

“Jesus: The Heart of God”

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The theme of the book that many of us have been reading is “Jesus: The Heart of God”, so our hymns this morning, in one way or another, are about celebrating Jesus Christ, His ministry, and having the spirit of Christ, and having the mind of Christ when we wake up in the morning.

I want to start with two stories that touch on Jesus and about why Jesus is actually a very disturbing component of our faith. This goes back to the summer of 1993. This was up in St. Louis, just before I was beginning my seminary training in the fall of that year. I got a summer job in a computer warehouse. This was a warehouse in St. Louis that basically held computers until they were shipped off to companies or individuals who had ordered them. I spent the whole summer running around this warehouse, trying not to get injured, because the boxes were huge, and I had the privilege of running a forklift to lift some of these boxes. You should see me driving a forklift, man!

One of the guys I worked with was the husband of one of my fellow students at the seminary so he and I became friends, at least workplace friends, and in that summer of 1993, The United Church of Christ had its General Synod, which is our every-other-year national gathering of our church. It is where delegates come from churches all over the United Church of Christ, throughout the nation, and missionaries come back, some of them from posts in other countries, and it is a big deal—about a week-long meeting. General Synod this particular year was in St. Louis, where I happened to be, and one of our guest preachers for that General Synod national meeting was Bishop Desmond Tutu, and this was, as you can imagine, a big deal that Bishop Tutu would come and give one of the keynote sermons of that General Synod.

Kim and I went to hear Bishop Tutu speak and lots of other people went to hear him too. The next day, as I was working in the computer warehouse, I had a conversation with this friend of mine, who was the husband of a fellow student, and I asked “What did you think of Bishop Tutu last night?” His response was “Tutu was great! I mean, he just preached and preached about God and God’s love, and I just loved it that he didn’t even mention Jesus.” I said “Oh, really?” He said “Yeah, he just talked about God’s love and that’s what I wanted to hear. I didn’t want to hear about Jesus.” I responded “Oh, okay. Well, that’s interesting.”

Another time, a friend of mine went to a retreat with a Catholic priest, and when my friend came back from this retreat with this Catholic priest, I asked “How was the retreat, and what did he talk about?” He said “Ah, Jesus this and Jesus that. That Jesus is getting on my nerves!” Jesus getting on my nerves? We have been struggling with (and I mean humanity--the human family in one form or another) this Jesus who gets on our nerves for a long time, and there has been a tradition in Christianity of study—scholars who get together throughout history and study about this Jesus—asking what did He mean, what was He all about, what was He talking about in the Gospels and in the parables and in all of His prophetic words, what was He getting at?

Now, just for a sense of history, probably one of the best known scholars of the historical Jesus was Albert Schweitzer. In 1910, Albert Schweitzer published a book called “The Quest for the Historical Jesus”. This was one of the earliest books about the quest to understand Jesus. Later on, a book came out in 1976 by a guy named Albert Nolan which was called “Jesus Before Christianity”, another book that was struggling to deal with the questions of what was Jesus like before there was actually a religion that was named after Him.

Then, most recently, in 1985, there was an entire group of scholars (over 150 scholars) who called themselves the “Jesus Seminar”, and these scholars—Marcus Borg, who was one of them—again re-engaged with this question of who was Jesus, what was He teaching, what did He come to the earth for, and what was his

point. The “Jesus Seminar” got a lot of press. They got on the cover of Time Magazine, they had a lot of news organizations talking about their ideas of what Jesus was all about, and the chapter that we deal with today is Borg’s understanding of Jesus.

Borg gives five characteristics of this Jesus and what He was all about. Borg calls this the “pre-Easter Jesus”, the Jesus before resurrection, before traditions about Jesus were forming, before the church was actually an institution.

Borg says there are five particular qualities of this “pre-Easter Jesus”. The first thing he says is that we have to recognize is that Jesus was a Jewish mystic—that to understand Jesus first, we can never forget that He was a Jew. He comes out of the Jewish tradition, He was schooled in the Torah, He was raised in a Jewish family, He probably attended a synagogue of one sort or another, and He was probably very much schooled in the traditions of Judaism. So, He was Jewish, but also He was a mystic, says Borg, which was simply a way of saying that Jesus was probably radically in touch with God, and that He had vivid and frequent experiences of God.

I have learned from our book study groups that mysticism and being a mystic has kind of a negative connotation, kind of like freaky people, and I think of people down in Jackson Square in New Orleans. If you’ve ever been there, there are the Tarot card readers down there in Jackson Square. They will tell you all kinds of interesting things, but we think of them, perhaps, as kind of “kooky”. Mystics, as Borg talks about them, meant that Jesus was radically in touch with God, who was very close by. Jesus understood God as not far away, up there in the by and by, but that God was actually very, very close at hand, so Jesus had these incredible encounters with God. Of course, what did Jesus do a lot of the time? He fasted. He prayed. He went off by Himself when the crowds were too much. He would have to get away and spend some time with God. Borg says that we need to understand that Jesus was a Jewish mystic before He was anything else.

Secondly, and perhaps a little easier to get our minds around, is the idea, as Borg says, that Jesus was a healer. Of course, in the Gospels, there is story after story of Jesus healing the blind, the sick, those who were possessed by demons, healing all kinds of people such as the woman with the flow of blood that had not stopped in years and years. Jesus was somehow engaged in a ministry of healing that Borg says included “paranormal healings and exorcisms”, that Jesus somehow was so radically in touch with God that He had the power to heal those who were very sick. You can imagine that this healing ministry attracted tons of people and crowds. The Gospels are constantly talking about the crowds that were around Jesus. Most of them, or at least many of them, were very sick people in need of healing of one kind or another. Borg says we cannot ignore this Jewish mystic, who was also a healer.

Borg says the third characteristic of the Jesus of history was that Jesus was a “wisdom teacher”, that Jesus taught a way of living, and He taught about dying to our old selves and having a rebirth—a psychological rebirth, a spiritual rebirth, and perhaps even a physical rebirth. Jesus was teaching those early followers a different way to live, and that it wasn’t about what you believe but it was about how you were going to live as a follower of the Way. Of course, many of you know that it is in the Book of Acts where those early, what we now call Christians, are really referred to as the “people of the way”, so they were trying to live in a particular way according to how they understood Jesus, so Jesus is this Jewish mystic, He is a healer, and He is a teacher of a way of living, a teacher of wisdom.

Now, if you noticed, the Scripture readings today were about the beginning of His ministry where He talks about what this is going to look like and the end where He is killed by the powers of the day on the cross.

One of the interesting things that I have read from historians is that, in Jesus’ time, apparently there were lots

of healers, people called magicians, sort of witchdoctor-type folks--to put an image in your mind. They were all around the Middle East, around Israel, and around Palestine. Many people were claiming the power of healing, and none of those healers, regardless of their legitimacy, incurred the wrath of Rome. Rome, as the power in the area of the world in that first century, could tolerate healers, could tolerate magicians, could tolerate people who were sort of out there promising a new way of life but they, for some reason, could not tolerate Jesus. This is the element that makes Jesus very unique.

Borg says the fourth quality of Jesus is the quality of a social prophet. Borg says, and many, many scholars affirm, that Jesus came out of the prophetic tradition of Israel, so Jesus is sort of in that stream of Isaiah and Jeremiah, Amos and Micah, and Jesus is talking about the injustice of that first century world.

As you heard in that first reading that Dale read, it was about good news to the poor. There are very difficult readings all throughout the Gospels about how the rich fare in the kingdom of God. You know that passage about getting a camel through the eye of a needle, that it's easier to do that than get a rich man through it. Jesus has this prophetic message about justice—economic justice, social justice, peace, and so forth and so on because, in that first century, the world was unjust, and Jesus had this prophetic component to His ministry that comes right out of that Jewish prophetic tradition. That is, as Borg says, what gets Jesus finally killed.

The last component that Borg lifts up for Jesus, to understand Him in His historical moment, is that Jesus was a movement initiator. A better way to say that, I think, is that what Jesus was about (before Christianity was developed from his life), what Jesus was interested in was Jewish renewal. He came and was focused on the renewal of the Jewish faith. He was always talking about Jewish tradition, talking about how we interpret the Sabbath, talking about how we live with God, with neighbor, trying to encourage Jews of His day to get back to the foundational and fundamental understandings of the Jewish faith.

History moved on, and Jesus became the center of a new religion, but scholars say that Jesus was not really interested in creating a new religion. He was interested in renewing Judaism, but history went on to create Christianity, but he was a movement initiator, and it would be a movement that was based primarily on the practice of bread and the inclusive table. He would enact this new movement at the table where we would eat together and what he would say is “Everyone at this table will have enough bread, and everyone is welcome at this table.” If you remember, Jesus was eating all the time. He was eating with the 5000, He was eating with the 4000, He was eating with His disciples. Everywhere He was going, He was saying “This is what the kingdom of God looks like, where everyone has enough bread, and everyone is welcome at the table.”

Of course, that smacked right into the social divisions of that first century, where women were not welcome, where children were not welcome, where men ran the show, and Jesus said no, everyone is welcome and this is what the kingdom of God looks like, so he was talking about the renewal of faith and a God of justice, peace, inclusivity and love. That is the primary characteristics as Borg lifts Jesus up as a historical person. But Borg also notes that we, as Christians, participate in the only major religious tradition whose founder was executed by established authority. He goes on to say that that doesn't make us the only way to God but it does make Christianity a very unique faith tradition, that our founder, Jesus, was executed by established authority. Borg doesn't say much beyond that, but he says that needs to be held very close to the heart. What does that say about our God?

Yesterday, I was at a meeting of the United Church of Christ, the Western North Carolina Association meeting, and I was there long enough to hear some statistics that were lifted up about faith in the United States today. I had heard some of these before, but I had not heard the updated numbers. David Schoen was there from the United Church of Christ national office, and he said these two figures that I remembered from his presentation.

He said, first of all, in the United States, somewhere around 93% of people claim that they are spiritual. Ninety-three percent, a vast, vast majority of people in our culture claim that they are spiritual, but then he said that recent research seems to indicate that close to 18% are involved in a faith community. Only about 18% are involved in any kind of faith community, so that means that 80% (if these numbers are correct) of our population is not involved in a church, a synagogue, a mosque or any other tradition of institutional faith. That is sort of good news for us. It means we have some work to do, and we've got lots of people to work with, but it raises the question, as Borg raises the question, "Why do we need Jesus? Do we, in fact, need Jesus?" Of course, we're in the Christian tradition, so we claim that as an assumption, but do we need Jesus in order to be believers in God—to be people of faith? On one level, the answer is no we don't—we don't need Jesus. There are many paths to God.

As Christians, here is why being centered in Jesus is so important—not only because there is an entire religion that is built around Jesus, but when we have Jesus as the center of our faith, it does not allow us to make up our image of God. Jesus is the "nuts and bolts", the "nitty-gritty" of what God looks like. I'm not talking about the physical appearance. I'm talking about that the character and the passions of God are most powerfully revealed to Christians in the person, and the work, and in the ministry and the teachings of Jesus, so we, as Christians, have a template for what God looks like and what God is about.

Second, with Jesus as the central component of our faith, Jesus keeps our faith earthbound. Jesus talks again and again about the neighbor and about society. Jesus says if you are going to be a person of faith and you are going to walk the walk and talk the talk, you have always got to keep your neighbor in front of you and love your neighbor. With Jesus central to our faith, we cannot ignore the struggles of the world. Jesus gives us a model of discipleship. With Jesus as central to our faith, we have this template by which we can model our lives and how we live. We can't just say as Christians we can live any old way we want. Jesus has come through the Gospel accounts to say this is how we shall live, and this is the way we try to model our lives. Now, we don't do it perfectly at all. We struggle with it mightily, but it is a model. Without Jesus, we don't have this model for how to live.

Finally, all of this is lived through the church. One of the points of spirituality that concerns me as a solo endeavor is that we are just that. We are a solo project. We want to be spiritual. We want to be connected with God, but what Jesus says in the traditions of Christianity is that we do that in community. We follow God as the body of Christ which we call the church, and what the church does is very important because the church—not talking about its ministries and all the stuff we do to reach out to our neighbor—but the church is involved in a 2-way relationship with our culture. One of the things that the church does, as it did in that first century, is that it pulls away from culture. We withdraw from our culture, from the values, from the actions and value systems of our culture while, at the same time, we engage our culture profoundly. The church is always sort of walking a tightrope about is that when we look out at our culture and we see that these are not the values of Jesus. We live in a culture of violence, of greed, of consumerism, of war, etc. We could add to the list. We pull away from that, recognizing that that is not the vision of Jesus, yet at the same time we cannot turn our backs from that culture because Jesus says to go out and spread the good news that there is a different way to live, so the church, the body of Christ in the world, is always on this tightrope of being in the culture but not of it. That is where we find our energy for living, our energy for mission, our energy for reaching out in the name of Jesus Christ.

So, for Christians, Jesus is the heart of God, and it is through Jesus that we most intimately and accurately come to know our God. Jesus is the revelation, as we say, of God and, through Jesus, we discover that God is a God of love, a God of compassion, a God of mission, of justice and peace, and a God of forgiveness, who invites us all to the table, and we give thanks to God for that revelation known in Jesus Christ. Amen.