

Christ Is Our Peace

What is your summum bonum? In seminary, we enjoyed tossing around such fancy Latin terms. Summum bonum (sum of goodness) means the highest good or the essence of goodness itself. How do you sum up goodness? How do you express goodness in your life? Another seminary word of the day was axis mundi (world's axle). In astronomy, axis mundi refers to the earth's axis running between the poles as the pivot point of the earth's rotation. In mythology or theology, the axis mundi is the universal, cosmic, or world's axis, the navel of the universe, the deepest connection point between heaven and earth! What is your world's axle? What does your life revolve around? What links your daily life to things eternal and holy?

In seminary, I took classes in Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, and folk religion. We read the sacred texts from these traditions and processed them with the loveliest of professors at Asbury, Matthias Zanhizer, PhD. Without the familiar comforts of my home theological turf, I found myself wrestling with the Incarnation, the Trinity, and other Christian understandings. My study of other faiths surely sanded down some more pointed theological edges but deepened my core Christian convictions. Hindu sacred poetry describes the universe as growing out of God's belly button. That image gripped my imagination, drawing me immediately to the Nativity and then the cross. God so loves the world as to connect us to God through Mary's umbilicus. So back in 1990, while someone asked if the Indian astronauts had seen a giant umbilical cord drifting out there, I drew a doodle of the cross as the axis mundi and summum bonum of the universe. Jesus stretches out holy arms embracing both heaven and earth. The kingdom comes on earth as in heaven. Paul describes how *"with great love, God raised us up, seating us in the heavens with Christ Jesus!"* (Ephesians 2) Jesus is the axis mundi- the center of everything, the pivot point that I strive to spin my life around... Christ is my highest good- the Incarnation and model of all goodness. What is your summum bonum and your axis mundi?

On Radiolab's podcast Dolly Parton's America, Dolly is asked about her very generous gift to Porter Waggoner years after he sued her for leaving his show. Dolly Parton shared, *"It's not like putting flowers on me- it was the least that I could do. I felt like it was all right: that it was to me the thing to do. So I was glad to do it. It made me feel better about everything else."* Jad Abumrad interjects, *"I have a theory that one of the reasons that you can have the crazy broad appeal that you have into so many different communities, that normally hate each other, is because of those acts of forgiveness, does that vibe with you?"* Dolly answers, *"Well..yeah, forgiveness? Forgiveness is all there is."*

"Forgiveness; forgiveness is all there is." That seems to vibe with Jesus' Incarnation: manger, life, and cross. Forgiveness is all there is- love is all there is, and love is best expressed in forgiveness. (1 John 3-4) Forgiveness is the highest good- that which everything else best moves around. What is your axis mundi, the navel of your universe? Does your life sum up to the collection of things, experiences, or wealth, or does your life move around forgiveness, mercy, community, justice and love? What is your summum bonum, your highest good that everything else moves around into place: faith, hope, and charity?

Scholars debate whether the book of Ephesians was really written by the Apostle Paul. Ephesians lacks Paul's familiar language and personal connections one finds in Romans 16 or 2 Corinthians 11. Indeed, the Ephesians writer acknowledges a second hand knowledge of the Ephesian church, "I have heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's people..." which does not easily vibe with Paul's travels to Ephesus in Acts 18-19. Whether Paul or some second generation Pauline disciple wrote Ephesians, it's poetry paints a portrait of Jesus Christ as our axis mundi and summum bonum. Jesus is the very essence of God, of love, of justice, of liberty, of unity, and mystery. Jesus is the center axis, or navel of everything good. Ephesians 1 offers a series of prayers and verses that offer a poetic vision of a cosmic Christ who links humanity to God and everything good.

In Christ, God has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing that comes from heaven. In love God chose us to adopt us as children through Jesus Christ. With overflowing grace, God pours forgiveness upon us and seals us with the Holy Spirit. This incarnational outpouring of God's love was all part of God's hidden plan revealed to us through Jesus. God sent this love in order to bring all things together in Christ, things in heaven along with things on earth. (paraphrase chapter 1) The writer then offers a prayer:

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ will give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation. And God's gift of wisdom and revelation will make God known to you. I pray that the eyes of your heart will open wide and you will see the hope of God's call, open your eyes to the richness of our glorious inheritance as God's children, know the overwhelming greatness of God's power that is working among us. This same power was at work in Christ's resurrection; now works in us! And even as Christ reigns in the heavens, far above every ruler authority and power, the church on earth remains Christ's body holding the fullness of Christ, who fills everything in every way. Ephesians 1:1-23

Ephesians offers a sweeping universal portrait of Christ who is transcendent and immanent, just and forgiving, gentle and strong, bold and compassionate, reigning in heaven and with us on earth. Christ is above us, around us, in us, through us, and everything! Such a beautiful mystery surpasses knowledge and muddles precise theological formulas.

God's rich mercy and Christ's deep love brings us to life and raises us up, seating us in the heavens with Christ Jesus. God's saving and sanctifying work is done by grace alone. Salvation is not something we possess, but simply God's gift. We are God's accomplishment, created in Christ Jesus to do good works as our way of life. (Christ is our axis mundi and Christ-likeness our summum bonum.)

Why does it matter what we count as our highest good? What does it matter what we order our lives around? Perhaps, we become what we worship; we become what we order our lives around. If we hope for Christ-likeness, forgiveness, or goodness, perhaps it must become our summum bonum and our axis mundi! So consider our passage.

Christ is our peace. In human flesh Christ made two divided groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. Christ has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that Christ might create within Christ's own body (the church) one new humanity in place of the two. Christ brings peace and reconciles both groups to God and one another through the cross. The self-giving love of God demonstrated on the cross puts to death hostility and group rivalry. Found by love, we are no longer strangers and aliens, but we are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus very-self as our cornerstone. In Christ the whole kin-dom structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple spiritually built together as a dwelling place for God.

So what is your axis mundi? Has love, forgiveness, or grace found you and held you so tightly that you strive to make it your highest good and the pivot point of every decision? What breaks down the barriers of hostility in your life? What brings peace? What unites you to others who you once felt separated from? Do you know the deep mercy of God poured out upon us? Do you know a deep, transforming indwelling love that moves us beyond rules and restrictions into the deepest holy embrace? Do we know love's deep liberation that ends our alienation from God, ourselves, and others, that brings together heaven and earth?

If you do not know love's liberating freedom, do not despair! Paul confesses in Philippians 3 not quite holding such love yet, *"It's not that I have already reached my goal or have already been perfected by God, but I pursue it, so that I may grab hold of it because Christ grabbed hold of me. Siblings, I don't think I've reached it, but I do this one thing forgetting about the things in the past, I press on for the prize, striving after the high call of Christ Jesus, that calls me heavenward."*

What is the highest good of your life? What do you strive to have at the center of your living? Love, forgiveness, Christ-likeness? What will be your axis mundi, the axis your life pivots around? Do you strive to live like Christ, to be rooted and grounded in love, to incarnate love?

I want to close with a prayer from Ephesians 3.

So, I kneel before you- holy Creator. You recognize every tribe in heaven and on earth. And I pray that God will strengthen each of us in our inner selves, with the richness of God's glorious Spirit. I ask that Christ might live in each of our hearts through faith, and that we might be rooted and grounded in love, so that each of us with all the saints might have the power to grasp love's width and length, height and depth, and that we might know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge so that we might be filled with the fullness of God. Oh, glorious God, You are able to do far beyond all that we could ask or imagine. We marvel that Your power at work within us; come be our peace, our axis, our highest good. Amen.