

UMC.org – The Message

Rev. David Bard
First United Methodist Church
Duluth, MN

Why Jesus?

2 Corinthians 4:3-6

3And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. 4The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. 5For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. 6For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

Mark 9:2-9

2After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. 3His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. 4And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus. 5Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." 6(He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.) 7Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" 8Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus. 9As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

I would guess many of you have heard this story about the children's sermon that took an unexpected direction. There are a whole host of such stories. In this one, a pastor has the children up front and begins to ask them a question. "What has four legs, is usually gray, has a bushy tail, likes nuts and enjoys jumping from tree to tree?" The pastor then called on the boy who was waving his hand most energetically. "Well, it sounds an awful lot like a squirrel to me, but this being church and all the right answer has to be 'Jesus'."

Jesus is everywhere in the church isn't he? The very name of our faith, of our religion takes its name from a title conferred on Jesus. We are "Christians," and that comes from Jesus Christ – and you know "Christ" was not a last name but an honorific title given to Jesus. It is the Greek word for the Hebrew word "messiah" which means "anointed one."

Jesus is everywhere in the church, and because of the history of this country, where the Christian faith has been spread far and wide, where we as a people have deep roots in that faith, Jesus is a whole lot of places. Jesus makes it into the popular culture with WWJD bracelets - what would Jesus do? For a long time, the term "Christian" was used almost synonymously with being a good person.

In a time when I am told there is a growing spiritual hunger in the lives of people, there is a lot of Jesus talk, but even more God talk – and frankly, the two don't always fit together easily. People who define themselves as spiritual often seem much more comfortable talking about God, or the Divine, or a Supreme Being, or the Creative Energy of the Universe, than wanting to talk about Jesus – in part because Jesus usually carries with him the "baggage" of the church. As Christians, sometimes, while we want to keep this relationship between Jesus and God together, we, too, are embarrassed by the way some of our brothers and sisters in the faith maintain the connection between Jesus and God. I remember a few years ago when a prominent Southern

Baptist declared that God really didn't hear the prayers of Jewish people because they were not offered in the name of Jesus. Many of us are uncomfortable with that sentiment. Some of us may even want to shy away from the strong connection in Christian faith between God and Jesus. Couldn't we just talk more about God?

We may even agree with the questions posed by an imaginary seeker to a theologian: *Isn't it rather strange associating God... with a person who not only lived so long ago but for all intents and purposes was a loser? Dead at thirty something? Rejected by nearly everybody, even his own followers? Crying out in pain and loneliness from his cross? Isn't that a contradiction of everything we've been taught to think about God?* (Douglas John Hall, Why Christian?, 17). Why Jesus?

In some ways that is the very question posed by the story of the Transfiguration. Jesus takes with him Peter, James and John, leads them up a high mountain, where they have this incredible vision of Jesus. In the days before laundry commercials his clothes became dazzling white. He is joined by Moses and Elijah. A cloud overshadows them, and then a voice comes from the cloud saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" They were amazed and terrified, but just as suddenly as the vision appeared, it disappeared.

There are a whole host of sermons that could be preached on this story, and no doubt you've heard a lot of them. But one thing this story seems to make clear is that Jesus is important, significant. It seems to be saying that Jesus is someone we need to pay attention to, and as Christians who take the Bible seriously as the central source for our faith, we need to heed the message of this story. Jesus is vitally important – deal with it. But that is not so much an answer to the question, "why Jesus?" as an invitation to ask the question again and again.

And I want to assert that we cannot avoid this question as Christians. We cannot escape the fact that to be a Christian means to continue to grapple with this person Jesus, whom we call "Christ." Theologian Douglas John Hall puts it well, "at the very center of the *reason* for being Christian there stand this name [Jesus], a name designating a particular, historical human being... one who puts us in touch with God in a way that is unique in our experience." (Why Christian, 18).

In writing about the meaning of "Christian" one of the great theological minds of the middle of the last century, H. Richard Niebuhr would say, "I call myself a Christian... because I... am a follower of Jesus Christ... because I believe that my way of thinking about life, myself, my human companions and our destiny has been so modified by his presence... that I cannot get away from his influence; and also because I do not want to get away from it; above all I call myself a Christian because my relation to God has been, so far as I can see, deeply conditioned by this presence of Jesus Christ in my history and in our history." (The Responsible Self, 43).

Jesus is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. Jesus is at the heart of a Christian understanding of God. We cannot escape that. We cannot ignore that as Christians. Now in saying that I am not saying that Christians are the only good people there are or are the only people who have an important relationship with God. All I am saying is that a Christian relationship to God is a relationship to Jesus Christ. But that still doesn't fully answer the question, "why Jesus?" does it. So here goes, in rather quick succession – my top ten reasons for "why Jesus?"

(1) In Jesus I really see and encounter "the image of God" (Paul). As human beings we need concrete manifestations of universal ideas. We understand something like beauty because we see beautiful things. We can only understand God when we see some more concrete embodiment of the Divine, and that's what Jesus gives me. "Through the humanity of Jesus shines the Divine. In Jesus the way becomes both clear and possible, plain and imperative. We see in Jesus the mind of God." (Joan Chittister, In Search of Belief, 67). I appreciate the phrase Marcus Borg uses when he describes Jesus as "the side of God turned toward us" (Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time, 137). In Jesus the light of God shines through to me so I can see

it. The love of God reaches out to me so I am moved by it. The grace of God envelopes me through him. One need not argue that it is only in Jesus that God's love and grace may be known, but for Christians we say that it is one place where we definitely know it – in Jesus. Why Jesus? That's why Jesus.

(2) But this Jesus in whom I experience and know God is not just a figure from the past, a great teacher who lived once and whose teachings live on. We know God through Jesus because we experience Jesus, a person from history, as also the living Christ. Again, let me quote Marcus Borg, a scholar who takes a back seat to no one when it comes to discussing the historical Jesus. Borg is not content, however, to leave Jesus in the dustbin of history. "Believing in Jesus in the sense of giving one's heart to Jesus is the movement from secondhand religion to firsthand religion, from having heard about Jesus with the hearing of the ear to being in relationship with the Spirit of Christ. For ultimately Jesus is not simply a figure from the past, but a figure of the present. Meeting that Jesus – the living Jesus who comes to us even now – will be like meeting Jesus again for the first time." (Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time, 137). Jesus did not simply hand down a lot of wonderful teachings, nor did he simply give us a powerful example of how to live. He did both those, but he also, in a very real sense, can be known and experienced even now – a living Jesus, a living Christ. Why Jesus? That's why Jesus.

(3) In Jesus, I learn the importance of and meaning of love. Douglas John Hall writes about Jesus, "Discipleship is the discipline to which Jesus introduces those whom his love beckons. Following him... is... rigorous, because its essence is loving as one has been loved." (Why Christian, 30). It is in Jesus that I see and know that the heart of God is love. It is in Jesus that I know God loves even me with a persistent and patient love. I watch Jesus forgive, and I know God's love is a forgiving love. I watch Jesus reach out to those who the society of his day thought unworthy, and I know God's love is a gracious love that operates beyond the calculus of worth and deserving. I see Jesus accepting as followers those who found little acceptance elsewhere, and I come to know that God's love is an accepting love, a love that meets us where we are. Why Jesus? That's why Jesus.

(4) But Jesus is not just a teddy bear, and not simply a comforting presence in human life. Jesus inspires. Jesus challenges. Jesus disturbs. Jesus was sometimes called "rabbi," and it is sometimes through other rabbis that I learn about this Jesus. Rabbi Harold Kushner writes in his book of the 23rd Psalm: "There is a part of us that wants to live in the presence of God, not only for the comfort, but also for the challenge. There is a part of us that wants to be summoned, that welcomes the demands of morality and righteousness. When God summons us to act justly and righteously, it is [God's] way of telling us that He takes us seriously enough to care about how we live." (The Lord is My Shepherd, 172). In Jesus I experience this challenging side of God and God's love, along with the comforting side. Why Jesus? That's why Jesus.

(5) To simply say that I experience the challenging side of God's love in Jesus is not enough. I need to be more specific. One of the challenges I experience in Jesus is the challenge to be a peacemaker. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9). There are some hard questions here. Does this mean Christians are to be pacifists? Is war ever justified? While we may find it difficult to imagine Jesus condoning war, it is also difficult for me to imagine Jesus telling others to just stand by and watch as innocents are killed or groups of people ethnically cleansed. The call to be peacemakers comes amidst the muck and mess of history. What is crystal clear is that peace is our ultimate goal, and that toward which we always work. I believe the challenge to be peacemakers is not simply a call to make peace between nations and peoples. Peacemaking has an intrapersonal dimension and interpersonal dimensions. Jesus challenges me to make peace in all these areas. Why Jesus? That's why Jesus.

(6) Jesus challenges me to work for justice. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled" (Mt. 5:6). The biblical concept of righteousness has a significant social dimension. It asks that justice flow down like waters (Amos 5). Jesus had a

deep concern for the poor, for the outcast, for the excluded. The self-righteous of his day accused him of spending too much time with the rabble of his time, but Jesus was undeterred. Jesus fed the hungry, healed the sick, ate with sinners. He challenges me to ask questions about economic relations in my own day and time. He challenges me to be concerned for economic justice, for people who work hard, but not at a living wage, for those whose jobs don't carry health insurance, for those whose lives are so unstable that steady work is but a dream. In including the often excluded Jesus challenges me to do the same, to look at the world in which I live and reach out across lines that normally divide – lines like race and sexual orientation. Why Jesus? That's why Jesus.

(7) One of the best ways I think to imagine how Jesus challenges me is that he challenges me to enlarge my heart. He tells this powerful story in Matthew 25, where the tag line is “for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to 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.” When I hear that story I am challenged to open my eyes, my ears, my heart to the whole wide world, to feel its pain and hurt and suffering. The other day someone gave me an article about Wal-Mart raising concerns about their business practices. I cannot simply turn away from what I read there. This past week has been awful in Iraq. I cannot turn a deaf ear to the bombings and destruction there. I cannot feed every hungry child. I cannot provide health care for every person who needs it. I cannot wave my hands and create an economy that provides living wages to every worker and is less destructive of our natural world. Jesus does not challenge me to do more than I can, but Jesus challenges me to hear, to listen, to feel, to think, and then to act as I can. Why Jesus? That's why Jesus.

(8) In the midst of all these challenges, there is joy to be known in Jesus. We are not to be despairing people, but those filled with joy and hope. Jesus took notice of the lilies of the field and saw beauty in the eyes of children. Marcus Borg quotes another scholar who wrote, “Being sad in Jesus' presence [was] an existential impossibility.” And then he goes on to write himself, “There is joy in [Jesus'] presence.... Perhaps one might feel sadness, but not sadness about existence itself.” The German theologian and World War II martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, “discipleship means joy.” Jesus paid attention to the lilies of the field. He saw beauty in the eyes of children. Through the eyes of Jesus I see beauty. Through the ears of Jesus I hear music. In him there is joy and dancing. Why Jesus? That's why Jesus.

(9) As I look at Jesus life, I see there a wonderful balance of prayer and activity. His life is infused with trust in God and with hope in God. His presence in my life invites me to better balance. It invites me to seek God more deeply. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (Mt. 5:8). It invites me to prayer as well as activity. It invites me to trust more deeply and it invites me to hope more profoundly. Why Jesus? That's why Jesus.

(10) In Jesus as the living Christ, the light of God's love burns within me and shines out. God's very self shines in us and through us in Jesus as the Christ, as Paul notes in II Corinthians. In his book, The Faces of Jesus, Frederick Buechner writes, “the ultimate purpose of God in his creation is to make Christs of us” (xi). Why Jesus? That's why Jesus.

So why Jesus? Because in him we know God, we know God's love as a forgiving, gracious, accepting and empowering love. Why Jesus? That's why Jesus.

Why Jesus? Because in him that love of God which accepts us graciously, which embraces us fully, also challenges us to live more deeply and profoundly. It challenges us to do make peace, to do justice, to include the excluded, to open our hearts even if it hurts to the painful realities of the world so we can make the world a little more caring. Why Jesus? That's why Jesus.

Why Jesus? Because with Jesus there is always hope and joy, beauty and balance. There is always a new day and another chance. Why Jesus? That's why Jesus.

Why Jesus? Because as we draw close to him as a living presence in our lives, we feel within the burning of the very light of God, and that light shines through us to others. Why Jesus? That's why Jesus.

Why Jesus? Because the ultimate purpose of God in creation is to make Christs of us. Why Jesus? That's why Jesus.

GREETING – *The Christ in me greets the Christ in you!*

Amen.