



September 17, 2006
Fully Alive in Christ

John 14:6-10
Jesus the Son of God
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This morning I am continuing in a series of sermons on the life and work of Jesus Christ. Two weeks ago we looked at the significance of the name Jesus, which means God saves. Last week we looked at the beginning of his ministry as a rabbi. Today we focus on his identity as the Son of God.

The year was 325 AD, and the place was a small town called Nicea in what is now Turkey. About 300 bishops from across the Roman Empire gathered for the first time in the history of the church. The convener of this great council was the Emperor Constantine.

The Emperor was worried. He was the first of the Caesars to embrace Christianity, and he was counting on keeping the Empire unified through the church that had spread into every corner of the Roman world. But a great debate among the bishops was about to split the church in half. One of these factions was led by a man named Arius, who believed that Jesus was a creature, upon whom divinity was bestowed. The other party was led by Athanasius, who claimed that Jesus was the eternal Son of God, upon whom humanity was bestowed.

The debate at Nicea was fierce, but eventually it became clear to the vast majority of the bishops that the whole Gospel was lost if Jesus was a man who became divine. So they voted with Athanasius, who claimed that Jesus was always the same essence of God, and thus, divine. The theology they hammered out became the first of our ecumenical confessions—the great Nicene Creed.

Now why is this so important? Both Arius and Athanasius thought Jesus was the Savior, and both ended up in the same place of affirming his divinity. Does it really make that much difference if he is a god who became a man or a man who became a god? And what difference does this make to you as you knock yourself out to do well in the marketplaces, at school, or at home taking care of the huge needs of small children?

The importance of this debate, which by the way is alive and well today, is found in our biblical text today. We have all echoed the words of the disciple Philip who said, “Jesus, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” We may not always use such clear theological and existential language, but that is precisely the most pressing yearning that arises from our souls. How do we

find the Heavenly Father? That is because we know that nothing in life will be right unless heaven and earth are reconciled for us. So how do we get back to God?

That may not be the first question that comes to your mind in the morning. You may be thinking only about the many things you have to do in the day. But behind every agenda in life is the drive to get your life to the right place. That's what you want for your health, career, relationships and family. You want them to be right. And that is why you work so hard to get to the right place—because in your soul you know that you're not there yet. "Show us the Father, and we will be satisfied," Philip says. Yes, Jesus, do show us how to get home to God where life feels right again.

From at least the fourth century, Christians have been debating how it is that Jesus gets us to the right place. In other words, exactly how does Jesus the Savior save us?

If Arius was right, and Jesus is just another creature upon whom divinity was bestowed, then salvation means that Jesus showed you how to do it. He is the human exemplar for finding our way to the right place. So Arius would tell us that we are right to be knocking ourselves out in life. "You had better be working as hard as possible at the office." "You had better be striving to become the super Mom who can ferry the kids to school, soccer, piano lessons, karate, and who can still maintain an immaculate home, prepare gourmet dinners, and hold down a career or volunteer in the community." Arius would tell our kids, "You had better get the A in school, so you can get in the best grad school, so you can get the best job, so you can get the best life in the rightest place in town." And if he were our preacher today, Arius would say, "The function of the church then is to show us how Jesus did it, with remarkable sacrifice while still being compassionate. But you can do it, too. You have the potential." If you ever get confused, just ask yourself, "What Would Jesus Do?" (By the way, the church's typical answer to that question is: "More.")

As the bishops at Nicea dissected Arius' teaching, they rightly began to wonder if this is really salvation. Is this our great hope—to claim that the purpose of religion is to motivate you to do more, to add a bunch of spiritual oughts onto your already demanding schedule, or to tease you with the unrealistic hope that you, too, can become a son or daughter of God and get life to the right place if you only try harder? "No," they said. There is no hope in that. There is only despair because we'll never be as good as Jesus.

It is ironic that both conservative and liberal Christians, for all of their many differences, are tempted to Arius' theological model. The conservatives tend to reduce Jesus' teaching to a moral code of oughts that they seek to legislate for others, believing that then we will get the nation to the right place. "We ought to mandate traditional family values," they say. "We ought to restrict a woman's right to choose. We ought to support the president. (At least, this president.)" The liberals reject such a conservative agenda, but replace it only with a different set of oughts that reduce Jesus' teaching to yet a different social agenda. "We ought to work for a more equitable distribution of wealth. We ought to work for farm workers, immigrants, and gay rights. We ought to boycott, divest, and march our way into the right place." And when Arius hears these debates from the right and the left, he smiles from his grave because he cannot lose. These are all just competing ways of imitating Jesus, in the hopes of getting home.

I'm not saying these political debates are unimportant. Of course, they are very important, and we all need to have a thoughtful position on these issues before our society. What I am saying is that we dare not think we have captured Jesus in our position. As Athanasius and the Nicene Creed remind us, Jesus has his own mission, and it is not to show us how to fight, debate, and struggle our way to the right place. His mission was to bring the right place to us.

Once we become clearer about the mission of the eternal Son of God who was "made man," as the creed claims, then our mission in life becomes clear also. No longer do we have to strive to get to the right place because Jesus is not an example for getting to God. He is the God who has come to us, and now the right place is wherever he may be found.

He can be found among conservatives and liberals. He can be found in the library, the office, or the hospital. He can be found among the poor, the rich, and in the minivans that shuttle around the suburbs. Jesus, the Son of God, can be found in the tears of a friend who has come to you, in the joy of a wedding like the one at Cana, in the smile of a Down syndrome child, and in the gentle "thank you" of a man who receives food in the soup kitchen. That's because, as the Son of God, Jesus is the outstretched hands of the Father. And he's got the whole world in his hands. The question is: are you looking for him, or have you been blinded by your desire to be just as good as he?

Philip said to Jesus, "Show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." We'll stop striving. Jesus responded, "The Father is in me ... I am the way." Arius was wrong. Jesus doesn't show us the way. He is the way. You'll never be satisfied until you see that what you want is already in front of you. And his name is Jesus.

We still commit ourselves to mission, social agendas, and political debates. We still have a lot of hard work, and we still have to get those kids to soccer practice. But now we enter all of that work not out of a desperate effort to get life right. Now it's because we might just see the Son of God out there. Nothing else will satisfy.

Benediction: The question isn't: what would Jesus do? The question is: what is Jesus doing? That changes everything about our mission. Amen.