

God Reaches Out with Two Hands

Romans 5:6-11, Colossians 2:13-15

Steve Hollaway
Harbor Church
October 6, 2013

My daughter Sarah has been a fan of a band called Caspian, which is made up people she went to school with at Gordon College. Last year *Spin* magazine called their third CD “the Best Post-Rock Album” of 2012—whatever post-rock means. But more importantly to me, the guys in Caspian are “post-evangelical,” like a lot of the young adults who graduated from Gordon, a warmly Christian school that broadened their minds just enough to make them sick of Christians. “Post-evangelical” is a label I have sometimes used for myself; we’re not comfortable with fundamentalism or the evangelical bubble, but there’s something still there that makes us different from people who grew up mainline—a hunger for the experience of God and the sense that there could be something a lot better than the church as we know it.

But here’s the reason I brought up Caspian and the Gordon crowd: On August 25, Chris Friedrich, the bass player for the band, was found dead. Nothing about the cause of death has been revealed, which is revealing in itself, and it was clearly a tragedy. He was 32 years old, and the band had just moved to the next level, touring in Europe this fall after successful gigs all over the US. The funeral was held at the Church of the Advent, an Anglo-Catholic church in Beacon Hill, Boston, but the homily was given by Patrick Gray, a friend and classmate of Chris at Gordon College, who is the rector of a new Anglican church not far from the college. Sarah shared a copy of that homily with me as it made the rounds on Facebook. I was so moved by the way Patrick presented the message of the gospel that I wanted to share some of what he said as we prepare to come to the Lord’s Table and remember what Jesus did for us on the cross. Here’s the section of the homily I want you to hear this morning:

I want to talk about the God Chris loves. I want to talk about the God that loves Chris. Because God does love Chris, he always has, he always will. Nothing separates us from the love of God. But lots of things try to. Lots of things want to get between you and God. And this is a problem. This is not right. Lots of things try to put a “no” where a “yes” should be.

But this God doesn’t take “no” for an answer. No matter who we are, no matter what we think, no matter how we feel, no matter what we do, this God says, I know who you are, and I have not forgotten you. I’m going to make all your problems my problem. All that has gone wrong, horribly, horribly, wrong, I will make right. I’m going to do something about it.

But it won’t go away with a wave of my hand. But it will take my hand, says God. In fact, because of what has happened, it will take both my hands. What has happened to you, what has happened to Chris, what has happened to this world will take both hands. The Christian God is the god that reaches out and that reaches into our lives with both hands. With one hand he takes away the weight, all those things that hold you down, all those things that trip you up, all those things that make you fall, he takes away, he clears it all away with one hand, and with the other hand he reaches in and grabs ahold of you, and never lets you go.

With one hand he takes ahold of death, and darkness, he grabs it by the scruff of the neck, he grabs that old dog, and he shakes it, shakes it till it shakes out, shakes out the way it was meant to be, the way God intended it to be, to paraphrase his prophet Bruce Cockburn, he shakes death and darkness until they bleed life and light. And with the other hand, the other hand that has grabbed you, this hand that will never let you go, he lifts you up, God will lift you up, no

matter how far down you go, God will lift you up, God will raise you up, and to quote God's other prophet Johnny Cash, ain't no grave can hold my body down.

God needs both hands to take care of what's happened to us. God reaches in, and God reaches out, he stretches out his arms of love on the hard wood of the cross so that he might draw the whole world to himself. This is the Christian God, this is the God that Chris loves, this is the God that loves Chris.

I want you to think a while about that image of the God who reaches out to us with both hands. It's a different picture from Michelangelo's Creator reaching with one hand to Adam, or the picture of the shepherd reaching down into a crevice with one hand to grab the one lost sheep. Back in the second century, one of the very early church fathers, Irenaeus of Lyons, wrote about the two hands of God. He said that in creation, God had two hands: the Word and the Spirit. He identified the Word active in creation with Christ the preexistent Son, so for him this was a kind of primitive image of the Trinity before the doctrine had been all worked out. God reaches out to us and acts in the world by means of his two hands, his Word which is Christ, and his Spirit—and who can say that the hands are not the person?

Patrick Gray's picture of God's two hands is different from that. He's really describing two aspects of what God does in our salvation out of his love. With one hand, Patrick says, God clears away all the stuff that keeps us from God, and with the other hand God grabs us and never lets us go. One part of what the Cross means, and what we remember at this table, is that God took away our guilt, removed all the charges against us and declared us forgiven and reconciled. Another part of what the Cross means is that God has declared once and for all his faithful love for us, the love that will not let us go.

Paul says in Romans 5:8—in one of those verses that ought to be burned into your heart—"God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us." Paul can almost imagine being moved to give up his life to save the life of a good person, but the reality that he met in Jesus is a love that is willing to die for a bad person. While we were still weak, he says, Christ died for the ungodly. Jesus did not come, after all, for the righteous, but for sinners. And it did not stop him from loving us that we ignored him, or acted in selfish and hateful ways. Even though we made ourselves enemies of God, fighting against him and his purposes in the world, God took the initiative to reconcile us to himself through the death of his Son. We were like the two-year-old on the ferry who has everybody on edge because he is screaming at the top of his lungs and you can't tell if he is really furious or just exhausted, but he seems at the moment almost autistic, and the mother wraps her arms around the child like swaddling clothes, saying "It's OK, I love you, all will be well, we are not enemies," restraining him with two arms of love until the child relents and allows himself to be reconciled.

The verses we read from Colossians gives us a different picture. "God forgave us our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross." Everybody has a rap sheet. If God wrote down everything that we had done against him, we would be locked away forever. Psalm 130 asks, "If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, who could stand?" There are two images here in Colossians. One picture is of a scribe erasing a document, taking a sponge to wipe all the ink off a piece of parchment or leather—so that the arrest record or the charges that are to be listed above your head when you are executed simply disappears. That is a picture of God's forgiveness. The other picture is of God taking that list of charges and nailing them to the cross, where they are put to death along with Jesus.

That is God's first hand, wiping the slate clean (to use an anachronistic metaphor). Today we might say he deletes the files permanently. I thought of the image of clearing a table of all its clutter by one sweep of the hand. I decided not to act it out, but imagine this table stacked with all our nasty, dirty stuff. All our dirty clothes, our unpaid bills, the walls we had built to keep God out, every careless word we ever spoke, the testimony of every poor person we ignored, everything we ever hoarded out of selfishness—imagine all that is piled up on the Lord's Table, hiding the very thing that could take care of it, the body and blood of Jesus. And imagine that God comes with his first hand as clears the table off, in one motion. It's all gone.

This is not a new idea. This is the picture we have of God in the Old Testament. Isaiah 44:22 says "I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed you." Isaiah 43:25 says, "I am He who blotted out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins." Psalm 103:14 says, "As far as the east is from the west, so far has God removed our sins from us." Corrie ten Boom used to say, "When we confess our sins, God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever... Then God places a sign out there that says No Fishing Allowed."

With one hand God wipes away our sins, and with the other hand he grabs us and does not let us go. This table says not only that God has expunged out records, but that he has loved us with an everlasting love. In Jesus, God was calling us his friends, his children, his partners in his work in the world. He says to us, "I will never leave you or forsake you." "Look, I am with you until this world comes to an end." You know how when a father walks with a little child, the child is gripping the father's finger; but when the child starts to fall, it is the father grabbing the child's wrist and not letting go.

It's a completely different picture, but I couldn't help but think of that father who shielded his 13-year-old daughter's body from the rock slide this week, giving his life for hers. He was not able to save everybody. Most likely it was an instantaneous, instinctive action to save the child next to him; I hate to think of a momentary Sophie's choice, deciding which family member to save. But God being God does not have to choose which one to save. God sees the giant boulders of sin and death coming down the mountain to crush us, and in the form of Jesus God puts himself between the rocks and us. Yes, somehow, Jesus was crushed for every one of us. In the words of Isaiah (53:5 CEB), "he was crushed for our crimes." He laid his body over ours to absorb the worst that evil could do. So we know he loved us. But God raised him from the dead. Paul asks the question: "If he saved us by dying for us, how much more will he rescue us from life and death now that he is living for us?" With one hand he made us right with God and did away with the charges against us—and now with the other hand he holds on to us as we together work in this world. What could be better than that? That is what we are here to celebrate today.