

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
17th Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 29, 2007

The Person and Work of Jesus Christ

One of the reasons I love helping out with Vacation Bible School
is that it reminds me of my own childhood.

Along with my pals, Steve, Craig, David, Robby, Monica and Stephanie
I went through years of VBS learning the same basic lessons
we taught this week:

God is with us and will never leave us.
God loves us and forgives us.
God gives us hope and courage.
God gives us a job to do.

The visual aids haven't changed much:

it was always either a Safari Adventure, or Treasure Island,
or a voyage on a ship through some tropical region.
This was nice because it didn't require purchasing lots of new props:
The church could use the same palm trees,
exotic stuffed birds, and assortment of safari hats
year after year.

I was also reminded of our behavior at VBS and Sunday School
For the most part I didn't act up,
not because I was an angel,
but because I knew there would be unpleasant consequences
at home.

The antics of my friends David and Robby, however, were insufferable:
they occasionally made us laugh,
but for the most part they got really tiresome
for everyone.

It was no mere coincidence that, without fail,
Sunday School teachers retired from service
the year after they taught our class.

The only exception was the pastor's wife,
who, on one unendurable Sunday,
marched the entire 7th grade class to our parents' classroom,
announcing that we'd be having Sunday School with the adults
because we didn't seem to be in the mood to sit still for her.

Well, a few days ago at VBS, as I was chasing three 4 year old boys

right through this sanctuary,
I wanted to warn these kids
(and their parents, not GPC members, relax!)
that they'd better shape up.
God fixed my friends David and Robby from all their mischief:
David continued on a path that landed him
in a Georgia state prison
as soon as he was old enough to go there,
and Robby's dad and mom became missionaries
on the mostly desert island of Bonaire,
off the coast of Venezuela,
where he had to study hard to learn the Dutch language.
(I'm sure Robby would have rather stayed in the States
and gone to prison with David)
My last contact with them was in my 20's,
when they were both beginning to shape up
and get their lives on track.

Despite all the chaos and wackiness
of my years of VBS,
a profound thing happened for me and my friends –
We got to know and love Jesus – even David and Robby.
Along with a weekly dose of Sunday School,
VBS brought me into a growing relationship with the God
who is revealed in the miraculous power and compassionate care
and in the suffering, death and resurrection
of Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus, the Son of God.
So at a very early age, I came love Jesus and call him my friend,
and I began a lifelong journey of understanding
just how much Jesus loves me.

I share this story,
because I want you to understand that the rest of this sermon,
as with all our conversations about Christ,
is rooted in a deep love for our Savior and Lord,
and a desire to know as much as we can
about this one we love because he first loved us.

When we discuss Christology, the study of Jesus Christ,
we engage in what St. Anselm called
"Faith Seeking Understanding."
The love of Christ and faith in his person and his works
is a matter of the heart.
Then, motivated by that love and faith,

we try to find the best way to think and speak about
who Jesus is and what Jesus has done
for us and for the world.

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When we talk about Jesus,
there are two major questions that arise:
Who is Jesus?
and
What does Jesus accomplish by what he says, does, and endures?ⁱ
That is,
our conversations have to do with
the *person* and the *work* of Jesus Christ,
the “being” and “doing” of Jesus.

In the Apostles’ Creed, we confess

*I believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit , born of the Virgin Mary...
...and [who] sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty
from where he will come to judge the living and the dead*

And in the Nicene Creed (p. 15, follow carefully!)

*We believe in on Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.*

Now we need not get in the old Greek and Latin terminology
used by the bishops who hammered out this creed in the 4th century;
but we can stand firmly with the creeds in some of the broad affirmations
of who Jesus was and is, and what he did and does.

One thing we can affirm from the creeds is this:
We believe that Jesus Christ was and is fully human and fully God.
The creed does not offer an explanation how this can be,
but it means to preserve the mystery
that Jesus is, at one and the same time,
the reality of God in the world,
and the reality of human life in right relation to God.

If you cannot wrap your mind around that,
and if your mind gets befuddled when you think about it,
that is fine and normal – we speak of a mystery.
We are not meant to understand the mystery, but to trust it.
As we trust the mystery and let ourselves enter it
we find in Christ a deep knowledge of God and ourselves.
By entering relationship with Jesus, we enter relationship with God.
By seeking and following Jesus, we learn what it means to be truly human.

Another thing we can affirm with the creeds
is that Jesus is unique among human beings;
meaning there is no other person who embodies this mystery
as Jesus does.

Jesus is the Only Son of God,
the only one who is fully human and fully God.
There is no parallel to Jesus in the Christian religion
or any other religion for that matter.

(A brief side comment on other religions:
we can affirm that Jesus is the Only Son of God,
without denying that there is truth in other religions.
One of the tenants of the Reformed Tradition noted in the first sermon
is that truth, wherever it arises, is God's truth.
There is some truth – even a lot of truth – in some other religions,
but we profess that Jesus Christ is the Only Son of God.
No one else can do what Jesus Christ does for the world.)

Now, in answer to the ludicrous statements
of some of the New Wineskins churches,
such as Memorial Park and Beverly Heights,
who have stated, and as far as I know have not retracted the statements,
that the Presbyterian Church (USA) no longer believes
that Jesus is the Only Son of God,
let me say clearly, standing firmly on the scriptures
and firmly within the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA), Part I,
namely, the Book of Confessions,
that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ of God,
and is the Only Son of God, Fully Human, Fully God.
To be Christian in any historical sense of the word,
a church must affirm this,
and to suggest that the Presbyterian Church (USA) does not affirm this,
is at best ignorant, and at worst, dishonest.
It is always a shame to see church leaders using deceptive propaganda

to achieve their political ends.

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So, we've said some important things about who Jesus *IS*,
the Only Son of God, and as such, fully human and fully God.
But what about what Jesus accomplishes
through what he says, does and endures.

For this question,
let's look briefly at the familiar passage from
the Gospel of John:
I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life
no one comes to the Father but by me.

First of all, Jesus is THE WAY.
Jesus shows us a Way of Life,
and not just any way of life,
but THE Way of Life by which humanity can live
in relation with God and with each other,
the Way of life in which we can experience
the gracious and beautiful goodness
of God's intention for creation.

Jesus shows us this Way by living it himself.
He demonstrates the way. He embodies the way.
Jesus IS the way in the flesh.
To be a disciple or a follower or a lover of Jesus
(whatever you like to call yourself)
means that we strive to model our life in the image of his life.
To follow this way puts us on a path of love for God and love for others,
a path of humility and self-denial,
a path of service and compassion for other people
and for the creation.
The beautiful things about losing ourselves in the Way of Jesus Christ,
is that in losing ourselves, we find our true selves for the first time.

Finding our true selves brings us to the second affirmation...
Jesus is THE TRUTH.
Jesus is the Truth because the words he speaks are the Word of God.
As those who seek to follow in his way,
we at Jesus' feet, and listen to the words of his teaching.
Jesus truth turns out to have deep resonance with
the truth that is announced through the Law and the Prophets

of the Old Testament.

With his words, Jesus evokes in his hearers
an mental picture of the kingdom of God,
and a heartfelt attraction to this kingdom.
Jesus speaks and we see the world differently.
Jesus speaks and the misguided ways of the world no longer make sense.
Jesus speaks and the truth exposes our sin and corruption.
Jesus speaks as one with authority,
the authority of one whose life is wholly integrated with his words.
The power of Jesus words are reinforced by the truthfulness of his deeds.
Jesus speaks, and the Truth sets us free.

But as much as we may be inspired by
the Way of Jesus' life,
and the Truth of Jesus' words
"it is not within our powers to take up such a life.

"Fortunately...Jesus Christ not only teaches the truth
and embodies a way in life that accords with that truth."

Jesus is THE LIFE.
and he empowers us to take up that Life.
By his suffering and costly sacrifice,
Jesus is 'the one who imparts the power of God
that turns people from sin
and sets them on the way to God's kingdom." ii

The great paradox of the Christian faith is found here:
It is by participating in Jesus' suffering and death
that we enter his LIFE.

It is through the innocent suffering of Jesus on the cross
that God makes the ultimate sacrifice.

God gives away God's own life for our sake.

In Jesus, God enters into the midst of our pain and suffering.

Now in the depths of our own pain and corruption
we are not separated from God,
but united with God in Christ .

We find that we are not alone and forsaken
but loved and accompanied
as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

We find that we need fear no evil,
for God is with us in Jesus Christ, and we are comforted,
and ultimately, eternally protected by God,
no matter how rotten our sin,
or how debasing our suffering.

We also find – in the spectacular proclamation of Easter –
that Jesus who suffered and died and was buried,
has risen from the dead, and is alive and ascended
to the right hand of God.

And the same power which raised Jesus from the dead
also makes us alive in Christ .

Do we understand it, can we work it out in our minds?

No. But again, we do not seek to understand the mystery,
but to trust it and enter it .

Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life of God.

To seek Christ is to seek God.

To love Christ is to love God.

To abide Christ is to abide in God.

No one comes to the Father, but through the Son.
and Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

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So, how do we do it?

Having heard this good news about Jesus,

what must we do to have eternal life?

how do we receive this grace of God in Jesus Christ?

how can we be saved?

These are questions to be addressed next week in the sermon,
“Saved By Grace Through Faith”

I’ll see you in church.

ⁱ Much of my understanding and appreciation of Christology I owe to my teacher Douglas F. Ottati, who dearly loves and deeply knows the Christian tradition. Occasionally, I will formally quote him on occasion, but in most of my theological speech I have been guided and formed by him. His Christology is most clearly expressed in *Jesus Christ and Christian Vision* (Augsburg Fortress, 1989).

ⁱⁱ This and the previous two quotes from “My Christology”, Douglas F. Ottati, an unpublished paper responding to the critics of *Jesus Christ and Christian Vision*.”