

Confession is Good for the World and the Soul
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IN A SMALL TOWN THERE WAS A MAN WHO HAD TOO MUCH TO DRINK. HE STUMBLED AROUND AND STUMBLED RIGHT DOWN THE RIVER BANK WHERE PEOPLE FROM THE LOCAL CHURCH WERE HAVING A BAPTISM. SO THE PREACHER GRABBED HIM AND THOUGHT THIS WAS HIS CHANCE TO STRAIGHTEN THIS MAN OUT.

THE PREACHER DUNKS THE MAN DOWN IN THE COLD WATER, BRINGS HIM UP AND SAID, "DID YOU SEE JESUS?" THE MAN SAID, "NO!"

THE PREACHER DUNKS THE MAN DOWN AGAIN IN THE COLD WATER AND HOLDS HIM DOWN A LITTLE LONGER, BRINGS HIM UP AND SAID, "PLEASE, DID YOU SEE JESUS?" THE MAN SAID, "NO!"

THE PREACHER DUNKS THE MAN DOWN AGAIN IN THE COLD WATER AND THIS TIME HOLDS HIM UNDER FOR A LONG TIME, BRINGS HIM UP AND YELLS, "MY GOD MAN, TELL ME YOU SAW JESUS!!

THE MAN ANSWERS, "NOOO!!! ARE YOU SURE THIS IS WHERE HE FELL IN?!?!?"

When you look at Jesus, what do you see?

For us this morning I want us to hear the challenge of Jesus' question brought to us by the storyteller, Matthew, "Who Do You Say I Am?" I want us to think about some of the challenges for a modern and post-modern mind when considering this question and I want us to think about what kind of faith family/faith community we can form when we answer this question.

First, let us acknowledge that there is not one answer to this question but there are many. Some people want to hear a clear, simple, and concise answer to their spiritual questions. I think we should try to do that but let us also be aware that when we slip from simplicity to being simplistic then we miss the rich diversity which can add to the understanding that each of us have.

When you look at Jesus, what do you see?

I want to qualify this sermon up front so as to not frighten or discourage people with more secular world views. As a pastor and theologian I am constantly wrestling with how thoughtful and intelligent people, determined to be citizens of a multicultural, cosmopolitan, secular world, maintain a sense of deep spirituality and social justice within a highly competitive and often brutally irrational and grossly unfair existence. I am convinced and I am committed to teaching how a person of faith can get along in this world and keep the faith without throwing one's reason to the wind and embracing keepers of promises, evangelical zealots, or born-again literalists.

I am very blessed and excited by the ongoing scholarship about Jesus, i.e. the Jesus Seminar, literary criticism of the Bible, demythologizing the New Testament, and re-mythologizing through the use of metaphors. It is out of this kind of scholarship that I have come to understand that the identity of Jesus can be seen on a continuum of meaning with the historical Jesus of Nazareth on one end and the Christ of the Church on the other. For some people there is no distinction and they are the same person. For others the two are very far apart and the more we keep them separate the better because one view can skew the other. So, we have this sliding scale of meaning as to who Jesus is and we have people all along the continuum and people may be at different places on the continuum at different times in their lives.

As a pastor I can imagine looking through a kaleidoscope. When I look through this kaleidoscope I see is a collage of Jesus as the various views, your views, make up the collage. On the one hand it may seem fragmented but on the other hand it is a beautiful expression of the diversity and unity of our faith family.

I remember speaking with Dr. Jack Forstman when I was trying to decide what seminary to attend. Dr. Forstman was the Dean of Vanderbilt Divinity School. I remember saying to him that I was considering other schools and one of the things I did not want was to be questioned if I said, "Jesus is Lord!" He looked at me and was thoughtful for a moment and then he said to me, "Here at Vanderbilt you can say 'Jesus is Lord'...but you also better be ready to say 'why' Jesus is Lord." I think this is at the heart of today's passage.

An important point of meaning for this passage is that Peter is not the Rock on which Jesus would build the Church. It is the confession of Peter that is the rock by which Jesus would build the church. So it is my confession along with all of you and your confessions that establish our faith community and give us power to move into the world. So, let me share my confession as Dr. Forstman would have expected.

Jesus is my Lord and Savior. What do I mean by this statement? Jesus is my Lord because Jesus is the authority to which I order my life. My family says I should order my life in a certain way with certain priorities. My government says I should order my life in a certain way with a different set of priorities. The marketers on television say I should order my life in such a way that I can make their products a priority in my life. I chose to order my life in a different way. I chose to order my life in accordance to Jesus who is the way, the truth and the life. Let me explain.

I believe Jesus had a vision for his life, his ministry, and the world. His vision was shaped by his knowledge of the scriptures of his day, and his close relationship with God. The Hebrew Scriptures give us glimpses of God's will for all of Creation. People who had experienced all the good and bad that life could throw at them believed that God had a hand on them and they were inspired by God's faithfulness and providential care. We read their inspirations in passages about flowers blooming in the desert, justice rolling down mountains like mighty rivers, over flowing cups of wine, green pastures, still

waters, banquet tables, and lions and young goats lying down next to each other without violence, bloodshed, and death.

Shaped by his knowledge of the scriptures of his tradition, and his intense prayer life, Jesus taught ideas such as, “pray for your enemies, feed my sheep, turn the other cheek, forgive seven times seventy, you are the salt of the earth, the first shall be last and the last shall be first”, and so forth. Sometimes his teachings “comforted the afflicted” and sometimes they “afflicted the comfortable”. Just like today, people in Jesus’ time liked what they agreed with and disliked what they disagreed with. While some of the things Jesus taught angered some religious authorities, his real impact on people’s lives came from his relationships and the way he moved through the world. *Just a side note: Jesus was killed by religion and the state. The political authorities didn’t care until the religious authorities manipulated them. The manipulation made the political authorities care more about preserving their own power rather than justice. Again, it was the way Jesus moved through the world that really impacted people’s lives.*

Jesus moved through the world in a different way. Jesus saw the world through the eyes of God and understood the world in terms of God’s intention for Creation. Jesus did not just teach that we should treat people as we want to be treated. This is not a new insight. Jesus actually lived this truth believing that it was the way God intended us to live. So, he treated the outcasts, misfits, ragamuffins, and people of lower status (i.e. women, children, lepers, sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors, gentiles, etc.) as he would want to be treated. Jesus believed that the best way to live out the way of God was to give equal (or better) status to such people around the dinner table. For Jesus, this way of living was being faithful to God. It was in those moments when the poor became rich, and the weak became strong, and the devalued became priceless, that Jesus proclaimed that the world is ordering its existence in terms of God’s purposes. It was in those moments that Jesus’ mission was being accomplished and the followers of Jesus could celebrate and proclaim, “The Kingdom of God is at hand!” *Another important side note. The Kingdom of God could be understood in less authoritative and patriarchal language. The Kingdom of God, is the way of God.*

The way of God is most visible when people live in peace and justice with each other and the created world. When this way of living threatened the way the world was corruptly ordered, it got Jesus killed. This is the way we are called to live, and this is the cost and joy of discipleship.

As a disciple of Jesus I rightly proclaim Jesus as my Lord. Jesus is my Lord because I chose to follow Him. This means that I am committed to ordering my life in accordance to God’s intention as Jesus taught and envisioned. Jesus vision for life has captured my imagination, my mind, my heart, and my strength. Jesus is the vision caster that defines the character and purposes of God, and we have the privilege to be stewards of this vision. I am now a trustee of Jesus’ original vision.

I want to emphasize that my confession is not an exclusive claim. It is a defining claim and mostly it is defining of who I am. I am joining William Sloane Coffin when he stated, “To Christians, God is most essentially defined by Jesus but not confined by Jesus.” I have found for myself that the deeper I go into the particularity of Christian faith the more universal is my love and appreciation for people of all faiths and no faith.

When you look at Jesus, what do you see?

There is another quality in this story from Matthew. Jesus was not only asking for their definition and decision. Jesus was expecting their yielding. We are not only to define Jesus but we are to yield to Jesus and while we may have a whole lot of different definitions which go all up and down the scale of meaning there is something that we can all share and that is to order our lives in accordance to Jesus view of the world.

And this is the main thing. **The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing, and the main thing is Jesus.**

There is room for people at Shadow Rock who define Jesus as a good moral teacher and there is room at Shadow Rock for people who see Jesus as the cosmic Christ who is the Alpha and Omega of history.

The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing, and the main thing is Jesus.

Regardless of our definition we are to yield to Jesus’ vision of life.

The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing, and the main thing is Jesus.

Regardless of where we have been, where we are in life’s journey, and our current definition of Jesus, we are to yield to the way Jesus related to the powers of the state and organized religion, and this means those institutions are to be honored only in so far as they serve “the least of these our sisters and brothers”.

The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing, and the main thing is Jesus.

It is my confession, your confessions, all crazy and mixed up, beautifully bound together by our willingness to yield to one another, for one another, that makes us powerful for the sake of making the world a better place for all people....this is our confession added to Peter’s confession, which makes us the Church.