

“Holding It All Together”

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¹¹May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from [Christ's] glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully ¹²giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. ¹³He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

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

(Colossians 1:11-20)

The summer before I started law school, I had some time to kill. I had a plan for the fall, but classes didn't start for another three months. So, I took off to the beach. I got a job at a golf course near Wrightsville Beach, taking tee times and handling sales in the shop. But they could only promise me 20 hours a week, that wasn't enough. Fortunately, I landed another part time job waiting tables, which was lucky because I had zero experience, and restaurant jobs around there were hard to come by. So, where does a kid with no restaurant experience get a wait staff job in a market like that? Krazy's Pizzas and Subs – serving the finest pizza available in the University Landing strip mall.

I can't really complain about that summer, because it was a good one and I made the most of it. But to this day, my job waiting tables at Krazy's Pizzas and Subs was the worst job I've ever had. There were lots of reasons for that, but one of them was that I was just not a very good waiter. I was really good if I had one table, and pretty good if I had two. But when the dinner rush hit and the tables all filled at the same time, I just could not keep it all straight. Everybody wanted their drinks at the same time. Orders came up in rapid succession. It felt like I was in that old "I Love Lucy" sketch in the pie factory – when the conveyor belt got sped up too fast, I just couldn't move fast enough to keep the pies from hitting the floor.

These days a lot of people are feeling like this a lot of the time. They feel like the world is moving too fast... that there are just too many fires to put out... too many things to fix... too many details that need to be resolved.

And we have soooo many choices! On Thursday afternoon, as Douglas and I were getting ready for our Interfaith Thanksgiving service, we were looking over the cereal boxes that had been donated and he said wistfully, "Remember when there was just one flavor of things?" And I knew what he was saying, because in our display there were probably 5 different flavors of Cheerios. When I was a kid, a "Cheerio" meant one thing. Now it means 10 or 11 different things. Same with an Oreo. Today, there are at least 85



different flavors of Oreos. Lady Gaga has her own Oreo flavor. I'm not kidding. It's kind of amazing that anybody can make a decision about anything these days.

The serious side of all of this is that a lot of people are feeling stressed out and overwhelmed, to the point that some of us feel like we are spending most of our time just trying to hold it all together. And it is exhausting. As one person has written, "I am tired of trying to hold things together that cannot be held. Trying to control what cannot be controlled. I am tired of denying myself what I want for fear of breaking things I cannot fix. They will break no matter what we do."¹

Or another, who on a day when it all seemed too much, just crumpled up into a ball. "I hugged my knees to my chest," she said, "desperately trying to hold myself together so I didn't splinter into a thousand pieces. If I let go, no one would ever be able to put the pieces together again."²

No wonder it is just at these moments when we tend to have our clearest experiences of God. The minute we realize that we cannot hold it all together, we realize how much we need to know that someone can. If we feel like we are losing our grip, we crave the assurance that someone greater can grab hold of us and keep everything from falling completely and irreparably apart. When the world seems crazy, we need to feel like something can hold it together. As one biblical writer has put it, "The quest of the ages has been for a principle of unity and continuity that will interpret the universe."³

Or, we might just call it a search for the "theory of everything." That's how Albert Einstein described it, and that's what Albert Einstein was looking for. Honestly, he got us as close as anyone ever has. Einstein's vision of the cosmos was clearly scientific, but it also rested on a conviction that there was and is a God who created it all. He had what some have called "a night-sky theology, a sense of the awesomeness of the universe"⁴ that was essentially the same as the wonder felt by the psalmist who looked up and the night sky and uttered the prayer "*O LORD, our Sovereign... When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?*"⁵

That's how Einstein viewed the created order. For him, the greatest mystery is the fact that the cosmos is *something*, even though it could have been *nothing*. In the beginning, something started everything, and Einstein referred to that beginning, as we do, with the name "God." And he was driven by a desire to understand the order that God had created. His life was a relentless pursuit of truth, a persistent probing of cosmic mysteries through scientific inquiry. He never stopped seeking that elusive "theory of everything," a model that could explain the workings of the universe.

¹ Erin Morgenstern, *The Night Circus*, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/462422-i-am-tired-of-trying-to-hold-things-together-that>, accessed on November 19, 2021.

² Cat Clarke, *Entangled*, https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/4118351.Cat_Clarke, accessed on November 19, 2021.

³ G. Preston MacLeod, Exposition to "The Epistle to the Colossians," *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. XI New York: Abingdon Press (1955), p. 165.

⁴ Louis Menand, "Reading Into Albert Einstein's God Letter," <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/reading-into-albert-einsteins-god-letter>, posted December 25, 2018.

⁵ Psalm 8:1, 3-4.

I am not a physicist by any stretch, but smart people have tried to explain this to me, and I think I have just enough of it to be dangerous. As I understand it, Einstein had a pretty accurate idea of how things work on an atomic level. Quantum mechanics found order and patterns in the way atoms and electrons and sub-atomic particles move and occupy space, electromagnetic rules that held true mathematically and predictably.

The same was true of the universe in its grandest scope. Einstein's theory of relativity was a breakthrough that focused how gravity really worked – how it affected planets and stars and galaxies on a cosmic scale. Again, there is predictability. There are consistent rules.

The problem was that what is true on the smallest scale did not translate into the universal scale. And vice versa. Relativity could not account for the way atoms behaved; quantum mechanics theory breaks down when things get really big. Einstein was never able to unify the two theories. He was never able to put it all together into one coherent picture. But -- and I think this is one of the coolest things about it all -- that never seemed to frustrate him. It just drove him harder. Although God seemed to have dropped a veil over the truths he was pursuing, Einstein kept plugging away, trying to peek beneath that veil to get a little glimpse into eternity. And he knew that, when his life was over, there would be others who could take the ball and keep running with it – keep searching for that elusive “theory of everything.”

While people continue to debate what kind of faith in God Einstein really had, it seems clear to me that Einstein strongly associated the order of the universe with his concept of God. As suggested by his famous aphorism, that "Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind," he also sought a grand theory that could somehow connect the order of our physical world to the order of God, an idea that could somehow pull it all together in some coherent way.

This, I would say, is the very same idea found in the letter to the Colossians. Where Einstein begins with science, the writer of this letter begins with faith. But I would say that both of them are really looking for the same thing. Both are seeking to understand this world that often defies understanding – a world in which the pieces don't always seem to fit.

Back in 1920, another great thinker probed these same mysteries, although his chosen medium was poetic verse. The world was still reeling from the carnage of World War I. Europe lay in smoky ruins. Nine million soldiers and seven million civilians had died in the conflict. Politicians were seeking ways to pull together a shaky peace, but William Butler Yeats worried that the world was far from finding any cohesive way to live together:

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity...*

But even in his pessimism, Yeats looked upon the world through a lens of faith. Perhaps there was something that could pull the world back together. Perhaps, he thought, the world had been broken so that something new could rise up from the ashes. "*Surely some revelation is at hand,*" he mused.

*Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?*⁶

Einstein, Yeats, and the writer of Colossians all wondered, in their own ways, how God might be at the center – how God might be the only thing, the only One, who can pull the disparate pieces of creation back together and somehow make sense of them. To use the words of John Wesley, we believe that Christ is the glue, the cement, and the support of the universe.⁷

That is the proclamation of faith that we dare to make on Christ the King Sunday. We dare to believe and to claim that Christ -- the cosmic Christ who was there in the beginning, is here even now, and will be forevermore -- is the "*firstborn of all creation*" ... that "*in him all things in heaven and on earth were created*" ... that he "*is before all things*" ... and that "*in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.*"

We dare to believe that, as Advent begins, the One who is making his way to Bethlehem to be born anew is nothing less than our Theory of Everything – the only One who can hold it all together. **Amen.**

⁶ William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming," <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/43290>

⁷ <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/notes.i.xiii.ii.html>