

*This Jesus*

Colossians 1:15-28

Whitefish UMC

July 18, 2010

- † Summertime evokes abundant images. Henry James writes “Summer afternoon, summer afternoon; to me those have always been the two most beautiful words in the English language.” And here on this July morning, we take part in one of our traditions of summer—singing favorite hymns and songs of our faith.
- † What do you notice about the songs that many of you choose? Often you choose songs of your childhood—old hymns that bring back memories of home—hymns such as “How Great Thou Art” and “In the Garden.” Sometimes you choose songs in praise of creation—“For the Beauty of the Earth” and “Morning Has Broken.” And you choose songs about Jesus and who He is to you—“There’s Something About That Name,” for example.
- † These beloved hymns and songs inform our faith and our theology, whether consciously or not. Hymns have fulfilled that same purpose over the centuries, beginning with the psalms of David. The first Christians expressed their faith in hymns as well. These hymns were sung not only in worship, but they were used to teach and to remind the faithful of who they were meant to be and who they were to follow.
- † The first five verses that Jim read are believed to be one of the earliest hymns of the Christian faith. Paul uses this hymn in his letter to church at Colossae to help the fledgling community remember who and whose they

really are. And these ancient and marvelous words can do the same for us, too.

- † After all, they too tell us of our roots of our faith home, praise the wonder of creation, and help us reflect on who this Jesus is—to us and to the world. Jesus Christ is the firstborn of Creation. There is none other like him, because he is both God’s revelation and the redeemer of the whole world. He is the subject of Creation as well as the cosmic reconciler, the one who restores harmony between God and all creation.
- † Powerful words, indeed. And Paul states that these claims about Jesus ought to be the foundation for anyone who calls themselves Christian. It’s also a bold reminder of the purpose for us as the body of Christ. We proclaim this Jesus with our very existence. But it isn’t that simple, is it?
- † Brian McLaren is a leader in what is known as “the emergent church.” The emergent church is a child of post-modernism, which we learned about last week. It seeks to transcend traditional or modern, conservative or liberal, evangelical or mainline labels. In his book, A Generous Orthodoxy, McLaren describes “the seven Jesuses I have known.”
- † The writer begins with the Jesus he met when he was a child, whom he describes as “the Conservative Protestant Jesus.” This Jesus was “born to die,” and the focal point was Jesus’ innocent death on the cross for McLaren’s sins. Over time, he struggled with this image of Jesus because it seemed individualistic, legalistic, and with personal but no global significance.
- † The next Jesus McLaren met when he was a young adult, and it was the “Pentecostal/Charismatic Jesus.” This Jesus was “present, personal, and dramatically involved in everyday life through the Holy Spirit, but nagging

questions about God's concern for the whole world, for history, and for creation frustrated McLaren.

- † This led him to the 'Roman Catholic Jesus'. McLaren loved the way this Jesus helped him focus on the Eucharist and the connection to ancient tradition that was beyond his present experience, but the exclusivism of the church in this view troubled him.
- † For a time he worshipped the 'Eastern Orthodox Jesus,' which emphasized the Trinity, affirmed mystery, and still engaged the world. This led him to the 'Liberal Protestant Jesus,' with a focus on social justice that grew from personal experience of faith in Christ. From there he ventured to the 'Anabaptist Jesus,' with its historic focus on peace and nonviolence, and from there to the 'Liberation Theology Jesus,' who confronted injustice in the whole of society and stood in solidarity with the poor and oppressed.”  
(from Feasting on the Word, 2010.)
- † Although we've never written a book about it, most of us have experienced similar progressions in our understanding of Jesus (although not in the same order or substance, most likely). And that's the trouble with Paul's demand that we proclaim Christ. Which Christ ought we to proclaim?
- † If we are honest, we can't claim an exclusive understanding of who Jesus is. And yet we don't want moral relativism—some wishy washy claim that every understanding of Jesus is correct.
- † And we don't want to be a church that is just another social organization or place of entertainment. Professor David Ng says the church is not meant to be some theological theme park where we employ tricks of the trade to bring and keep people in the pews. It is not meant to be a place of maintenance—to be a safe place to hide until Christ comes again.

- † “Perpetual purgatory,” Ng calls it—requiring nothing of its members except that they wait and not stir things up, lest they become more anxiety ridden than they already are. He also warns against a church that exists for fellowship only, even though fellowship is an important part of being church. When fellowship is the main focus, the church becomes all about comfort rather than living faithfully.
- † Nor is the church about protection, where the community, frightened of the world beyond its walls, constructs an environment that reenacts old familiar rituals that tend to keep people out rather than invite them in.
- † We want to follow Jesus, faithfully, and to be a church that proclaims him not just with words but with our ministry and our compassion. How does that happen?
- † If you’re a regular part of our church, you know that it has been an eventful few weeks. For those of you have joined us a visitor for today, our church has been running on fast forward during this time. Some of the activity has resulted in pure joy—Vacation Bible School, The Ark Full of Chairs, the expansion of our community garden so that people who are hungry in our town can enjoy fresh vegetables, our prayer hikes in Glacier Park.
- † But some of the ministries of our church have centered on ministering to those in pain and grief. With three funerals last week, we might claim too much practice in this part of being church. It’s one thing when a person has lived long and well, but another when a young mother leaves this life too soon, and a grown-up child of the church is mourned for the painful struggles he experienced in the last forty years.
- † On Tuesday, we celebrated Brad’s life. Not many of us knew him well, but we knew him by sight. His long hair, beard, and distinctive persona made us notice him. At Brad’s service, friends and neighbors told stories of their

experiences with Brad. Many of them were poignant, funny, and enlightening. I especially love Kathy Bechtle's remembrance of the first time their grandson, Jackson, (who was in attendance at the service) saw Brad in church.

- † Jackson could barely talk, but as the grandson of a preacher, his words were telling: "Is that Jesus?" Jackson whispered. One of Brad's neighbors looked thoughtful, and said, although only those next to him could hear, "It might have been."
- † Some might say that comparing a struggling, sometimes delusional schizophrenic man to Jesus is blasphemy. But as we learned more about Brad through the stories of his life, I'm not so sure. For he taught his little brother about the stars, tried to connect ideas and people to the mysteries of the cosmos, always shared what little he had with those who had less, and believed that Love was the missing element in Einstein's unified field theory.
- † Some of you know that a few weeks ago, at our annual conference, I received a wonderful surprise in the form of the Harry Denman award. I confess that I didn't really know who Harry Denman was and had to look him up when I returned to my place around the table at conference.
- † Now Alita has heard Harry Denman preach, and I wish I could have heard him, too. He was full of energy, the ability to connect with all kinds of people, and a passion for Jesus. He only owned one suit, never married but called fellow Christians "daughter, son, brother, sister." His primary reason for living was to share Jesus, not just through his words but with his life. He was a servant in the manner of Jesus and gave himself away.
- † I certainly could think of lots of other people who deserved recognition more than I did. But when I reflect on that amazing surprise, I think the award

belongs to our entire congregation. It's always dangerous to compare yourself, as an individual or as a church, with someone who has been held up as a model of faith. And I can think of so many ways that I (and yes, we) have fallen short.

- † Yet I think Brad's memorial service serves as a guidepost for our witness and our ministry—yours and mine. So many people remarked that the service was so honest and yet so full of love. And it was. At several points I silently repented of my initial fear of Brad—he was hostile to me at first, and I didn't want him to frighten people away from our church.
- † But over the years, I grew to know him better and to appreciate his compassion and intellect. I come from Chicago, where many people with Brad's disease would have dropped between the cracks of the social service network and become homeless and lost. But in Whitefish and in our church, although it often wasn't easy, Brad made his way among us and with us. A person of great faith, although indecipherable at times, he belonged to God and to us.
- † You, his church, graciously offered yourselves so that he would be lovingly remembered and celebrated. And the community noticed. That, my friends, is what is meant by proclaiming Christ. And I am grateful for you and I love you.
- † We may not always have loved as Jesus would love. We have fallen short of the glory of God. But that's why we come, and that's why we follow this Jesus. Through him, we are reconciled from the past and to God's eternal present, in which grace and peace are the hallmarks of life in Christ.
- † Will you join me in proclaiming the ancient hymn (found in the first paragraph of the scripture on the front of your bulletin.)?

† He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and 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 all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

† Amen.

Sources:

Feasting on the Word, 2010.