

On Christ the Solid Rock I Stand
Part 2 *Who Is This Jesus?*
January 14, 2018 Pastor Roger Barkley

It was a Friday, the day before Passover, when the armor-clad executioners with soul-less eyes hammered rough iron nails through Jesus' wrists and ankles.

Jesus gasped in pain, his mother screamed in anguish, his terrified disciples hid behind locked doors, and the Pharisees heaved a collective sigh of relief.

The demons that haunt, the tyrants who skim their riches from the wages of the poor were reassured of their control.

Satan himself must have been high fiving ... the world, now, was surely his.

But on Sunday, Jesus turned their world upside down.

We're continuing our series on our *Statement of Faith*, today asking, "Who is this Jesus?"

Who is this Jesus whom the powers of darkness conspired to destroy?

Who is this Jesus whose own bickering disciples utterly failed to comprehend while he was alive, and who abandoned him in defeat, but within a few weeks were risking everything to proclaim him as *The Holy and Righteous one* and *the author of life* (Acts 3:14, 15)?

Who is this Jesus who 2000 years later calls us – and 2.2 billion others like us - to his church?

Our *Statement of Faith* says this:

"In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Lord, God has come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death."

If Jesus is all that, then our knowing him must be the most important thing we do in this life.

First, Jesus is the portrait of God.

Jesus was a living, breathing man, a Rabbi from the village of Nazareth who knew sorrow and pain, friendship and a good meal.

But Jesus was more than a great teacher, or some guru with mystical revelations.

Jesus also was God revealing Himself through that man.

Hebrews 1:3a *The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being ...*

That means that Jesus is the fullest and most accessible self-revelation of God.

We can experience the divine through many religious traditions, and even through a walk in nature, but Jesus is more: Jesus is actually God showing Himself to us.

And because God chose to come in the human form of Jesus - rather than some distant, unapproachable god or goddess or abstract philosophical concepts - Jesus is the most understandable and accessible revelation of God.

This is the sacred mystery that is at the heart of all varieties of Christianity: Jesus is simultaneously both fully human and fully divine.

But even though saints and thinkers have filled libraries trying to explain the mystery, we only need to look to Jesus to understand most of what God wants for us and from us.

We can tie ourselves in knots of logic over problems such as how a loving God can co-exist with a world of suffering, but in the end, all I really need do is look at how Jesus lived his life to know how to live mine.

The gospels do not paint very flattering self-portraits of the disciples.

The gospels confess that his followers consistently missed the meaning of his teachings even after living with him for three years.

But with the Resurrection, and with his continuing presence through the Holy Spirit they began to understand.

The Good News is that they or their followers recorded the experiences for us

- what God is like in living, human terms,
- what God does when confronted with sin, legalism, injustice, intolerance, and with life's tragedies ... and, so, what God created us to be like.

1 John 1:1 *From the very first day, we were there, taking it all in — we heard it with our own ears, saw it with our own eyes, verified it with our own hands. The Word of Life appeared right before our eyes; we saw it happen! And now we're telling you in most sober prose that what we witnessed was, incredibly, this: The infinite Life of God himself took shape before us.*

Jesus shows me how to live if I am to most fully experience God.

For example, I remember long seminary debates about what good it does to pray if God already knows everything and when God seems unmoved by our prayers.

Jesus silences such questions – he prayed, so should we.

Tony Campolo was to speak at Princeton Theological Seminary a few years ago.

Being a national celebrity, he was greeted by a packed auditorium of young ministers in training and learned professors.

As he walked onto the stage, he was interrupted by an embarrassing scene.

A local woman pushed through the crowd and said, “Dr. Campolo, God sent me here so you could heal my son.”

The three-year-old boy she held by her hand was in leg braces and couldn't walk – but this wasn't a Pentecostal revival and neither Campolo nor Princeton is where you'd expect to turn for miraculous healing.

Tony tried to squirm out of the situation saying, “I’m sorry ma’am but I don’t know how to do that.”

But she persisted. “I thought you were a man of God. Well, God sent me here for you to heal him.”

“Ma’am he said,” he replied in his most reasonable voice, “some people may have the gift of spiritual healing but I don’t. I have a gift of teaching. Maybe you should go to another minister.”

Just then the chaplain stepped forward and said that even Jesus did not like to heal in the presence of doubters.

Then he challenged the audience, “OK. Anyone who is here who does not believe that this boy can be healed by prayer, please leave the auditorium for fifteen minutes.”

The auditorium pretty much cleared out, except for five Pentecostal students, who were already going into their speaking in tongues routine.

The chaplain whisked everyone into a backstage room and asked an assistant to fetch some oil.

“Why the oil?” Tony asked.

“Because it says in James that when someone is sick you anoint their head with oil.”

“What kind?”

“Wesson is what we have,” which hardly assured Tony of the ultimate spiritual success of this exercise.

Just for luck they’d asked the five Pentecostals to join them and they started to pray – and suddenly there came a moment when a radiance seemed to emanate around the boy.

Campolo later said that he’d never experienced such a thing before or since, and his only response was to shut up.

The chaplain became silent . . . even the five Pentecostals stopped and they all just stood there.

Well, he says, there was no miracle that day.

The boy went home in his leg braces – but they knew that they had done what was expected of them.

But about two years later, Campolo was back in the area giving another lecture when a woman came up to him and asked, “Do you remember me?”

“Sure. You brought your son for me to pray over at Princeton a couple of years ago. How’s he doing?”

“Well, he’s fine. Now he runs and plays like all the other kids.”

She explained that the day after the episode he complained that his braces were too tight, so they loosened them, as they did each day for a week before they realized that his legs were straightening.

She said, “I was faithful in bringing him to you, you were faithful in praying the best you knew how, and God was faithful in restoring his health.”

I don’t understand prayer.

I don’t understand how prayer works, and I don’t know why we so often don’t seem to get what we think we need with prayer – accounts like this are the exceptions.

Nor do I understand why our prayers bring miracles to some but not others.

But I do know that the Rabbi Jesus, the Son of God prayed, and that really is all the explanation I should need.

Jesus sought out the lost and broken hearted, so that is all explanation I should need as to how I should live my life.

Jesus challenged social barriers that excluded whole classes of people, and so that is all the explanation I should need as to my attitude toward others.

Jesus is the portrait of God.

The second lesson the Bible gives is that Jesus is a joyful lover.

Because of Jesus we learn that God could not stand-by and watch this little world in the corner of the universe be pulled down into its self-inflicted suffering.

He had to do something to set things right.

John 3:16 (The Message): *“This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, His one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in Him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life.”*

You know how much God loves you?

God is like a grandfather who carries pictures in his wallet.

It’s like God walks around Heaven and says, “Excuse me, but have I shown you a picture of xx lately? Here, look.

“Oh, oh. And here’s yy. I’m so proud of her: What a girl!”

Sounds far out . . . but that is the picture of God’s love we get through Jesus.

Again, *The Message*: 1 John 4:16b *God is love. When we take up permanent residence in a life of love, we live in God and God lives in us.*

As Christians, this passage is so familiar, that it tends to go in one ear and out the other.

But do you know how unlikely this is?

Think of this: On our own, would any of us dream up the notion of a God who yearns for love and relationship?

Probably not.

If I were conceiving a god, mine would be orderly, powerful, and with a few well-aimed thunderbolts would set things right around here.

Aristotle stated bluntly, “It would be eccentric for anyone to claim he loves Zeus” – and we might add, that Zeus loved a human being.

Well, Jesus changed all that.

Jesus actually sought out the most unlovable of his society.

If he were here, you’d find him in the needle-strewn alleys behind Sunset Boulevard dining with the prostitutes.

He’d be hugging the depressed, encouraging the unemployed, and bringing food and water to the immigrants crossing the desert.

He taught about the shepherd who risked it all to find one lost sheep, the dad who rushed to embrace his wayward son, the woman who searched all night for the lost coin.

Then each of those parables ends with a scene of rejoicing, as if there is a celestial celebration each time one of us returns to God.

Philip Yancey recalls a long night sitting in uncomfortable Naugahyde chairs in O’Hare Airport waiting for a flight that had been delayed for five hours.

He happened to be sitting next to a wise woman who was traveling to the same conference.

He says that the long delay and the late hour combined to create a melancholy mood, so they had plenty of time to share all their dysfunctions of childhood, their disappointments with the church, and their questions of faith.

At the time, Yancey was writing a book called *Disappointment with God* which explores questions about why God doesn’t always intervene to relieve human suffering.

Being preoccupied with that topic, he was feeling burdened by other people's pains and sorrows and with his many unanswered questions.

The woman listened in silence to him for a very long time, then out of nowhere she asked a question that has stayed with him ever since, a question that re-oriented his spiritual walk.

She quietly asked, "Philip, do you ever just let God love you? It's pretty important, I think."

Yancey reflects that in his wrestling with the deep theological questions of the ages, he "had missed the most important message of all. The story of Jesus is the story of celebration. The story of love. It involves pain and disappointment, yes, for God as well as for us. But Jesus embodies the promise of a God who will go to any length to win us back."

Bringing us back is overcoming sin comes from the cosmic power of Christ as well as our willingness to receive it.

In fact, from Genesis 3 to Revelation 22, the Bible traces God's reckless desire to get His family back.

The closing scene of the Bible, just like the ending of Jesus' parable of the lost son, is jubilation, joy and celebration for a family united once again.

The Bible teaches that Jesus is the portrait of God, that Jesus is a joyful lover, and, **third, the wounded healer.**

The New Testament is improbable from beginning to end.

The disciples write accounts of themselves being untrustworthy and obtuse during his life.

They later proclaimed that the Creator of the universe in absurd terms for the time, as a God who is lovesick for a relationship with us.

And on top of all that, they report in detail the miserable defeat of the Messiah at the hands of Caesar – who, himself, claimed to be the son of God.

And why would anyone think that they could attract followers to a new religious movement by choosing an instrument of execution as their central symbol?

Why not squelch any memory of this humiliation and injustice?

Why not stress the Resurrection and reduce the crucifixion to a footnote of history?

Because the cross reminds us of a deep truth that makes no sense apart from Jesus' suffering on the cross.

The cross gives us hope when we can see no hope.

The cross offers healing when we see nothing but pain.

The cross is not a symbol of a fantasy god who promises happily ever after tales.

The cross proclaims God's transforming power, when everything seems to have failed.

What was once a symbol of state sponsored terror, is now a reminder that God's power can defeat the worst that life can throw at us.

2 Corinthians 12:9 "My grace is enough; it's all you need. My strength comes into its own in your weakness". Once I heard that, I was glad to let it happen. I quit focusing on the handicap and began appreciating the gift. It was a case of Christ's strength moving in on my weakness.

And, ultimately, the truth of the continuing life of our soul after our human life has run its course.

Jesus overcame the worst human cruelty could conceive so that we can hold on in faith through our tough times, and even in the face of death itself.

Finally, Jesus disciplines those he loves.

We might prefer a kind, warm and fuzzy Jesus, but that is not the Jesus of the gospel nor the Jesus of my experience.

And I've never found much hope in the "nice guy Jesus" when facing real tough stuff in my life.

In one of the recent UCC *Still Speaking* daily devotions, Kenneth Samuel shared about his early lesson about how God shows love through steel-eye judgment and tough love.

Isaiah 42:3b-4 prophesizes the coming of Jesus
as a judge who will bring justice to the world:
*He won't call attention to what he does
with loud speeches or gaudy parades. He will bring lasting justice to all.
He will not lose hope or courage;
he will establish justice on the earth.*

Ken remembers when, his early twenties, he was summoned to traffic court for a speeding ticket and some unpaid parking violations.

He says that he could have just mailed in the fines, but he'd procrastinated and so had to appear in court.

He didn't know what to expect, and so horror stories raced through his mind as he sat in the crowded marble courtroom waiting for the appearance of the judge.

But upon the judge's entry, he breathed a deep sigh of relief.

The judge was a member of his church.

He was a kindly gentleman, who always greeted him with a smile, a firm handshake and words of encouragement.

Surely he, who knew him so well, would grant leniency, or perhaps dismiss his violations altogether.

But looking down from his lofty position, the judge spoke stern words, "Kenneth Samuel, you are guilty as charged. You will pay the maximum fines with interest, because I know that you know better. You've got to be an example for other young people."

Kenneth says, “Such a nice man, but such a stern judgment. But after his ruling I was determined to never have to appear in traffic court for neglected violations again.”

Jesus knows us intimately and loves us dearly.

But Jesus knows to discipline those whom he loves, and to hold those of us who know him to high standards because his judgments are much more than our punishment.

His judgments are really our salvation.

The forces of darkness may have been celebrating on that Friday long ago, but Sunday was yet to come, and on Sunday the angels would be dancing.

And 2000 years later we, too, can rejoice.

Just when we think we are down for the count, when we feel unloved and unlovable, when injustice seems insurmountable, we remember the cross.

And suddenly, because of Jesus, it’s not Friday anymore.