

"WE LOOK TO JESUS AND SEE THE FACE OF GOD"

Sermon Series, #6: Great Texts, Core Truths

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Did you hear of the boy dawdling before Church School one Sunday? His mother urged him to get ready. "What exciting, new things will you learn in class today?" she asked. "New?" he said. "Every Sunday it's the same. Jesus, Jesus, Jesus."

That lad has a point. His criticism makes me smile. If you take golf lessons, you hear repeatedly, "Keep your head down." If you take tennis lessons, you hear recurrently, "Move your feet early." If you wish to have God's life stamped into your life, you continually hear, "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus." Christ is the cornerstone of all that happens here. The strong churches keep him at the center of everything. As we look to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we see the face of God.

Christianity is about something that happened *to* Jesus of Nazareth. It is about something that happened *through* Jesus of Nazareth. It is about how, with Jesus, God has put into place what N.T. Wright calls the rescue operation of our finding, saving, and receiving new life. "A great door has swung open in the cosmos which can never again be shut. It's the door to the prison where we've been kept chained up. We are offered freedom: freedom to experience God's rescue for ourselves, to go through the open door and explore the new world to which we now have access." It is a world of justice, spirituality, relationship, and beauty.

We too easily lose track of how Jesus is at the heart of it all. One way we liberal Christians do that is by reducing Jesus to a great moral example, a Gandhi or a Mother Teresa or a Martin Luther King, Jr. Of course, his example is important. But frankly observing Jesus' example can depress us as much as it inspires us. It's like watching Roger Federer's groundstrokes. Yes, his tennis is stunning. But I'll never hit a ball like that. Jesus' unattainable example can discourage us.

More conservative Christians typically reduce Jesus' importance is by making him no more than some guy who'll punch your ticket in order to get into heaven. Of course, our lives and actions do have lasting consequences that go beyond this lifetime. But if you read the Gospels, really *read* them, Jesus did not make this the focus of his ministry. The focus of his ministry was the coming reign of God and the infinite ways we could get swept up into it rather than obstructing it. Jesus' mission was not just to save my soul, but even to win back all of creation.

If we wonder how essential Jesus is to all that the church is about, Paul's letter to Colossae (1.15-20) puts it in perspective. "(Jesus) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven or 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. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He 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. For in him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.” Wow. Now that’s what I call picking up the check for the whole table. Brian McLaren says three things happen as we grant Jesus centrality in our lives.

First, we relate to Jesus more as alive and present than as historical figure. That sounds simple, but it can’t be taken for granted. No few treat Jesus as dead and gone forever. The Jesus Seminar comes to mind as an example. Ever heard of them? These are N.T. scholars grandiose enough to sit around tables voting with colored beads on which words we can trust truly to be of Jesus. Once they finish their exercise—like teenagers dissecting frogs—pitifully little remains of Jesus. Apart from their method, which is distant and aloof, my point is if they believed Jesus is alive, that he is active and at work in the world, that God is still speaking and Jesus is his principal mouthpiece, then they would skip the kangaroo court.

Then again, having said this, I read something by Marcus Borg, founder of the Jesus Seminar. He died recently. “Imagine,” Borg said, “that Christianity is about loving God. Imagine that it’s not about the self and its concerns, about ‘what’s in it for me,’ whether that be a blessed afterlife or prosperity in this life.” That amazing statement—faith is about loving God--treats Jesus as Living Lord rather than a deceased spiritual subject to be dissected, rehashed, and regurgitated. The first thing we do letting Jesus have his way with us is treat him like he’s alive.

The second thing to put Jesus on the throne of our days is to trust what he said about the world. We hold his words as true, even if we can’t understand them. C.S. Lewis described reaching a point in life where he realized he needed to trust Jesus even more than he trusted himself. We as Americans don’t easily do that. We stubbornly cling to the individual self as final arbiter of what is true and binding. That reminds me of the old joke about the skeptical preacher who, when he cited the Gospels, said, “As Jesus said, and for the most part I agree with him...”

At the close of Matthew’s gospel, Jesus said, “All authority in heaven and on earth is given to me.” Something very similar is claimed in our Colossians lesson. Are we willing to trust that? Are we willing to trust Jesus’ way even over our own? It’s hard, I know, given how some bend or distort the message and life of Jesus. And it’s hard, living in a society that encourages us to define all meaning of our lives for ourselves, rather than letting another outside of us provide that meaning.

What does trust really mean? some protest. Others bring what they call “trust issues.” I say we know more about trust than we let on. And we have all had experiences in relationships teaching us trust finally has as an all or nothing quality.

I remember with my eldest, Greta, teaching her to skate, wanting her to learn because I love it so. I remember how slowly it went at first, ankles bent, step and fall. She spent more time horizontal making ice angels than vertical and moving. But for me, skating is much like those flying dreams that I used to enjoy so much.

So I put Greta on my shoulders and gave her a few turns flying around the ice. Obviously, this was long before my lower vertebrae became a demilitarized zone.

I clasped her feet to my chest and took a wide, stable and secure skating stride. I could tell by her awed cooing sounds that she immediately grasped the concept. Of course, it was only moments before the rink attendant found me and made me stop, but Greta's trust had revealed an important truth I couldn't otherwise impart.

Truly, Jesus is more reliable than Greta riding tenuous me, as in a chariot above. And if we cannot trust Jesus is on the right track, we stop short of following him. Instead we admire him. But Jesus never sought admirers, frankly, only followers.

McLaren's third point about granting Jesus an honored place in the living of our days is about our willingness to trust his claims about himself. Was he merely some mouthy rebel, like many others chafing at Rome in first century Palestine? Or was Jesus who he claimed to be: Son of God and the Savior of all the earth?

If we can manage to trust who Jesus is, trust the way he points, trust what he tells us it means to be human, trust what he teaches about our origin and destiny, we inch along behind him in his footsteps and we imitate how he lived and loved.

That is when the windows of our life fly open and the doors welcome in sunshine and we start to see life by wavelengths of light we didn't even suspect was there. Revelation comes less by arduous debate and long walks with weighty thoughts. Revelation comes by living the life he modeled and seeing ourselves differently.

Do we hedge here? Or do we hold back? Woody Allen once claimed he believes in God, but thinks he's an underachiever. Look at the stars in springtime, Woody! Look up at the stars. Colossians today tells us that all of this was made with Jesus as the pivot point, with him at the center of the plan, the centerpiece of life. All things were created through him and for him, we heard. He is before all things and in this one person alone in the world history, in him all things come together.

Today, entering the portals of Jerusalem with Jesus, as he is hailed with hosannas, let us listen to ourselves, lifting our voices with the surrounding acclaim. Do we really mean it? Are we willing to stay the course? Or are we cheering background noise of those who will peel away and flee him, as push comes to shove.

Big questions like these confront us every year at Holy Week. So I arm you with three smaller and personal questions of your own to help you reach your destination. Do you really believe he is alive? Do you trust his teachings, even as none of us can understand them fully? Do you trust what he claimed about himself? Amen.