

1 March 2009

Super Glue

(This is the first message in our Lenten series 'Together Again: The Meaning of the Atonement'.)

Colossians 1:15-20

It's one of the first nursery rhymes we learn. There are drawings and cartoons of it. Kids all over the English-speaking world can recite it at the drop of a hat. Usually he's portrayed as an egg.

*Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall.
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
All the king's horses and all the king's men
Couldn't put Humpty together again.*

According to the East Anglia Tourist Board, Humpty Dumpty was a powerful cannon used in the Siege of Colchester during the English Civil War. It was mounted on top of the 'St Mary's at the Wall' Church in Colchester defending the city against siege in the summer of 1648. The church tower was hit by enemy cannon fire and the top of the tower was blown off, sending "Humpty" tumbling to the ground. Naturally all the king's horses and all the king's men (the cavalry and infantry, respectively) tried to fix it, but it didn't work.

The poem also shows up in popular music from time to time

Billy Joel had it in one of his tunes:
*All the king's men and all the king's horses
Can't put you together the way you used to be*

Dolly Parton used it in a song about a divorce:
*And all the king's horses and all the king's men
Couldn't put mommy and daddy back together again*

Genesis used it, too:
*All the king's horses and all the king's men
Could never put a smile on that face*

These songs remind us that there's a sad story at the core of this little poem. Whoever or whatever Humpty Dumpty represents, clearly he's taken a serious fall and is suffering because of it. The sad part is that there seems to be nothing anyone can do to help. *'All the king's horses and all the king's men, couldn't put Humpty together again.'*

That's a very sad ending, I think.

We hear a lot these days about how fragmented our culture is. We hear about the

distance—the broken relationships between men and women, black and white, young and old, rich and poor, urban and rural—the list is long. Our text this morning is a reminder that there is someone who holds things together—even if we can't see him, someone who loves completely and acts decisively to put things back together again.

15He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. 16For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. 17He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. 19For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, 20and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

We talked about the background to Paul's letter to the Colossians a few weeks ago. The city was a small trading center, and was home to a handful of different religions. The problem Paul is addressing with the Colossian church was that it had allowed too much influence from other religions in its practice of the Christian faith. When you added that to the constant danger of persecution from Rome, Paul's letter was an attempt to get them back on a straight path. There are some great hymns in this letter—songs that explain important theological truths. The central theme of the letter is pretty basic: Christ is the glue that holds the universe together, even in an uncertain world.

It's important for us to build our faith on a firm foundation of who God reveals himself to be in the pages of Scripture. We can also get a better understanding of who we are and who we're made to be.

One of my former pastors preached a sermon on the Trinity a few years back. Rather than try to explain rationally what it meant for God to be three persons at the same time, he said this. 'At the center of the universe, there is a relationship.'

If the Scriptures teach that we're somehow made in the image of this relational God, then what does that mean? If it's true that God lives in a constant state of relationship as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, then it means that we're made to live that way, too. We're made to live in a range of relationships at a handful of different levels.

But we've taken a serious fall—our ability to live and love and thrive in relationships has been damaged—and no one seems to know how to put it all back together again. That shouldn't sound like a radical statement if you read the newspapers—or even if you just step out of your house. If you drive a car in Central London you know that there is something seriously broken about the way we relate to each other.

The focus of this series as we move through Lent builds on everything we've talked about here since September. The Lord's Prayer, the celebration of Christmas, and our look at what it means to be a contagious church. The theme during Lent is an important one. We can sum it up in a single sentence: The work of Christ on the Cross offers healing for our relationships at all levels—with God, with ourselves, with each other, and with nature.

That's the outline for what we'll be doing over the next 4 weeks.

But what was it supposed to be like before things got broken? The Bible has a word for how we were made to live: **Shalom**

We were created to live in a constant, blissful state of Shalom. That word appears more than 250 times in the Bible—it's clearly important to God that we understand it. We usually translate it as 'peace', but that doesn't do it justice.

In the Old Testament, Shalom has a broad range of meanings. It can refer to the communal well-being of the nation, or physical health. A sense of contentedness or happiness in relationships. It often describes a state of completion and wholeness. One writer called it 'the webbing together of God, humans and creation in justice, fulfillment and delight.' In the famous blessing from Numbers 6, we hear this: 'The LORD bless you and keep you. The LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you. The LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you *Shalom*.'

One thing that is always true in the way the Bible describes Shalom: It can only be found in the presence of God.

So let's get this part set in our minds: We were designed to live healthy, content, happy lives filled with wholeness and peace, all in the presence of God. 'The webbing together of God, humans and creation in justice, fulfillment and delight.' We can't really talk about what's broken in our world—or even in our lives—without understanding this idea of Shalom.

Sin is the breaking—the shattering into pieces—of the shalom God created for all of us. It's what happens to us when we have our great big serious fall. One writer said that if Shalom is God's design for creation and redemption, then 'sin is the blamable human vandalism of these great qualities, and therefore an insult to their architect and builder.'

Now sin is an unpopular topic for discussion for a handful of reasons. No one wants to seem judgmental. No one wants to appear intolerant. Mostly none of us wants to define anything we might be doing ourselves as sin—as blamable human vandalism of God's Shalom.

But here's the truth. We can't begin to comprehend the saving, healing, reconciling ministry of Jesus Christ, if we're not willing to acknowledge the presence and impact of sin in our lives.

Maybe it will help to put it into relational terms. Think of the word 'estranged.' Literally it means to be made strange to someone else—to become a stranger to someone that was once known. That's what happens when sin breaks the perfect Shalom God created for us. We are made strange—even strangers—to God.

But we were made to live in that state of Shalom—to have healthy, fulfilling, connected relationships with God, with ourselves, with each other, and with the earth. Remember

that line from the definition: Shalom is 'the webbing together of God, humans and creation in justice, fulfillment and delight.' Those are the relationships that are broken by sin, and those are the relationships healed by Christ's work on the Cross.

In our text we learn a couple of important things about who Christ is and what he does. He was before all things—present at the creation of the world—and he holds everything together, like some cosmic Super Glue. We also learn that he gave himself as a sacrifice to reconcile all things in heaven and on earth, when it was clear that we couldn't manage that job ourselves.

So back to Humpty Dumpty. In the nursery rhyme I started with, the bad news in the poem is that no power can heal something once it's broken. 'All the king's horses and all the king's men' keep trying, but that bad news is that they can't solve the problem.

The good news for us this season, as we take this time during Lent to focus on Christ's sacrifice for us—the good news is that Christ can put everything back together again. The gift of the Cross—the amazing thing Christ accomplishes in the Atonement—is the rebuilding of the Shalom we threw away in the Garden—the reconciling of the relationships that are somehow broken. The Atonement—the work of Christ on the Cross—offers us the chance to restore our relationships with God, with ourselves, with each other, and with the earth.

During this season of Lent—of reflection on our need for Christ and his sacrifice for us—during Lent our focus will be on the way God made us as relational beings—people who are hard-wired for connection and community. We'll see the different ways that Shalom has been broken, and what God has done to restore it for his people.

As we come to the Table this morning we celebrate the gift of communion—the gift of connection and relationship with Christians in all times and in all places, and with Jesus Christ himself. It's the glue that holds us all together in faith. Wherever you are on that journey, if you're seeking to have a relationship with God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, come and join in this holy feast.