

AN EVER-WIDENING EMBRACE  
Rev. Bruce J. Roffey  
New Hope, York Pines and King City United Churches  
York United Ministries  
Sunday, January 22 and 29, 2023

Three hundred years before the birth of Christ, the Greek scholar Aristotle stated with absolute authority that the universe was earth-centred because the human race had been patterned in form after the gods.

And that's how it was for 19 centuries until Polish-born Nicolaus Copernicus, a Canon in the Church, stated his conviction that this was all wrong. The sun and not the earth was the centre of our universe. His theory, he said, was simple and beautiful. The world was outraged. Even such revolutionaries and reformers as Martin Luther called him a fool and a heretic. Obviously, we, humankind, were central to God's interest. We and our whole world were at the centre of the universe.

In the seventeenth century Galileo confirmed the view of Copernicus through accurate astronomical observations. For his work he was condemned by the church as well as secular philosophers. It wasn't until October of 1992, over three hundred and fifty years later, that the Vatican admitted its error.

With every development in astronomy and cosmology humankind has gotten smaller and has felt more unimportant. If the earth was not at the centre of the universe, then humankind was not at the centre of God's love. Now, of course, every school

child knows that the earth is not even at the centre of this solar system. Our solar system is not at the centre of our galaxy and our galaxy is not at the centre of the universe. Moreover, the universe is much larger than people ever thought and it's getting bigger all the time.

In 1998, by observing supernovae, intensely bright exploding stars several billion light-years away from earth, scientists have determined that not only is the universe expanding from the Big Bang of billions of years ago, it will never stop. It will just keep getting bigger and bigger. Its rate of expansion is accelerating and with it our personal universe is contracting in importance. If theology corresponds with cosmology, we are indeed sorrowful creatures.

But to speak of creation and to speak of the Creator are not the same thing. Cosmology is not to be confused with theology. The message of our faith, the good news passed on to us through the centuries by the generations of the faithful is that we are of importance to God the Creator. Each one of us, regardless of our status in society, or our minuscule size in the universe, each one of us is important to God. God's concern is not limited to the macrocosm, to the big picture. God's concern and God's love are focussed on the microcosm, on each one of us. In a sense each one of us truly is at the centre of God's universe, the focus of God's love.

But there is more to it than that. God's love is constantly

expanding. It's getting larger and larger. Like a wave in a pool, like light from a beacon, it is spreading out from the individual to society and on to societies, from the singular to the plural, from the particular to the general. God's love is not limited. It's spreading out like an ever-widening embrace.

That's what we observed over Christmas and Epiphany. God's love was incarnate at Bethlehem in a baby in a small manger in a stable. Jesus was born into an unimportant Jewish peasant family in the backwaters of the world, a place of little significance in the Roman empire, a place few in the wider world had ever heard of. But the love spread, first to shepherds, people from the margins of society, unimportant people in the world's scheme of things. Then Magi came signifying the extension of God's love to the Gentile world. Then Jesus was baptized and undertook a ministry in Galilee. Then disciples were called, and the love extended. Then, after Jesus' death and resurrection, Paul met the risen Lord and the love extended again geographically to the ends of the empire. Then other Christians took the message farther and farther across the whole face of the globe, an ever-widening embrace including everyone.

Such ideas are not new to Jesus' time and ministry. In the reading from the 49<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah we have what is almost a reprise of Isaiah's call in the sixth chapter. Here Isaiah complains that his work has borne little fruit. It has been to no purpose. So his reward must only be in God, not in worldly success.

God's response is interesting. It seems almost like a non sequitur. God doesn't say, "Keep trying." God says, "Expand your vision. Look farther." "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to Israel. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth." "And you will be successful because you have been chosen and God is faithful." When Isaiah was despondent at his failure in God's call, God didn't cut back, God didn't withdraw, God expanded the call, increased the terms of reference, enlarged the task.

Expand your vision. Expand your vision to match the expanding love of God, the ever-widening embrace of God's love.

Now that is a wonderful vision of God's love reaching out like giant arms in an immense embrace including everyone. It's wonderful. At least it seems so at first glance. But as the love of God expands it will embrace those who we think are unlovable.

When the Titanic went down it did not take with it the Titanic attitude that some people are better than others. The class structure of that day might have changed but there is still prejudice in all societies of the world that some are better than others, that some are more worthy than others of being saved from drowning and death, that some are more lovable than others and some are not lovable at all.

Theologian Kosuke Koyama describes "an upside down world" in which the "Centre God runs out to the periphery" to welcome strangers and outcasts. Such an ever-widening

embrace of the world by the grace of God “causes commotion, not tranquility.” Hope, he concludes, lives today “in the commotion caused by grace. The Biblical mystery is not tranquil. It is impassioned. It is about the homeless Jesus who embraces everyone by going to the periphery.” It is a hope and a love that leads us with it out into the world with an ever-widening embrace.<sup>i</sup>

Surely the turmoil we sometimes feel from God’s grace comes from the fact there are people, many people, we don’t want to embrace.

Philip Yancey writing about grace says, “There is nothing we can do to make God love us more. There is nothing we can do to make God love us less.”<sup>ii</sup> That’s very comforting and assuring news – when it’s applied to me. But when it’s applied to those I don’t think are lovable, it’s quite disturbing.

Every day now in the media we hear or read about homelessness. The police and city employees in Toronto forcefully evict the homeless from tent cities, often destroying their meagre possessions in the process. Advocates call for action on the part of the various levels of government. It is a moral imperative.

What do you think and feel about homeless people, poor people, street people? I have heard a lot of negative things said about poor people which I won’t repeat here. I have heard them in the wider world and in the church. What do you think about

poor people? Are they included in God's ever-widening embrace? Are they included in yours? Does God love them? Do you? If God does, and if you do, what would that mean?

When I was a summer student, I spent some time as a chaplain intern in the prison in Cowansville, Quebec. The people in Canada's federal prisons have done some terrible things. Some people say that they are being treated royally in our prisons. That's usually said by someone who has never actually been in one. Do these people deserve a second chance? Do they deserve society's help? Does God love these people who have done such terrible things? Do you? If God does and if you do, what would that mean?

God's love is not expanding. Rather God's love has never been limited. From the very beginning God's embrace has always extended to all people and indeed all creation. It is our understanding that has been limited and our love that has had restriction. God invites us to expand our vision, to extend our arms, to open our hearts and to embrace all those whom God loves.

Over the years, I have been involved in helping congregations develop their mission or vision statement. Our churches have done so. I recall someone saying that a vision should sound like bragging. It should be a goal for which we strive, one that motivates our corporate and personal lives so that people will see God in us.

There will be a temptation for us to seek something less than that, to be a good person rather than to be Christ for those we meet. There will be a temptation to say that our vision is not achievable. But to paraphrase Browning shouldn't our reach exceed our grasp, /Or what's a heaven for?<sup>iii</sup>

Thomas Edison once said, "Show me a thoroughly satisfied [person] and I will show you a failure."<sup>iv</sup> Every disciple of Christ will from time to time feel like Isaiah as if we are a failure, we are unsuccessful. If that doesn't happen then we are not seeking for much, our sights have been set too low.

God does not respond to our failure by reducing the task but by urging us on and even calling us to an even greater one. But be assured God equips us, provides us with the gifts we need to accomplish the task.

Commenting on the passage on spiritual gifts<sup>v</sup> which is today's epistle reading, one preacher said we are called to live a lack-nothing life. To live a lack-nothing life is to recognize and treasure the presence of God with us, and the way in which God has gifted each one of us. The difficulty is that our gifts are often hidden until we begin to use them. Like electricity that comes from the power system of this province we can't store it. We can only depend on it being there when we need it.

Are you ready to take up the call of God? Are you ready to extend your embrace in ever-widening circles as God has done to you? Are we as a church ready to live according to our vision so

that others find, see, experience and feel Christ in us?

At a stewardship conference a number of years ago, John Brackett told the story of when he joined the Episcopal Church in 1974. He went to St. Luke's Church in Atlanta, Georgia. He gave \$1/week or \$52/year. In November of 1975 he received a letter from the Chair of their stewardship campaign who was a Senior Vice-President of a trust company or bank. The letter said, "Your pledge for 1976 will be \$104/year. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me." That was twice what he had been giving the previous year.

Brackett was furious. He ranted and raved for a week until under his wife's instructions he called the Chair of the Campaign. He didn't actually expect to get through. This was a Senior Vice-President after all. "Yes, John, can I help you?" he asked. He didn't know Brackett from Adam, but he called him by his first name.

"Well, I'm upset by the letter you sent me." Then Brackett ranted and raved and complained. "How dare you? The church has no right to raise my pledge, to double it. What do you think you were doing? It's my money. It's my life." For about ten minutes there was silence on the other end as he complained. Then there was a pregnant silence after which the Chairman said, "I understand all that. I have only one question. Are you going to do it?"<sup>vi</sup>

Well, what do you think? Are you ready to expand your

vision? Are you ready to extend the embrace of your concern to match the ever-widening embrace of God's love? Are you going to do it? Are we going to do it? What are you going to do? What are we going to do?

---

<sup>i</sup> Quoted by Jerry L. Van Marter, "Hope Leads the Church into the World, Theme Presenters Say," *Presbyterian News Service Release # 98414* (December 18, 1998).

<sup>ii</sup> Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* Zondervan (1997).

<sup>iii</sup> From Robert Browning, "Andrea Del Sarto."

<sup>iv</sup> Quoted from a sermon by Fred Damaray in *Aha!!!*, (January-March 1999) Vol. 8, # 2, p. 16.

<sup>v</sup> 1 Corinthians 1: 1-9.

<sup>vi</sup> John Brackett, *Covenant, Baptism, Stewardship and Living the Christian Life*, Commission on Stewardship Winter Event (1989).