

“Credo, Third Series, Part VII”: Seated at the right hand of the Father”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for April 26th 2020 (Third Sunday of Easter)
by Foster Freed

Hebrews 1: 1-14

I have spent a fair bit of time, over the past seven days, thinking about the legacy of 19th century German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher. Before I explain who Schleiermacher was...and why he has “haunted” me this past week...I should note that no one could possibly be more surprised than I have been, to discover that thoughts of Friedrich Schleiermacher decided to make an appearance over the past seven days. I didn't ask for it; I certainly wasn't anticipating it. But those thoughts arrived all the same: and I think they are important thoughts that have something pertinent to say to us this week, as we ponder the transition from last Sunday's sermon—with its focus on the Apostles' Creed's confession that Christ “ascended into heaven”—to this morning's sermon which adds the rather important qualifier: that he ascended into heaven **where he is “seated at the right hand of the Father.”** And yes: as I ponder the task that I have set for myself this morning...in light of the sermon I offered last Sunday...it becomes a wee bit clearer just why it is that Schleiermacher turns out to be the theologian who decided to pay a house-call.

Friedrich Schleiermacher—whose life spanned the closing decades of the 18th century and the opening decades of the 19th—is often referred to as the “founding father” of the liberal Protestant theological tradition: a title that is well-deserved. Growing up in a strongly pietistic family (his father was a Moravian pastor)...a faith-tradition which, not unlike Methodism places a strong emphasis on **personal experience** of Christ...the future direction of Schleiermacher's theology certainly bears the marks of those pietistic roots. What also shaped his theology, however, was the faith-crisis he underwent as a young man: choosing (over his father's objections) to leave the Moravian seminary where he had begun his studies, instead attending the University of Halle in order to read Enlightenment thinkers such as Immanuel Kant and Baruch Spinoza. There is a sense, then, in which Schleiermacher's theology emerges through his creative re-appropriation of the Christian tradition, having re-thought that tradition in light of the radical questioning of tradition to which he was exposed at University. His theology bears the marks of **both** of these formative influences: above all his insistence that the real heart of the Christian religion is to be found not in the realm of the intellect but in the realm of the emotions, coupled with his insistence that Christian truth must be grounded in the “**religious-experience**” of Christians.ⁱ Indeed, even when—later in his career—he sets out to write about the key Christian dogmas...

...including, of course, the major Christian creeds...

...he does so with the intention of reinterpreting the creeds and the dogmas in light of their ability to illuminate the “religious experiences” of faithful Christians and, indeed, the religious experience of human beings, Christian or not.

That, I think, helps to explain why Schleiermacher chose to pay me a visit this past week! It has to do, I believe, with the sermon I chose to offer a week ago: a sermon which was, in many ways, decidedly different from any of the others I have so far offered as part of what may well seem, by now, to be a never-ending series of sermons. (If you are keeping track, you will know that this is sermon 19; God help us all! But I digress!!)

What made last Sunday’s offering different from just about all of the others, is that I took as my focus the “experiential” side--the human side--of the Ascension: grounded in the stark contrast between the 40-day experience of the first Easter...and the subsequent experience of most Christians (in most times and places) over the past 20 centuries: an experience which is as much the experience of Christ’s absence as of Christ’s presence. I did so unapologetically, and I still have no regrets over that sermon...in part...in part because...

Well: in part for the reasons I tried to name toward the end of that sermon: namely that Christ’s “withdrawal” on the 40th day of Easter—despite the fact that it creates a vacuum that can be and often is filled with the painful experience of “doubt”—also creates a “space” in which all other kinds of human experiences can unfold. God, in Christ, **makes space for us**, space which entails both gift and challenge: in short, space which creates the possibility for us to participate in the writing of the “human” story, the corporate human story and also our individual human stories, filled with experiences that embody the full range of what human life has to offer. Whatever else the Creed entails with its affirmation of the Easter faith...

...indeed, whatever else the **New Testament** entails with its telling of the Easter story...

...there can be no denying the extent to which Christian experience (and, by extension human experience) has been shaped by the great announcement that, having risen on the third day...he **ascended into heaven** on the 40th. He withdrew...thereby, at a bare minimum...opening for us a space in which to pursue the freedom that is ours in Christ! However!

As I acknowledged last Sunday...and as I have already noted this morning...the Creed does not come to a close with that announcement of his ascension. More to the point, the Creed “qualifies” the announcement of his ascension by insisting that his ascension—far from representing his disappearance—represents, in effect, a new beginning: Christ now **seated at the right hand of the Father**. Nor, I hasten to add, was that proposal one the shapers of the Creed dreamt up on their own. On the

contrary! There were no shortage of New Testament texts from which I could have drawn, this morning, in order to support the Apostle's Creed's confession that "he is seated at the right hand of the Father". If, in the end, I settled on the first chapter of Hebrews, it has to do not only with the forceful nature of the argument it offers, but also with the larger context in which its opening chapter operates within the larger "thought-world" of Hebrews.

Arguing that Christ, precisely because of his incarnation, is to be exalted above even the angels, Hebrews takes as the foundation of that argument a radical reinterpretation of a handful of the Psalms. And so, in that spirit of radical reinterpretation, the author of Hebrews applies to Christ these words from the 45th Psalm: ***Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever; a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom.*** No less impressively, Hebrews applies to Christ these words from the 110th Psalm: *The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet".* Although there are other impressive New Testament testimonies to Christ's ascension...

...none more so than the ancient Christian hymn Paul appears to be quoting in Philippians 2: 6-11, a hymn that traces Christ's journey from pre-existence to incarnation to "death on a cross" to resurrection and—ultimately—to exaltation "to the highest place"...

...what makes Hebrews especially helpful here, or so I have come to believe, is the larger context in which it places the ascended Christ who "is seated at the right hand of the Father". That context, above all, includes its designation of Christ as the "**great high Priest**" whose specific role—at the right hand of the Father—is that of advocate on our behalf. As Hebrews makes clear at one especially crucial juncture: *Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to **intercede** for them.*ⁱⁱ

Let's be clear! From the perspective of the Apostles' Creed, what makes the announcement of Christ's ascension not just "news" but "**good news**", is that it "locates" Christ precisely where we ought to wish for Christ to be. In telling words drawn from Christ's final discourse found in John's Gospel: *"You heard me say, 'I am going away and I am coming back to you.' If you loved me, you would be glad that I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I."*ⁱⁱⁱ Without wading into the full range of controversy opened up by that final phrase ("for the Father is greater than I"), the implications seem clear. The event we know as Easter, if we are to understand it in the fullness of the New Testament witness, incorporates not only his "rising" from the tomb on the third day, but his ultimate destination at the right hand of the Father, where he is to continue the intercessory work—the high-priestly offering—he had already begun to offer while still with us in this realm.^{iv} To claim Christ as our advocate—to lift our voices with those who celebrate the "friend" we have in Jesus—is, first and foremost, to express gratitude for the One who, having ascended to the right hand of the Father, is

stationed there **on our behalf**. That much seems abundantly clear. But is there more than can be said? Is there more that ought to be said?

I want to return us...return us to the Easter story we pondered last Sunday: that of Thomas and what are generally referred to as his strongly expressed “doubts”. Without retracting any of the things I said about those doubts—which stand as a crucial New Testament reminder that there are better things to do with our doubts than to demonize them—it is important to name that to which I alluded last Sunday: namely that Thomas’ expression of doubt embodies some pretty **shrewd theological insights**. I am, of course, referring to the fact that the specific proof Thomas craves, when he hears of the risen Christ’s having manifested to the other disciples, entails his desire to “*see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side*”. In short, Thomas needs to be celebrated not only because of the frankness of the way in which he names his doubt, not only because he ultimately comes to be the first person to confess Jesus as “his God”, but because the specific “proof” he requested when he learned of Christ’s resurrection, involved the wounds of Christ. Thomas, you see, yearned to authenticate not merely a “generic” rising from the tomb, but to assure himself that the one thereby risen was none other than the Jesus he had come to know over their years together: the Jesus who had taught them, who had served them and yes...at the end of the day, had suffered for them. My question, this morning, is simply this: what bearing does any of that have in light of Christ’s subsequent ascension to the Father?

And I realize full well. To note that I am, with the asking of that question, thereby opening a very large can of worms is something of an understatement. Unlike the Nicene Creed, the Apostle’s Creed plays its Trinitarian cards rather close to the chest; if the only thing we knew about the Christian faith was the Apostle’s Creed, I rather doubt its three-paragraph structure would provide us with a whole lot to go on, in terms of forming a Trinitarian understanding of God: “God in three-persons, blessed Trinity”.^{vi} Nevertheless: given that the Apostle’s Creed is most certainly **not** the only thing we know about the Christian faith—indeed: given that our congregation bears the name “Trinity”—it would be sad indeed were we to pretend we are entirely innocent of that dimension of the Christian tradition. And it seems to me...

...seems to me that it would be a dereliction of my own responsibility were I to fail to ask—precisely at this juncture--what it means for us to claim that Christ now “resides” at the right-hand of the Father, especially if we accept the Nicene Creed’s claim that in Jesus we find ourselves having encountered One who can rightly be described as “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God....” If those affirmations are something more than empty words, how can they not prompt us to ask some very weighty questions: questions not only about this Jesus—who ascended to the right hand of the Father—but questions about the reality and the nature of the God we worship. Indeed!

If Thomas' intuition is correct; if his insistence is correct, namely that (in order to know he stood in the presence of the risen Jesus) he needed to "*see the nail marks in his hands,*" to place his "*finger where the nails were*", to put his "*hand into his side*": is it not our right, indeed our obligation, to wonder about the identity of the Christ who is now seated at the Father's right hand? Is it not proper for us to wonder whether he still bears the wounds Thomas asked to be shown? And yes: as the One our tradition came to regard as "God from God", is it not right and proper and fitting for us to wonder what all of that may have to tell us about the God we worship: One we name as Father, Son and Holy Spirit?

Well. With due apologies all around, the word I have no choice but dusting off and placing before us at this juncture, is the word "impassibility", an imposing sounding term that is actually quite basic in its essential meaning. Impassibility is one of the traditional attributes of God which Christian theology has tended to offer almost from its most ancient origins, having to do with the question as to whether or not it is possible for God to "suffer". Just as a hymn such as the well-known "Immortal, Invisible, God only Wise"^{vii} seeks to name some of the ways in which God stands in stark contrast to everything that is "not-God"...

...we humans serving as the perfect counterpoint: those who are "mortal, visible and far from wise"...

...to speak of God as impassible, is to state that God is not subject to the very human experience of suffering. For obvious reasons, this became—and continues to be—a very significant issue for the Church, and for Christians. For the most part, the "battle lines" in this conflict are often depicted as having been drawn between our Hebraic inheritance (our Biblical inheritance) and our Greco-Roman inheritance (especially our debt to ancient Greek philosophy). Speaking personally, I think that is actually something of an oversimplification, although it cannot be denied that the witness of the Old Testament certainly incorporates many passages in which God is unambiguously depicted as thoroughly wracked by intense emotion, including intense suffering.^{viii} And yes, it is also the case that the philosophical background against which Christian theology emerged--coupled with the Biblical testimony that the Creator God is not part of creation--encouraged our best minds strictly to police the boundaries between that which is of God and that which is of God's creation. In short: much of the history of the formative years of the Christian theological tradition became occupied with efforts that would permit the church to take seriously the divinity of Christ without thereby endorsing the notion of a God who suffers.^{ix}

For a whole host of reasons, modern theology has tended to charter a different path: at times, perhaps, rejecting impassibility as a divine attribute in an overly cavalier way. For our purposes, it can be helpful to remember that part of what is at stake—from a faith perspective—when the claim is made that God is "impassible", is the affirmation that God is not wracked by emotion (**thrown off track by emotion!**) in a manner

analogous to the way in which we human beings can be thrown off track by emotion. Perhaps a better word with which we might “wrestle” as people of faith, than the word “impassibility”, is the word “constancy”. It is not a synonym; I realize that. But surely it captures something of the importance of our not discarding the notion of “impassibility” in too casual a way. Indeed: to state that God exhibits constancy is, ironically, not all that different from what the book Hebrews is getting at when it describes Jesus Christ as *the same yesterday, today and forever*.^x As a people called to put our faith in God—our **trust** in God—surely it should matter a great deal whether or not God can be said to be “trustworthy”. And yes: if God is not constant, if God can shift direction with every passing breeze and changing circumstance....

...the sort of behavior we would expect from a god who, in effect, was little more than a large and powerful human being made in our image....

...surely that is not the sort of god in whom any of us could possibly place our trust. We ought not to be too dismissive of those who still wish to remind us of the key insights the ancient theologians were trying to hang on to when they spoke of God’s impassibility. And yet!

What about the nail marks in his hands? What about the hole in his side? What about the tears he shed over the beloved city, Jerusalem? What about the sweat that fell like blood at Gethsemane? And yes: what about the cry of dereliction from the Cross? Is all that left behind at Easter? Is all of that simply erased at Easter? Does all of that remain in the tomb with the burial cloths? Does none of that rise on the third day? Is all of that nothing more than refuse to be ruthlessly discarded on the day of his ascension?

I began these thoughts...began these thoughts by speaking of a theologian who attempted—at the start to the 19th century—to place human emotion and human experience at the very heart of the theological enterprise. Nor am I oblivious to the fact that the 20th century theologian who is generally regarded as Friedrich Schleiermacher’s great nemesis—namely Karl Barth—entitled one of his later essays: “The Humanity of God”. And yes, from where I stand—

...as someone who most certainly does not want to sacrifice the “constancy” of God in order to turn God into someone more like me...

...neither do I wish to relinquish Schleiermacher’s emphasis on “human experience” nor Barth’s willingness to speak of the “humanity” of God. As a people who are presently enduring no shortage of weighty experiences...

...not only the experience of our ongoing fragility as a result of COVID-19, but the at times overwhelming experience of the grief from which we Canadians are still reeling as a result of last weekend’s horror in Nova Scotia...

...I insist that we must be able to place the good news of God's constancy ("Great is thy faithfulness"!^{xi}) side-by-side with the good news of the full humanity of the Christ who now sits at the right hand of the Father ("Jesus is with God")^{xii}. How, precisely, we ultimately wrap our small wee minds around those two seemingly incompatible claims is a question that is well beyond my pay-grade....other than to state that if we are willing to credit physicists--who assure us that light is both a "wave" and a "particle"--we should be willing to credit a tradition that wishes to assure us that the God we worship is utterly trustworthy, in part, because the God we worship incorporates the lived experience of one "who will all our sorrows share," one "who knows our every weakness", one who invites us to "take it to the Lord in prayer,"^{xiii} in short, one who still bears the marks of Calvary! All of which leads me to one final thought, namely this.

To claim, as we ought most certainly wish to claim, that the human experience of the man Jesus now resides at the heart of God, should also--or so I have come to believe--lead us to be capable of making a further claim, namely...namely, that the human experience—writ large—also finds a place at the heart of God. The God who has made "space" for us...who has gifted us with life and with the invitation to have life "in abundance"...takes with radical seriousness **all** of our human experience...and has vowed to bring healing and restoration to every fibre of it. Pruning that which is destructive and life-denying...bringing to fullness and fruition everything that partakes of the light and the life and the love of the One we worship...beckoning us to a future in which God may be and **will be** all in all.

May it be so! In God's good time. And in the name of Jesus.

Thanks be to God!

- ⁱ Karl Barth provides what some will regard as a surprisingly sympathetic introduction to Schleiermacher in his *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1973), pp. 425-473.
- ⁱⁱ Hebrews 7: 23-25
- ⁱⁱⁱ John 14: 28, 29
- ^{iv} See, above all, John 17
- ^v John 20:28
- ^{vi} “Holy, Holy, Holy”, *Voices United* #315
- ^{vii} *Voices United*, #264
- ^{viii} Hosea 11 always comes to mind in this context.
- ^{ix} See “The Christological Problem” in Robert W. Jenson’s *Systematic Theology, Volume 1: The Triune God*, (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1997), pp. 125-145.
- ^x Hebrews 13:8
- ^{xi} *Voices United* #288
- ^{xii} Title to a hymn written by Brian Wren, with music by Ron Klusmeier. <https://musiklus.com/product/1977/>
- ^{xiii} Quoting from “What a Friend We Have in Jesus”, VU #664