

# *“Christian Through and Through”*

*(Part I of III in the sermon series, “Our Reformation Faith”)  
Isaiah 25:1-9; Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14*

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*October 15, 2017*

From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Children's Sabbath, Proper 23, October 15, 2017, dedicated to the Rev. Lisa A. Bowersock on her ordination into Christian Ministry, to all the runners and supporters this Columbus Marathon Sunday, to the Children who inspire us on this Children's Sabbath and to G. Dene Barnard and Jackie Dean, two inspirational friends on the journey of Christian faith, as they celebrate their birthdays this week and always to the glory of God!

**“Christian Through and Through”**

**(Part I of III in the sermon series, "Our Reformation Faith")**

**Isaiah 25:1-9; Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14**

Two weeks from today, we will celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. On All Saint's Eve, October 31, 1517, Martin Luther, a Catholic priest and a professor of moral theology at the University of Wittenberg, Germany

presented *Ninety-five Theses* or *Disputation on the Power of Indulgences* as a list of propositions for academic [disputation](#) that started the Reformation - a [schism](#) in the [Catholic Church](#) which profoundly changed Europe- and ultimately the face of Christianity. He spoke out clearly against corruption in the Catholic Church and the way in which the church kept its people in a state of subjugation through indulgences. Ultimately, it was his greater questions about justification by faith and the bondage of the will that would cause the church to charge him with heresy, try him and then, in 1521 excommunicate him from the church.

But, the dye was cast. The church was reforming. And across Europe, placing Scripture first over and against the church and her sacraments was to cause the split we now know well as the Protestant Reformation. Protestant Christians are now 500 years old. So, what is it that we believe? How do we define ourselves? We, Congregational Christians, trace our roots back to a split with the church of England in 1580. We upheld two primary beliefs – the authority of scripture alone and the priesthood of all believers. We have four foundational beliefs – we are Congregational (how we organize ourselves). We are Christian (who we follow in our faith). We are Evangelical (how we spread the Good News of Christ). And we are

Reformed (always seeking to find the edge of our faith –  
“more light and truth to break forth of God’s Holy Word.”

I would like to look at Christian, Evangelical, and  
Reformed... we will leave Congregational for an upcoming  
sermon – in January I hope....

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*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of  
each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our  
strength & our salvation. Amen.*

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First and foremost, we are Christian. At the heart of God is  
Jesus Christ. And at the heart of our Christian faith, Jesus  
Christ stands as our center and our Savior. When the author  
of Hebrews wrote, "*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today  
and forever*"(Hebrews 8:13), we have to wonder if he had  
unforeseen insight into the future which has eluded Jesus'  
followers? Clearly, we have only to look at the record of  
Christian understandings of Jesus to see how he has changed  
and continues to change in the eyes of his followers. Since our  
earliest days, Christians have been trying to understand, name,  
and describe Jesus and his place in our faith and history.

More books, more paintings, more plays and films have been written about Jesus than anyone else. No matter what the medium of the message, Jesus tends to be pictured however the beholder portrays him. In the past 100 years alone, writers have depicted Jesus as a political Liberal and a Conservative (And First Church would find such a delineation here as well!); a rationalist and an emotionalist; a feminist and a super Macho Man. Theater has portrayed him as Superstar and Clown. Film has rendered him as a homeless street person and a man wrapped in dreams about temptation. And of course, *The Passion of the Christ* characterized Jesus as a pulverized super heroic victim of intense brutality, scourging and crucifixion.

Beginning in 1906 with Albert Schweitzer's critique of 19<sup>th</sup> Century writings on Jesus entitled The Quest for the Historical Jesus, the last century saw thousands of publications about Jesus - each author claiming to have discovered his essence over and against the last. The spectrum of writings ranges from historians and theologians who question whether Jesus ever existed to those who say that raising any questions about Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection is blasphemous. We are among the Christians who raise questions – not so much about existence, but how in the world others of our “Family of Faith” can come away with

views that seem to vary so greatly from the essence of Christ himself. To have questions about our sisters and brothers can make claims like inerrancy or literal interpretation is what often troubles our kind of Christian.

But, if we are honest, there are some strange ideas out there about Jesus put forth by his followers. In 1986, Dr. Daniel Harrington illustrated the present problem in theological writings on Jesus. Harrington showed how seven different scholars created at least seven different images of Jesus in the span of a few years. Jesus was a political revolutionary (SGF Brandon, 1967), a magician (Morton Smith, 1978), a Galilean Charismatic (Geza Vermes, 1981, '84), a Galilean rabbi (Bruce Chilton, 1984), a proto-Pharisee (Harvey Falk, 1985), an Essene (Falk, 1985), and finally a prophet of the end of time (E.P. Sanders, 1985).

In addition to first-world white and male theological perspectives, feminist or womanist, Native American and African-American, and a host of Third World theologians have all portrayed Jesus as a Liberator in the midst of suffering poor and oppressed people, especially through the lenses of their own struggles for freedom and liberation. For example, in the 1977 book, Faces of Jesus, Latin American theologians present for the first time, 12 essays on the question "*Who is Jesus in Latin America Today?*" This fascinating collection of

writings paints a portrait of Jesus very much different from the classic North American and European portraits which most of us have been trained to see and in which we find comfort for our journeys of faith. I see absolutely nothing wrong with a wide-range of people across the globe and across time claiming Jesus as their hero, liberator, guide, teacher and savior.

But, at the end of day, from the four corners of the earth, the question still remains: **Who is Jesus?**

**The problem of getting to the root of Jesus and who he is begins, not in the minds of scholars, but in the incongruity of the fourfold record of Jesus in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.**

If you follow Jesus Christ's Gospel story vertically from birth to death, from resurrection to ascension in glory, you gain a picture of unity, harmony, and agreement. However, when you dig through the texts horizontally, side by side, word by word, disagreement rather than agreement strikes you most forcibly. In fact, by the middle of the second century A.D., pagan opponents like Celcius and Christian apologists like Justin, Marcion, and Tatian were clearly aware of discrepancies between the gospel texts. In Luke and Matthew for example the Lord's Prayer is different. The church's solution to dealing with the differences was to drop Luke's

version from the liturgy and accept Matthew's as our prayer. There are two versions of the birth story (and in John's gospel a mystical story of Jesus' beginning). The solution has been to merge the shepherds and the magi together at the manger rather than struggle for reconciliation in the texts. That is actually what we do each Christmas.

In the end, we know that the story of Jesus which has been passed on to us is given by thinkers, but not memorizers of his words; by his disciples but not reciters of his sayings; and by people of faith, but not parrots of parables (Paraphrased by John Dominic Crossan, The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant, 1991, p. xxxi).

By putting all the Jewish texts (religious and historical), Christian texts (canonical and non-canonical) and pagan writings together we can somewhat form a picture of Jesus of Nazareth. We know he was born in the underbelly of the Roman Empire - one of the most powerful and long-lasting empires our world has ever known. From his earliest days, he was outside the center of power and spoke from there to the people who were around him. Born in a barn (or more likely a cave) used for animals in Bethlehem, he was raised in Nazareth of Galilee – after having fled for his life to Egypt shortly after his birth. We know almost nothing of his childhood. One historian records that when Jesus was about eight or nine years

old, there were almost 1,000 Jews executed on crosses for subversion. Since Joseph was the only carpenter in the small village, one can imagine that Jesus assisted as a cross-maker and witnessed the torture and mass crucifixions of his people before his tenth birthday.

Around the age of 29-30, Jesus enters a "hamlet of lower Galilee" and begins his life among the broker-less kingdom of people in the lower Mediterranean plains. John Dominic Crossan carefully describes the scene:

*This yet unknown peasant is closely watched by the peasants who are scratching out a meager existence in a politically cruel and violent context . . . He speaks about the rule of God, and they listen as much from curiosity as anything else. They all know about rule and power, about kingdom and empire, but they know it in terms of tax and debt, malnutrition and sickness, agrarian oppression and demonic possession. What they really want to know is what this Kingdom of God can do for a lame child, a blind parent, a demented soul screaming in tortured isolation among the graves that mark the edge of the village? Jesus walks with them to the tombs, and in the silence after the exorcism, the villagers listen once more . . . (but differently this time) . . . He is invited . . . to the house of the village leader. He goes instead to stay in the home of the dispossessed woman. Not quite proper to be sure, but it would be unwise to censure an exorcist or question a magician . . .*

*The next day he leaves them, and now they wonder aloud about a divine kingdom with no respect for proper protocols - a kingdom, as he had said, not just for the poor like themselves, but the (spiritually) destitute. Others say the worst and most powerful demons are in the cities, maybe he is heading there . . . But some say nothing at all and ponder the possibilities of catching up with Jesus before he gets too far away (Crossan, p. xi).*

**What was Jesus thinking?** As a preacher, healer, teacher, and exorcist, Jesus must have known he was shaking the foundations of his culture. As one who was following in the footsteps of his soon-to-be beheaded cousin, John the Baptist, didn't Jesus realize that some form of political-religious execution was in store for him, too? To heal and speak out-loud about God's coming kingdom was subversive. And Jesus must have known (or quickly been told) that five hopeful Messiahs had been executed in the last ten years. Still, he spoke. As John's voice was silenced, Jesus found his own voice. His message was clear and simple. *"You are healed healers. Take this message to others. God's kingdom is available for everybody. It does not belong to the powerful, but it belongs to **all people**."*

Jesus brought a combination of ecstatic vision and social vision which sought to rebuild their society from the grassroots. From healing individuals within a communal context, he combined miracle and meal, free compassion and open

community, a challenge to Judaism's purity regulations, patriarchy, and patronage with an absolute commitment to stop civilization's eternal inclination to draw lines, invoke boundaries, establish hierarchies and maintain discriminations. He did not invite a political revolution but envisioned a social one in which no distinctions were given to Jews and Gentiles, females or males, slaves or free, rich or poor. He did this not by attacking these distinctions in theory, but by simply ignoring them in practice and overcoming them with the power of love and justice.

**If you want to know who Jesus is, pay close attention to what Jesus says and does.** Whatever incongruities exist in the Gospel texts dissolve in the person and in the actions of Jesus. Compassion, humility, healing, laughter, love, pain, prophetic solidarity, practice of equality, presence of God bursting from his body - this is the Jesus who stepped into lower Galilee and transformed lives and societal visions through his very life among common people.

Jesus is a servant who would rather serve than be served. His nature is one which is not to be feared and obeyed, but rather walked with, questioned, listened to and responded to. He is not supremely detached and indifferent, but intimately connected - weeping openly in face of his friend Lazarus' death and crying in anguish in the face of his own death. He is

committed to the liberation of humankind because our God identifies Godself with all people in a spirit of solidarity, humility and compassion.

And then, this man who stepped into lower Galilee, embodying all of this and more, is willing to die for his friends. He is willing to lay down his life for all of humanity. Into the heart of darkness and the embrace of pain Jesus goes. He carries with him the hurting ones from whom he came and with whom he walked. In this transformative death, Jesus moves from darkness to light.

On Good Friday, Jesus is executed **because** he embodies of all this - social prophecy, movement initiation, personal healing, compassionate friendship - and so much more. By critiquing the social system of domination, this once mystic Jewish healer and wisdom teacher comes under intense scrutiny by the power elite - both Roman and Jewish. His passion for justice and change ultimately brings about his execution. His death becomes the **fatal consequence** of what he is doing, but **not the purpose of it.**

His resurrection three days later transcends history and lifts Jesus Christ to a sphere outside the control of human historical experience. Thus, the great paradox of Jesus Christ is that through his resurrection, which happens in an historical

period, he is raised outside and beyond the realm of history itself!

The death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth changed the world. Never again would people of any faith, in any age, relate to God in the same way. For close to two millennia, this story which is paradoxically in history and yet beyond history, has been changing lives and denting the injustices of the social order.

It is Jesus Christ who calls us to follow a different path than was ever presented before he came into this world. He is the central figure of faith at the heart of Christianity. He is why we are Christians.

I invite each one of you to come to know him and be known by him more fully. There are times when he will call you to places you would rather not go. But, come and follow him. He will never forsake you. In the words of the Apostle Paul, "*Lo, I tell you a mystery . . . we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, we will all be changed.*" He has changed my life. I invite you to let him change your life. Remember, your relationship with the Risen Christ is and will always be a mystery – at some deep level. Allow the mysterious and beautiful nature of Jesus to change you. If you choose to

follow him, you will be changed each day. His eyes will twinkle and in the twinkling of an eye, you will be changed.

In the end, those who follow him are called Christian. We come in all sorts of hues and views; all sorts of beliefs and actions in his name. But, if we are to bear his name, we need to claim his story. His story must become our story. And we must admit that following him is a beautiful and dangerous confession and path. It is a confession and a path which winds through the human story. To be counted as a Christian means to stand with, walk with and yes – follow the way of the Savior. So, let us walk with him – and be changed forever. Amen.

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