

## **“Who Is Jesus, Really?”**

Colossians 1 : 11-20

There was teacher of the Old Testament at Duke Divinity School by the name of Elbert Russell. Dr. and Mrs. Russell usually spent Christmas holidays in Greensboro, North Carolina with their daughter and her family.

On one Christmas morning they opened presents at sunrise as usual. They sat down to have breakfast. Dr. Russell's grandson Rusty was 8 then, and he had learned lots of things since he was 7. "Grandpa," he said, "I have made a discovery." "What is that?" his grandfather asked. "I have found out all about Santa Claus, the myth of Christmas.

There was an embarrassed silence around the table. Then the boy added, "And that's not all. When I get a little older, I'm going to look into this Jesus business." The old professor braced himself, looked straight into the eyes of young Russell, and said, "And I hope you do. And if you look into this Jesus business seriously, he'll get you just like he got me."

Today we will take a look into this Jesus business seriously.

There is only one thing distinctive about the Christian faith, and that is Jesus Christ. We are the only major faith on earth to claim that God himself became a human being, died an atoning death, and rose triumphant from the grave.

When Methodist founder John Wesley dispatched the first preachers to America in the mid-Eighteenth Century, his last direction to them was simply this: "Offer them Christ."

Over 200 years later, the foremost Wesleyan scholar in the world, the late Albert Outler, in his last public address, said, "Hold fast to Christ, and as for the rest, hang loose."

All across mainline Protestantism today, our historical belief with regard to person and work of Christ has been diluted somewhat. That's nothing new. St. Paul wrote the letter we call "Colossians" because some false teachers called Gnostics were attacking the Gospel message about Jesus Christ.

Gnostics were intellectuals who disliked what they regarded as the crude simplicity of Christianity. They wanted it to be more of a philosophy which they could align and co-mingle with other philosophies of the day. The Gnostics regarded Jesus as less than unique, just one of many intermediaries between God and humanity.

Such belief is alive and well in Twenty-First Century America. There are some voices in our mainline seminaries who say that anyone who believes that Jesus is the Son of God and that He was raised from the dead -- is a "fundamentalist." In applying that criteria, that would mean that Rev. Duerwaechter and I are both "fundamentalists," as well as most of you. Ridiculous, but there are people in the church today who make such outrageous pronouncements. They claim that there is room for other savior figures from other religions. They see Christ as just one of many Saviors.

There is a professor in New Jersey who holds such view. . She believes that "Jesus is simply an elder brother, companion, and trail blazer, one among many siblings who shows us how to live in oneness with the divine source."

We UCCers pride ourselves on being a diverse people, and that is a great strength. In practice, we affirm a wide variety of beliefs. We don't require litmus tests. But remember: Our denominational name is the United Church of *Christ*. And the name Christ -- which means "God's Anointed" -- implies Divinity. That means that to us, Jesus is more than just a swell guy -- He is the Son of the Living God. The basis for our unity is Christ Himself.

Who is Jesus, really?

The first is this:

**In Jesus Christ We See The Fullness of God.**

Notice verses 15 and 19 of our text: "He is the image of the invisible God..." "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. .." Jesus Christ is all of God we are capable of knowing. He is absolutely sufficient for abundant and eternal life. If you ask me "What is God like?," my answer is to point to Jesus Christ.

Those people who see Jesus as nothing more than a brilliant teacher or a loving example are reading their Bibles selectively.

I'm reminded of a charming elderly lady, born and reared in the South, who was trying to convince her nephews and nieces that southerners were the best people in the world. One of them asked, "Aunt Sue, do you mean that everything good and beautiful comes from the South?" She said, "Well, nearly everything." One of them asked, "Do you think Jesus was a southerner?" She replied, "Well, he was good enough to be a Southerner."

But the Bible won't let us be content with affirming that Jesus was just a morally superior person or an inspired prophet or an example of love. C.S. Lewis, that great English theologian, has reminded us that we do not have that option. Lewis taught us that if we read the Bible fully and objectively we will conclude that Jesus was either God or a complete lunatic. There is no middle ground.

The statement that got Jesus crucified was this response to the High Priest: "I am the Anointed, the Son of the Eternal God, and you shall see me appearing at the end of all history as the Judge of the Universe."

When Jesus' disciples asked to see God the Father, Jesus replied, "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father." He said, "Before Abraham was, I am." Those words "I am" were the traditional Hebrew name for God.

Someone who is a teacher only would say, "This is the way you should live." But Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me." He isn't just a "teacher" -- He's the Savior.

It takes some audacity to claim that God has visited this planet only once in the form of a human being, and that we are privileged to know that person. It takes audacity to claim that the church has the franchise on the only worldwide message of salvation. Fine! Then let's be audacious! Jesus was rather audacious during His public ministry. In Jesus Christ we see the fullness of God.

A second affirmation about our Lord is this:

**Jesus Christ Is Creator, Sustainer, And the Completion of All Creation.**

Notice again verses 16 and 17: "...for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible...He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together."

This means that long before Jesus of history was born into Bethlehem, even before the beginning of creation, the Christ-Spirit had co-existed with God. Jesus Christ was co-creator with God of all things. Jesus Christ holds the universe together. Every law of science and nature is an expression of the Christ-spirit, though now all of it is tainted by sin. All of creation is intended to be his and to give him glory.

What does all that mean in practical terms? It means that every new baby bears the fingerprint of Christ. Every chemical formula, even H<sub>2</sub>O, owes its dependability to the creative Christ-spirit. The ultimate purpose of every government is to create a conducive environment in which people can know and serve Jesus Christ. The primary purpose of every person in this sanctuary is to be an effective disciple of Jesus Christ. Our world is moving steadily toward its final destiny: when every knee shall bow and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord. Jesus Christ is creator, sustainer, and the completion of all creation.

Then there is a third affirmation about Jesus in our text:

**Jesus is the Head and Body of the Church.**

The church is the body of Christ, and the living Christ-spirit is our leader and source.

Some people laugh at the church and look down their noses at it. Lots of people are fond of saying that the church is full of hypocrites. You all have heard that argument before, too. The next time someone tells you that the church is full of hypocrites, tell them that there is always room for one more! Then invite them to come to church. People throughout history have written off the church as impotent. Adolf Hitler said, "Once I have settled my other problems, I'll have my reckoning with the church. I'll have it reeling on the ropes." Adolf Hitler and all the other pagan braggarts of history have self-destructed, but the church of Jesus Christ goes marching on. It is the only institution on earth guaranteed by God to last forever.

What is our secret? The living Christ-spirit is here among us, wherever even two or three are gathered in his name. We have the only saving recipe for a hurting world, and the living Christ authenticates and energizes that message.

I am proud of our denomination, the United Church of Christ! I am proud to be a UCC member, and I am proud to be a UCC minister. Truthfully, we do a lot of good things! One of the things about our denomination that is most admirable is that we are big on social justice. But I also think that we are tired and getting worn out. We see our national membership numbers decline each year, and no matter how much we long for unity, we are not a truly united church.

The key to our revitalization is to turn our central focus upon Christ, Lord and Savior. Social justice that is based on pure emotion is susceptible to compassion fatigue and cynicism. But, social justice that is based on our relationship with Jesus Christ is everlasting. We will find new energy if we will always bear in mind that Christ came into this world to redeem us -- not merely teach us how to be nice people. Christ our Redeemer must be at the very center of who we are and what we do!

In 1495 the Florentine artist Leonardo DaVinci began to paint his immortal vision of the Last Supper. Working slowly and with great care for detail, he spent three years completing the painting. When he had finally finished he called a trusted friend to see it. "Give me your honest opinion," said DaVinci. "It's wonderful!" said his friend. "In fact, that cup is so real I cannot keep my eyes off it."

Immediately, DaVinci took a brush and drew it across the sparkling cup, removing its glow. He said, "If it affects you that way, it must not remain." "But why," asked his friend. "The cup was beautiful."

"Because," said the great artist, "Nothing whatsoever shall distract attention from the figure of Christ."

When you explain the dynamism of Christ Church, point to Jesus Christ. If there is any glory attendant to anything we do, let it accrue to Jesus. If someone wants to know how we survived heartbreak and tragedy, point them to Jesus. If they ask why we do not despair in the face of poverty and racism and drugs, tell them that nothing is impossible with Jesus. If someone wants to know how we remain confident even when the world is mired in war and hatred, tell them the victory belongs to Jesus. And if they wonder why even death cannot intimidate us, tell them that we know someone who conquered death, and his name is Jesus.