christmas special – and why?

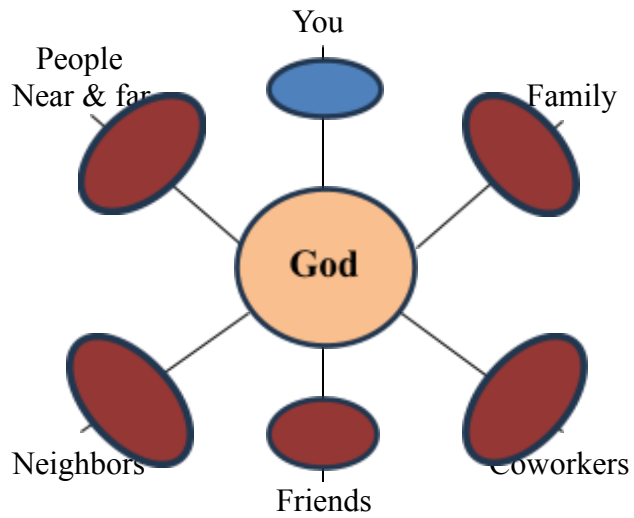
2. On Sunday we continued exploring what Jesus was sent to earth to do, drawing clues from his birth, life, and death. Specifically, we are asking what new things Jesus was meant to accomplish and, therefore, what old things he came to end. In the prior sermon in this series, we saw that Jesus came to transform our understanding of God. In Old Testament times, people felt God was distant, dangerous, and fearsome. By contrast, Jesus became “God with us” and taught us that God wants to live within each of us – guiding, comforting, convicting, and empowering us. No more alienation from God! But this past Sunday, we saw that Jesus also came to tackle our alienation from one another. It's a story as old as time. From Adam's breach with Eve (men v. women), Cain's breach with Abel (farmer v. herders), and Isaac's breach with Esau (Jew v. Arab), on down to our own time, we humans have been fighting, hating, and fearing each other.
 - a. Much of human hate is expressed by one category of people fearing and hating another category of people. Jeff shared a bit of the story of Viola Davis and how the racism and abuse she experienced as a child created a haunting fear within her that she can't shake even to this day. He also shared a story of an immigrant family who have been deported, losing access to vital medical care for their little girl who has cancer. Have you ever experienced discrimination because of some “category” of people you belong to? If so, tell us about it and how that has impacted you.
 - b. Have you ever feared or hated a group of people who were different from you? If so, tell us about it and how that impacted you and the people you feared.
 - c. Why is “category-based” hate (*e.g.*, racism, sexism, homophobia, anti-trans phobia, xenophobia) such a powerful human impulse?
 - d. Category-based hate is only one form of human alienation. We also experience alienation in our personal relationships with family, neighbors, coworkers, church members, and friends. In your personal life, who's someone you currently feel alienated from? What happened? How has this impacted you?
 - e. Dorotheos of Gaza taught that it's impossible to love God while having contempt for people around us because the loving God and loving others are so closely related. First John 4:20 says, “Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love the brother and sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. And this command we have from Jesus: Whoever loves God must also love their brother and sister.” Dorotheos used diagrams like those shown on p. 3 to illustrate this concept. Do you accept the premise that the depth of our love for the people around us is a clear indicator of the depth of our love for God? Why or why not?

3. The Biblical Christmas story tells us that Jesus' birth was "tidings of great joy for *all people*," and that Jesus came to restore "peace on earth and goodwill to humanity." Luke 2:10 and 14. It's especially poignant that this message was first delivered to shepherds since they were part of a despised occupational group. Read Luke 2:8-18 printed on p. 4.
 - a. When this group of outcast shepherds first saw the angel, our text says "they were terrified." Why do you suppose that was?
 - b. When the angel told the shepherds not to be afraid and went on to say, "I bring *you* good tidings of great joy which will be to *all people*," what do you think they felt inside themselves?
 - c. Jesus once said, "If I am lifted up . . . , I will draw all peoples to myself." John 12:32. What do you think that means?
4. In Jesus' public ministry and in the early church movement, we see huge strides toward equality for women, slaves, Gentiles, and LGBTQ+ people. But the task of healing human alienation was greater than Jesus could accomplish in three short years. So before ascending into heaven, he said this to his followers, "As the Father has sent me, even so send I you." John 20:21. Elsewhere, the Apostle Paul said, "God . . . has given us the ministry of reconciliation." II Corinthians 5:18.
 - a. What do you think those verses mean for us as followers of Jesus?
 - b. What are you doing in your personal life to further Jesus' ministry of reconciliation among people in your family, workplace, circle of friends, neighborhood, or here at church? Do you feel you're doing enough?
 - c. Now let's broaden the foregoing question to focus on our nation and world. What are you personally doing to further Jesus' ministry of reconciliation among categories of people traditionally at odds? How are you seeking to promote justice, peace, and reconciliation? Do you feel you're doing enough?
 - d. One thing each of us can do is to be an active part of a church that's trying to vigorously pursue Jesus' ministry of reconciliation. What are some good things we're doing collectively as a church? And how might we do better?
5. The last really big thing Jesus did before his crucifixion was the cleansing of the temple. Vendors had been allowed to exchange money and sell sacrificial animals in the outer court of the temple, which was the only part of the temple where Gentiles, "unclean" people, and other outcasts could go to pray. In a dramatic act of civil disobedience, Jesus drove the vendors out of the temple. Mark 11:11-19. Scholars believe this was the act that finally sealed Jesus' fate. The defenders of the religious status quo decided Jesus must be stopped at all costs. Within four days, he was handed over to the Romans for crucifixion. So it's fair to say, Jesus lost his life because of his zeal to create space and inclusion for despised people. How does that make you feel?

Close to God = Close to the People Around Us



Away From God = Away From People Around Us



Luke 2:8-18

8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I am bringing you good news of great joy which will be to all people! 11 To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth and goodwill to humanity!"

15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." 16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.

17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.