

December 31, 2017

*"Reflections on Jesus"*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

John 1:1-5 10-14; Colossians 1:15-20

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One bright Sunday morning after a big rainstorm, a little boy walked to his church on the eastern hillside of his little village, and a little girl walked to her church on the western hillside of that same village. When services were over, the two children left their respective churches and began walking down the hill, back to their homes. And they met, for the very first time, where the two roads converged together. They introduced themselves, and the little boy said, "I go to the Catholic Church over there." The little girl said, "Oh, I go the Protestant Church over there." They began talking about their churches and what they learned and did there. And in the back of their minds, they wondered why there were two different kinds of churches. As they were walking, they came to a spot in the road that was still very flooded because of the recent rainstorm, and there was no way to get across without getting wet. "My mom will be mad if I get my Sunday clothes wet!" said the little boy. "Me too!" exclaimed the little girl. So the little boy suggested they take off their clothes, hold them over their heads, and then wade through the water. Which they did. When they got to the other side, they stood around so that the warm sun would dry them off before they put their clothes back on. It was then that the little girl, looking at the little boy, said with all the innocence of youth, "I never understood, until just now, the difference between Catholics and Protestants."

We laugh at this humorous little story about the theological differences between various churches. But there is one great common denominator. As renowned nineteenth century theologian Charles Spurgeon said, "I am not at all ashamed to call myself a Calvinist. And I would not hesitate to take the name of Baptist, (or Methodist), or that of any other denomination. For if I am asked what is my creed... what is my creed...I simply reply, 'It is Jesus Christ.'" Yes, it is Jesus Christ that binds us together.

Here we are, on this Sunday after Christmas, and I'm sure most of us can look back and admit just how busy we've been these past few weeks - with decorating, shopping, wrapping, parties, family gatherings, and more. But now that Christmas is over, and there's some relative time to relax, don't we just want to revel in the afterglow, the holiness, the peace and joy of what this season is really all about - celebrating the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ. And so I thought it would be a good thing this morning for all of us to reflect more deeply on the One we are committed to follow, the human embodiment of the great, "I Am", and the mystery that surrounds him. The One, who for the past 2000 years, has so influenced humankind. So let's see what more we can say and learn about Jesus Christ.

Well, the first thing we all need to keep in mind, is this: if you feel that you don't know as much about Jesus as you'd like, you're not alone. We can all learn more about him. In fact, in my experience, the folks who think and say they know all about Jesus, are sometimes the same ones that really don't know him that well at all – at least they certainly don't act like him. You see, the truth is, Jesus Christ is really a mystery to all of us. None of us know what it is to be both human and divine. And so just look at some of the dichotomies that describe Jesus. Gregory, the fourth century bishop of Constantinople states: “Jesus began his ministry by being hungry, yet he became the Bread of Life. Jesus ended his earthly ministry by being thirsty, yet he is the Living Water. Jesus’ ministry made him tired and weary so much of the time, yet he is our rest. Jesus wept, yet he wipes our tears away. Jesus was sold for thirty pieces of silver, yet he redeemed the world. Jesus was brought like a lamb to slaughter, yet he is the Good Shepherd. Jesus died, yet by his death, he assures us of eternal life.”

And in his book, *“The Jesus I Never Knew,”* Philip Yancey captures even more of this same mystery. He writes, “(Jesus)...urged obedience to the Mosaic law while acquiring the reputation as a lawbreaker. One day miracles seemed to flow out of Jesus, the next day his power was blocked by people’s lack of faith. One day he talked in detail of the Second Coming, another, he knew neither the day nor the hour. He fled from arrest at one point and marched unavoidably toward it at another. His extravagant claims about himself kept him at the center of controversy, but when he did something truly miraculous he tended to hush it up. If Jesus had never lived, we would not have been able to invent him.”

That really sums it up, doesn't it? If Jesus had never lived, we would not have been able to invent him. Yes, there may be many contradictions, much controversy, so many mysteries about him. But here are some of the verifiable facts as we know them: he was born in Bethlehem, he was Jewish, he worked exclusively in Judea and lived in a country occupied by the brutal Roman army, he called ordinary fishermen and tax collectors to be his disciples, he told wonderful stories, had unheard of compassion for the poor and suffering, was a notorious troublemaker, went to a lot of parties, and was finally tortured to death after a short run as a wandering rabbi.<sup>1</sup> There you have it.

But that's not all, is it? For those of us whose creed is "Jesus Christ," we know that only he can give us that “peace that passes all understanding” when we are anxious or afraid. We know that only he can

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<sup>1</sup> Will Willimon, *Why Jesus?* Abington Press

forgive us our sins against God that make us feel sorrow and regret, and instead cleanse us and make us whole. We know that only he knows our hidden, inner most thoughts and actions, and yet he still loves us.

And doesn't that kind of love demand a response. We also know that Jesus wants the world to know about that love. One of the last things he told his disciples was, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Now go out and make more disciples." Go! And they did. And they changed the entire course of history forever. Here we are today! So what does that mean for us? Well, this tells us that the God we worship is not some abstract deity that allows us to turn inward to ourselves. It is not a God who is content with us sitting back filling our own spiritual cup, not going out tending to the spiritual needs of others. No, our God is a dynamic God, a God on the move. A God who sent Jesus to draw us to him, and now sends us to draw others to Jesus. It is a God who sends you and me to do his work. But in order to draw others to Jesus, we must strive to become more like Jesus.

You know, I've heard it said that trying to become like Jesus is like staring at the sun. But what does that mean? We all know it's impossible for regular, ordinary people like us to stare at the sun. But, you see, here's what could be the greatest mystery of all. God uses the most unlikely people to do his work. Noah – a drunk, Moses – a murderer, David – a murderer and adulterer, Rahab – a prostitute, Jacob – a manipulator and a liar, Mary – a peasant teenage girl, Matthew – a tax collector and cheat, Peter – who denied even knowing Jesus, St. Paul – a murderer and persecutor of the church. And so many more. And yet when we look at these people, we see people who ultimately opened themselves up to God, and through repentance, change, obedience and faith, patterned their life after the will and way of God, of Christ. And through them, we learn and grow.

And so, as we start off the new year of 2018, let us embrace the divine mystery surrounding Jesus Christ and his coming. Let us, in fact, be part of that mystery by becoming part of his story, committing to be more like Jesus Christ in our words and deeds. To "go" and offer hope, spread goodwill and joy, bring peace and love to all whom we touch. Do you get it now? Becoming like Jesus is like staring at the sun. You see, sometimes the bright sun is best viewed by watching those upon whom it shines. So let me ask you – can people see the Son when they see you? Amen.