



“The Boundless Riches of Christ”

When Christ appeared to the apostle Paul unexpectedly, his life opened up. It didn't close down. It wasn't the end of his adventure. It was the beginning. In his own words, “grace was given to him to proclaim the *boundless* riches of Christ” (Ephesians 3:8). The adjective is carefully chosen. The riches of Christ, Paul discovered, extended beyond Jews to include Gentiles. God had revealed to him that his way of thinking about God and religion had been far too narrow. To be in Christ was to enter into a *boundless* adventure.

He was perhaps discovering what the Magi in Matthew's gospel had already learned. Such persons would have been Persians, and likely practiced Zoroastrianism. Nevertheless, they crossed religious and cultural boundaries to pay homage to a newborn Jewish baby. You see, they weren't called Magi, Wise Ones, for nothing. They were seekers after spiritual wisdom. As such, they dedicated their life to deepening their knowledge of the workings of God and the universe. The wisdom they sought was not confined to their culture or their particular religion. It was more boundless than that.

It seems to me that we have, in this passage from Ephesians and in the story of the Magi, the basis of a

fundamental orientation of the Christian faith: namely, that to be in Christ is to be involved in a process of continual expansion of our horizons, to search for the boundless nature of God. Paul was in the midst of persecuting Christians when he met Jesus on the road to Damascus. (There are two different accounts of this story, but we do know that his life changed dramatically because of this encounter). His interpretation of his religion had narrowed his thinking down to a belief that he had the truth and these Christians were wrong. Well, his interpretation of Judaism was misguided. It was *bounded* by ethnic, religious, and cultural elitism. The revelation came to him that God's heart was large enough to encompass non-Jews, and it changed his life. His boundaries were expanded.

Every world religion, in fact, suffers from this tendency to believe that their own particular form of faith is the complete and total revelation of God – that with them, the revelation of God has been closed. Seventy percent of Christians still believe today that to be in Christ is to bind oneself to the one, the only, and the unchanging truth of their brand. Fundamentalist Islamists continue to terrorize women, children, and infidels, because they associate belief in the prophet, not with the boundless

pursuit of wisdom, but by drawing the lines that divide evermore sharply.

There *are* fundamentals to the Christian faith, but these fundamentals always lead in the direction of opening up, not closing down. The fundamentals were never meant to lead to *fundamentalism*. These fundamentals, in fact, are based in a universal wisdom that will always transcend, yet include, particular religions, including Christianity. In fact, when the early church was trying to come to terms with the identity of Jesus of Nazareth and the scope of his message of the Kingdom of God, they imagined him to be the incarnate presence of Universal Wisdom.

This Wisdom is the Heart and Mind of God, who created the cosmos, holds the cosmos together in her Heart (and typically she is imagined to be feminine), is active as the non-coercive power within creation, and is leading us in the direction of conscious realization of our divine nature. Many New Testament scholars are convinced that the one title that Jesus used to describe himself was “child of Wisdom”. And so, as Christians, we look to Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection to help us plumb the depths of the Wisdom of God. Here are 10 fundamentals of Jesus’ teaching, fundamentals intended to open us into boundlessness.

1. God is personal: While He/She/It is more than what we mean by personal, God is never less than what we mean by the term. God is not a

“person”, but is the Source of the love and compassion that our most highly developed persons on the planet exhibit. Jesus called God “Daddy”. God has a heart and cares for us and all creation.

2. This Love extends beyond our tribe, our family, our nation, to include not only “us”, but also “all of us”, and beyond this to include “all that is” – the whole cosmos.
3. God has a special place in God’s heart for the left-behinds of society, and therefore by extension, those who are in Christ have a heart for them as well. A just sharing of the earth’s resources is therefore a central ethic of Christianity.
4. While God is always more than we can ever conceive of, nevertheless God can be known, in and through our own lives and in and through the created world, and through the stories of our faith. God is known in the deepest and most authentic regions of our own heart. The Kingdom of God is within.
5. We gain access to this realm, not by believing the right things, but rather by through the door of the open heart and open mind.
6. There is nothing to fear from this God, because God is love.

- Fear is a sign of being out of relationship with God. It is a condition that manifests in the hoarding of material wealth, in the mistreatment of oneself, others, the earth, and other-than-human creatures, and the desire to dominate over others, rather than to serve them.
7. Death is not a dissolution into nothingness. It is a portal into the heart of God. Eternity is not endless time. It is timelessness, and we can enter into this timelessness, this eternal dimension here and now.
 8. The predominant predisposition of the Christian is joy – even in the midst of tragedy, suffering, and evil. The proper response to the reality of evil and atrocity is compassion – the willingness to suffer with – not violence and not despair. We trust that this broken and beautiful world is held in the heart of God.
 9. As Paul writes in today's reading from Ephesians, the church is charged with the responsibility of making known this "wisdom of God in its rich variety" (3:10).
- because we live in an evolutionary universe. In one sense, wisdom is timeless. In another sense, because we are evolving in our understanding of the universe, new insights into the reality of God and God's world are always on the horizon. Therefore, I would add a 10th fundamental:
10. Revelation itself - the ways in which we know God – is evolutionary. It will never be closed. To return to Paul's adjective, wisdom is therefore *boundless*. As our own consciousness evolves, our capacity to fathom previously unavailable knowledge about God also increases. Profound humility is therefore required. What we don't know far exceeds what we do know, and this will in all likelihood, always be the case. While we get glimpses, in Paul's words, of the "plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God" (3:9), the plan itself will always be an evolving reality. And no single religion will ever have exclusive claim to ultimate truth. Revelation is ongoing.

This is, I contend, is universal wisdom, made known in rich variety through the partial insights of every religious tradition, including the Christian faith. I say "partial"

The way of the future is to celebrate and live out the "rich variety of God's wisdom". It will mean making forays, like the Magi, into territory we may not be familiar with. What territory? We will want to return to nature as a sacred mode of divine presence, after hundreds of years of separating ourselves from it because of

a fear of paganism. Nature is an expression of boundless grace of God. A friend of mine showed me a book the other day the theme of which is that our children suffer from NDD – Nature Deficit Disorder. So does the church.

We need to traverse the territory of science if we are going to discover the boundless grace of Christ and the rich variety of wisdom. For too long there has been a separation between science and spirituality. They are distinct domains and it is important to understand their distinct areas of concern and methodologies. But both end up at the same place – in mystery. We have different language for describing this mystery. But both science and spirituality are discovering that what we don't know about the universe and God is far greater than what we do know. A sermon needs to be preached about what science and spirituality *don't* know. It's what we

don't know that keeps us exploring the boundless nature of Christ. The point is that science is helping us to know something of the boundless nature of Christ and the rich variety of wisdom.

We will want to join our own Allan MacLean who makes it a practice to occasionally go and worship with other faith traditions, like the Muslims. We will want to get out of our comfort zones and pay homage, in the tradition of the Magi, our Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, and Islamic friends. We will want to go with our own Beverley Straight to participate in the sacred rituals of our indigenous people, as long as we are welcome. Finally, we will want to explore the interior dimensions of our own spiritual life through spiritual practice, social engagement, and acts of lovingkindness. Friends, it's been almost 2000 years since Paul wrote about the boundless nature of Christ. His words hold true for us today.