

Questions: What is God like?
Questions Sermon Series 1
February 5, 2017
Trinity Bixby
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Isaiah 40:18-23, 28-31
I John 4: 7-16

My friends, today we begin on a small adventure together – a sermon series based around your questions! Elana and I have been asking you for questions for a couple weeks now, and you’ve definitely come through – though if you think of something else, by all means, let us know! As a matter of politeness, I’m not going to name the person asking the question – though they may choose to name themselves, if they wish. The question that we’ll be talking about today is this: What does it mean when we talk about the “Sovereignty of God”?

To get at this question, we need to unpack a few things. First, if you’re expecting me to say, “God’s sovereignty means exactly this....” Then, I’m going to need you to put that expectation aside. Like many theological questions, there’s not a single, simple answer. Rather, as we discuss a range of answers, we reveal more about the nature of God and how we relate to God. Indeed, I hope that you don’t walk away today saying, “the question of God’s Sovereignty was answered in Worship today!” Instead, I encourage you to think of this as being one part in an on-going conversation, with those gathered in this church today and with those who have gone before in the Church Universal – and the Church to come. We’re going to look at historical context, but perhaps your voice will be a part of the historical context to come!

So, what does sovereignty mean, anyway? When we talk about sovereignty today, it’s usually in the context of sovereign nations – that is, nations that have authority to govern themselves, independent of anyone else. Sovereignty, in this view, sounds very much like a synonym for “independent authority.” But does this fit, when talking about God? Given that God created everything, and “nothing in life or death can separate us from the love of God”?[Romans 8:48] Some people take great comfort in God’s immediacy, and involvement in their life - and this is good!

On the other hand, how can God NOT be an independent authority? For God is the Potter who shapes the clay [Jeremiah 18: 1-11], and God is “beyond the reach of human understanding.” [Isaiah 40: 22] There's also comfort in this emphasis – that God is in control, that ultimately, God's vision will prevail. Maybe you've felt this tension, a good tension, in the Bible and our understanding of God as a personal being who interacts with us on our level while at the same time being transcendent, all-knowing and all-powerful. Maybe you've noticed that many of our prayers together begin with a dual naming of God – I tend to use “Holy and Beloved God,” but we've also prayed using “Holy and Gracious God” and “Our Father in Heaven” and “Sovereign Source of Salvation,” when we're feeling particularly alliterative. These are representations of this tension between God-in-Heaven and God-with-us. If you want to know more about this, the scholarly terms are “God-Transcendent and God-Immanent” – but that's a sermon for another time.

Instead, let's look into this idea of tension a little further. In the Presbyterian Church (USA), we tend not to speak of God's sovereignty alone, but in tension with another attribute of God – God's grace or God's love. Sometimes, the emphasis is more on sovereignty or on grace, but both are present throughout the Reformed church – and, indeed, in the Church Universal as well. The Heidelberg Catechism begins with the question: What is your only comfort in life in death? The answer: “That I am not my own, but belong – body and soul, in life and in death – to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ... He watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven – in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.”(4.001) Here, God's sovereignty is emphasized in classic, sweeping terms – everything happens according to God's will – and held in tension with the grace of salvation through Jesus – “all things must work together for my salvation.” In the Isaiah 40 passage, that I read a moment ago, God is described both as “inhabiting the horizon” – so far away that the people below look like locusts! – with power over the whole universe. Yet, God is also so close as to be able to “give power to the tired” and “revive the exhausted.” Again, we have the tension between God's sovereignty and God's love and care for humanity. As uncomfortable as this

tension may make us, who like simple answers, and settled arguments, it is the tension that brings energy to the discussion.

Now, the mechanical-minded among you are nodding your heads already. A spring under tension has potential energy to change to kinetic when it is set free. When you wind your watch, for instance, you're adding energy back to the spring by bringing it into greater tension. The tension between God-with-us and God-in-Heaven provides energy, too, (though God doesn't need to be wound up!)

Another way to look at this is like a swing dance. In a traditional ballroom dance, the couple make a "frame" – a single solid object, by placing their hands just so, and holding their bodies in tension. That way, one can lead or follow by feeling the pressure exerted by their partner. In swing dance, though, there's no solid frame to move around. Instead, the direction in the dance is provided by the dancers pulling away from each other slightly, turning their arms into a sort of rope under tension. So long as the tension is maintained, the partners on the dancefloor can read each other's direction, and move together.

"So long as that tension is maintained..." That leads us to a historical oddity when it comes to God's sovereign grace – often, sovereignty is emphasized at the expense of grace. When that happens, the tension is lost, and humanity can stumble out of step with God. To better illustrate this, I'm going to turn now to the late Reformed theologian Shirley Guthrie:

The form of the attributes of God's sovereign majesty... are expressed either... in terms that God is what we are not (infinite, unchangeable)... or that God is what we are at our best, but raised to perfection (most wise, most holy). But when we define God by comparison with ourselves,... are we really talking about God or only about ourselves? ...Moreover, if we begin by thinking abstractly of the sovereign majesty of God before we speak of God's love for us in Christ, how can we avoid making God into the image of a human tyrant?

God as a human tyrant writ large is unfortunately an all-too-common understanding. You may have heard of sermons with titles like, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" or "God's Wrath: Eternal Conscious Punishment." Or definitions of God's sovereignty that read "God has the right to do whatever God wants to do." That's what happens when we lose the tension – and stumble out of

the dance. We forget that God isn't just God-above-us – but God-with-us, too. That's what our passage from I John is reminding us of: God is love. God does not act contrary to God's nature, which is love[1 John 4:1-2]. It's not that we love God, but that God first loved us – that God's grace saves us from our stumbling.

You may have noticed that I keep using love and grace interchangeably. They are different, of course, but I'm trying to keep another tension in balance. You see, Luke and Paul talk about God's grace, while Mark, Matthew and John refer to God's love in pretty similar contexts. Turning to the book of confessions, The Scots confession emphasizes that the covenant of grace extends back to Adam. Later, in the Brief Statement of Faith, the emphasis is that God's ruling is expressed as love in Christ Jesus, whose life lived and sacrificed for others was vindicated in the resurrection's overruling of death. The Koine Greek word that we translate as “grace” is *charis*. *Charis* originally meant something akin to charm – that's why it's the root of “charisma” – but came to mean in Koine Greek “doing good without reward.” God's grace, then, is that God gives Godself to us freely, without expectation, or even ability to pay God back. God's grace is God's love, eternal, and full. God's grace covers our missteps in the dance, and pulls us back into relationship with God. And one of the ways to do that is at the communion table – in the sacrament of the eucharist. Eu-*charis*-t. The table of good grace. The table of communion with the love of God.

When we believe truly that we belong to God's sovereign grace, we can get into the swing of the dance. We can share God's love and grace with others, secure that God will lead us where we are most needed, and will pick us up when we fall, fill us with energy to fly across the dancefloor like eagles wheeling in the sky. For nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God.

May God-in-heaven lead you in the dance of life. May the Christ, God-with-us, fill us with love for God and each other. May the Holy Spirit remind us of the tension that causes us to fly like eagles and never grow weary of the dance. Amen.