

A Sticky Wicket!

I John 5: 9-13

A *sticky wicket* is a phrase that comes from the game cricket that describes the field after it dries out following an overnight rain during a multiple day game. A hard crust forms over the soft, wet soil and the result is a *sticky wicket*. Batting becomes awkward and even dangerous as the cricket ball bounces unpredictably. Nowadays, they just cover the pitch overnight and there are no more sticky wickets – at least not literally! The symbolic meaning of a sticky wicket is a challenging situation, a conundrum, or a difficult question with no easy answer.

The title *A Sticky Wicket* refers to one of those difficult questions with no easy resolution. Christians believe that Jesus is the Son of God right? The author of the first Epistle of John (1 John) sees this as true and also central to Christian faith. Not only do Christians say that Jesus God's son, according to 1 John, God says it too. That is the reason for confidence.

If we take human testimony at face value, how much more should we be reassured when God gives testimony..., testifying concerning his Son that whoever believes in the Son of God inwardly confirms God's testimony. Whoever refuses to believe in effect calls God a liar. (1 John 5: 10-11)

This is typical first century writing. The author tries to make his case with the threat that the reader had better believe or God won't be happy. But many today, persons of genuine and mature faith, don't accept the literal idea that Jesus was the Son of God, the divinely born offspring of a divine being – that he somehow had divine DNA. They don't believe Jesus was qualitatively different from other humans. One can imagine this holds great potential for division among Christians.

What can we do with this issue? Can we compromise? Is it possible to ignore the issue? Is clarity even possible? Does the answer lie with more solid biblical study or better scholarship? How about less study or more faith? Will we ever learn enough to know for sure or will we never know? Is this an irreconcilable argument?

Some background might help. Son of God was a title used for Caesar in the Roman world to give imperial authority a divine stamp of approval. If Caesar were the son of God, then the Roman empire was the kingdom of God. The disciples Jesus left behind, who wrote the New Testament and effectively started the church, began to call Jesus the son of God, to have the stature of Caesar and to offer him as an alternative to Caesar. Their point was that the true kingdom of God was represented by Jesus' vision, not the Roman's vision. The true kingdom, empire, and vision was one of love, mercy, justice, compassion, and peace rather than the oppressive peace of Rome imposed and controlled by the legion.

When the early Christians called Jesus the son of God, they meant that Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God, not Caesar's, was the true one. Only John's gospel, from the late first century, began to claim a divinity for Jesus that was of a different quality than other people. Through the years, there was a developing belief in the divinity of Jesus based on a belief in his resurrection. Only after Easter was Jesus, as the risen Christ, seen as uniquely God's son. This perspective was only then read back into his earthy and very human life.

The farther away the Christian church got from the historical Jesus, the more this idea of Jesus as God the Son developed. This belief was finally defined, under the direction of Emperor Constantine, by the bishops at Nicea in 325 CE in order to enhance the attractiveness of the Christian faith to potential believers and to hold together crumbling remnants of the Roman Empire.

What is the best Christians can do now to explain and reflect the nature of Jesus after Easter? In faith, most of us see Jesus as the source and enabler of faith more than just the Jesus of history. We have the mysterious and mystical idea of the dual natures of Jesus: as much God as if he were not human at all and as much human as if he were not God at all – a mystical truth. The trouble comes when the church tries to make this a literal truth and then insists on compliance. As a child, I believed Jesus was God's Son in the same way I was my parents' son. But now, isn't there a need for maturing faith? Isn't now a time to put away childish things?

The book *Blink* by Malcolm Gladwell is a fascinating study of the science of intuition -- how decisions are made. Its premise is that simpler decisions can benefit from exhaustive consideration and lots of information. Ironically, we often make better decisions on more complex problems with less information. Trombonist Abbie Conant, early in her career, was playing in Europe. She had applied for eleven orchestra jobs and had only received one response – from the Munich Philharmonic. The letter began, “Dear Herr Abbie Conant.” This should have given her a clue. They thought she was a man.

She went to Munich for an audition that was played from behind a screen for the sake of fairness. It turns out that one of the other people auditioning was the family member of someone in the orchestra. So Conant, number sixteen, played a great audition with a really tough piece of music. To make a long story short, the conductor knew immediately that this was the trombonist he wanted. What a surprise it was when not Herr Conant, but Frau Conant, emerged. It was an awkward situation and that conductor spent the next eight years trying to get rid of her. After all, he thought, a woman couldn't possibly be a better trombonist than men – but she was. Only when the visual information was excluded was the focus on that thin slice of the most vital information come to the fore. Only then could the best decision be made and the best trombonist really heard.

We live in a culture whose premise is that more information leads to better decisions. Often, just the opposite is true. With less information, sometimes we are able to see the forest and not just the tress. We have lots of information on Jesus as the Son of God and what that means. Just look up what's been written about the nature of Christology: Jesus as Son of God, Jesus as God the Son, Jesus as itinerate rabbi, and Jesus as “of one substance with the Father.” How twisted and turned we get trying to get a handle on what this means.

What is that vital information we really need in order to experience God through Jesus? We need to know how he lived and what he taught. The centrality of his message was love: to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength – to love the love neighbor and to love ourselves. It is to live with compassion, to live for justice, to treat yourself and others with kindness, and to lay down your life for your friends. Isn't that enough?

There is so much mystery in life. We don't know about the nature of the reality inside matter or the nature of the reality of cosmic patterns and dark matter. We don't know how Jesus related to God other than as a human being. I am not convinced that Jesus of Nazareth understood or could explain the nature of his relationship with God. He knew he loved God. He was committed to the values of the God he had come to know through his own Jewish faith. His mystical relationship with God was most like the deepest human relationship you could imagine. Jesus shows me how to relate and how to commit myself.

I don't know if Jesus had some divine DNA that was different than yours and mine. I do know we share a common humanity with him. I know more clearly what I value in life and how I choose to see the universe. I also know this: the world will not be changed by even the most compelling arguments about who Jesus was. People will only be moved when they see us changed.

God is big, really big -- beyond comprehension big. How can we grasp the enormity of God in time and space universe? How can we perceive God in this life? The basic assertion of Christian faith is that ultimate truth – God – was focused in and made clear through Jesus of Nazareth. That focus was so clear after his death that believers have continued to understand his life as identical with God's life as much as we can perceive it. The cross is the way. It was not a punishment visited on the Son by an angry father – God -- but a sign of the full extent of God's love shown us in Jesus.

The cross is the amount of commitment love requires to transform the world. Faith is stepping through the gateway of fear, disillusion, and greed to find the keys to the kingdom of God. The Spirit is not something that possesses us from outside, but life that emerges from within us. She is the co-creator with God of us and a co-creation of God and us. The Spirit challenge us to live today as Jesus would, with a full measure of insight, action, courage, and joy that awakens the divine within each of us. It is the Spirit who sends us into life with courage, compassion, and joy

Regarding Jesus, that thin slice of vital information is this: only transformed people transform the world. Only a changed church can change the world. Only when we live the values of justice, peace, compassion, mercy, and inclusion can we touch the true spirit of Jesus. People saw the nature of God in the face of Jesus. The divinity that shone in Jesus also shines, at least to some degree, in us and through us still today. The energy, light, and creative energy of God shines in us and through us as we give our lives to change the world into the kingdom of God..