



**THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
JUNE 7, 2020
HOW IS CHRIST WITH US?**

MATTHEW 28: 16-20

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

SERMON

I remember a dinner after church in our social hall when I was ten years old.

I was seated across from Edwina Lovelace.

Me, a short, chubby white boy, and she, a tall, thin black girl.

It must have been a special Sunday, because there was a soft-serve ice cream machine.



I was eating my vanilla cone and Edwina was eating her chocolate cone.

I can't recall who started it.

But, with a smile on her face and a twinkle in her eye, Edwina said, "I like chocolate."

And I responded with a smile on my face and a twinkle in my eye, "I like vanilla."

Of course, we immediately knew what we were doing.

And back and forth we went:

I like chocolate.

I like vanilla.

Until we were about to fall out laughing.

My experience with Edwina and Edwina's experience with me had nothing to do with first English Lutheran in Columbus, Ohio being committed to diversity, being committed to political correctness, or being committed to combating white



privilege. At this point in our country's common experience, these words seem often to create division, debate, defensiveness, and animosity.

My experience with Edwina and Edwina's experience with me had simply to do with the biblical vision handed to me by our pastor that Christ is found in our neighbor.

Martin Luther wrote, "we conclude, therefore, that a Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and his neighbor. Otherwise, he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ through faith and in his neighbor through love."

Or as G.K. Chesterton wrote, "Christianity hasn't failed. It has not been tried yet."

Both history and our current experience reminds us that the bible has been used to defend the ownership of slaves. The bible has been used and is still used to oppress women. Priests and pastors can preach and celebrate communion and then sexually abuse children.

Once Christianity became an established religion, we could avoid the transformation of our minds and hearts that Christ calls for. We could remain greedy, selfish, racist, homophobic, xenophobic, mean-spirited and still confess that "Jesus is my personal lord and savior."

Our neighbors, peaceful protestors, can be teargassed and shot with rubber bullets so that our nation's leader can hold a bible upside down for a photo op.



This is my favorite bible. My bible is falling apart with use. The bible cover is long gone. The binding is broken. Pages are worn.

And when clc re-gathers for worship, I won't be playing golf during worship.

The world has no time for this kind of hypocrisy any longer. Too much is at stake.

We are not people of a book. We are people of a person. Christ does not say, "I am leaving you a book until the end of the age.

Christ says, "surely, I am with you always, until the very end of the age."

We are people of the Christ. As Luther says, "the bible is the cradle in which we find the Christ child." Paul submits that "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me," and Carl Jung adds, "the individual ego is the stable in which the Christ child is born."

"there are some of us who think to ourselves," says Luther, "if I had only been there! How quick I would have been to help the baby. I would have washed his linen. How happy I would have been to go with the shepherds to see the lord lying in the manger! Why don't we do it now? We have Christ in our neighbor."

How is Christ with us until the end of the age?!



The foundational truths for those of us who follow Christ are these: we are in Christ and Christ is in our neighbor.

At the end of the parable of the good Samaritan, Jesus asks, “which do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”

“the one who showed him mercy,” was the reply.

To which Jesus responded, “go and do likewise.”

Followers of Christ do not speak of dominating others or demanding others, but speak of serving, walking beside, having compassion for, and reaching out to the neighbor.

What the pandemic has done in Millvale and throughout the nation is expose the hidden hungry. The pandemic has exposed the pushed-to-the-margins poor. The pandemic has exposed our vulnerable neighbors. The pandemic has exposed the violent injustice against some of our neighbors of color.

As a nation, how far we have strayed from these words inscribed on the statue of liberty: “give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free. The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door....”



Mother Teresa diagnosed the world's sickness: "we've forgotten that we belong to each other."

Such a world is a world of us and them.

It is not the world envisioned by Christ: "come, you that are blessed by my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world., for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me."

How is Christ with us till the end of the age?

We are in Christ and Christ is in our neighbor....

Here is one thing I have learned from the least of these during the pandemic:

When we gave out grocery gift cards, people flocked to our church. They kept coming and coming. So, we kept finding ways to provide them with gift cards.

When we made the transition to providing food, the number of people dropped off drastically.



What became clear is that, by essentially providing the same food to every person, we had taken away the freedom of choice.

And, as I pondered this, I recalled the teaching of St. John Chrysostom, born in 349, and was called the golden-mouthed preacher.

In his teaching about the gifts of the holy spirit, he defines the first gift as freedom. And he says the first expression of freedom is choice. Because without choice, we are under the rule of law: you should love pinto beans because that's what we can give. You ought to appreciate Manwich, even though we do not give you ground beef so you can use it. Here is a can of diced tomatoes; no here are three cans of diced tomatoes, even though no one has taught you how to prepare a healthy meal with them.

And then we judge, right? Oh, they—you see, back to us and them—they only want gift cards so they can buy cigarettes. Well, I used to smoke and I can understand that addiction. It's a bear to kick it. Or they are going to buy gas. Okay, maybe someone needs gas to keep a business running.

Freedom of choice is a gift of the holy spirit. In any situation, one must experience at least two acceptable options. Choice bestows dignity, a sense of autonomy, and a sense of personal power.

You know, I think I'll buy baked beans because I know what to do with them.



Until we discover the compassionate Christ within us and discover the needy Christ in our neighbor we will be caught in judgment, which is not a sign of Christ in us and within our neighbor.

As a pastoral psychotherapist, I was grateful to serve my neighbors from very different backgrounds: Chilean, Korean, black, white, priests, pastors from various denominations, straight, lesbian, gay, bi.

So, out of that experience, I offer a story and a learning.

The story is that deb and I had our offices in our home and so clients would park outside on the street and walk around to a side door that led to our waiting room and offices.

On more than one occasion, one of my black clients was stopped by the police as he got out of his car. Obviously, he had been followed into our white neighborhood.

I'll call my client William. William was a doctoral candidate in psychology, and a professor in a university in a neighboring city. Bill related that his experience was not unusual. Often, he went shopping at one of our local malls after seeing me and, often he was tailed by a store detective as he entered.



Bill asked me if I had ever had either of these experiences as a white man and I had not.

Bill was not viewed as a neighbor, but as a potential criminal....

The learning is that through empathy—thinking and feeling my way into each person’s life experience—I came to know what it was like to live inside his skin and the skin of each of my clients.

I came to understand their life choices, their personal suffering, their worldview, and what was needed for healing.

Please notice that in every teaching: by Jesus, by Luther, by Jung, the focus remains on you and your neighbor. How do you and I stay conscious of being in Christ and conscious of seeing Christ in this neighbor in front of me?

As Richard Rohr writes, “worship of Jesus is harmless. Following Jesus changes everything.”

Jesus says, “I no longer call you servants. Instead, I have called you friends. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit. This is my command: love each other....”



The nuanced meaning in Jesus' words is that we begin relationship by serving, but then we move to friends. It is not giver and receiver—it is we are in this thing called life together and we who are in Christ move from being those who serve to those who befriend the neighbor.

SERMON SONG

You've Got A Friend (James Taylor)