

Frank Beall
 Trinity Presbyterian Church
 Pensacola, Florida
 August 18, 2019

It's All About Jesus
 Hebrews 13:7-8
 John 14: 1-6

When I was ordained on August 19, 1959 Eisenhower was president and the world was at peace. Attending church was the “in” thing to do and churches were filled and growing. Racial segregation was still the way of life in the south, though the Supreme Court decision ending segregated schools had been passed 5 years before and the race problem and civil rights issues were steadily heating up and would get hot in the next decade. The space program was just getting off the ground. The hippie and Woodstock free love and drug culture of the 60's had not yet happened. There was no internet and, therefore, no personal computers or smart cell phones.

From that rather placid society sweeping changes began to occur and I and the churches I served had to deal with some of them. We grappled with the Vietnam war, the civil rights movement, prayer in the public schools and numerous other church-state issues, abortion, physician assisted suicide and when or whether to end a life in a hopeless situation, the ordination of women to serve as elders and ministers, the ordination of gays and lesbians for the same positions along with the right to marry, the steady expansion of secularism, and others.

Looking back over those six decades the one constant through all the sweeping changes is Jesus, his love and grace and what he expects of his followers in all situations. From birth I have known that Jesus loves me and I have loved him and in my teens I felt his call to preaching and pastoral ministry and I have tried to be faithful to that calling across the decades. I am more and more confident that he not only is our savior, but, as our readings claim, Jesus is also the way, the truth and the life and that no matter what we are facing, Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today, and forever.

Let me try to spell this out.

We begin with our belief that Jesus is a part of the eternal Godhead. His birth at Bethlehem does not mark the beginning of his existence. His birth at Bethlehem marks the point at which God became a human being to get close to us, to reveal himself to us and to redeem us. To be sure, Jesus gave up the powers of deity when he became a man but, as Paul wrote to the Colossians, “in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.”

In my judgment two passages in the New Testament assert what this means for us. One is the opening paragraph of the Gospel of John:

“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life and the life was the light for all people.”

The other passage is a section of the letter to the Colossians that we have already cited:

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things were created....all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things and in him all things hold together....For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things...by making peace through the blood of his cross.”

In both of these passages, the biblical writers assert that Jesus is the one through whom God created the world and the one toward whom God’s purposes move.

As a young man I was taken by the works of the great missionary to India, E. Stanley Jones. Though he was a Methodist, he was embraced by Christendom as a whole and was a confidant to FDR and a friend of Mahatma Gandhi’s. I heard him preach when I was a teenager and again as a young seminarian and I read a number of his many books and was profoundly moved by his assertion that since Jesus is the agent of creation, that means that his way is built into the very structure of the universe and that, therefore, things were made to work his way. Jones contended that Jesus was not a moralist in that he did not impose a moral code upon humanity. Instead, Jones said Jesus “revealed first the nature of God, and the nature of God became the ground of God’s conduct and ours.” Jones would say further that we cannot break the laws of God. When we try to, we break ourselves. Across the years I have become more and more convinced of the truth of his thesis.

All of this gives weight to Jesus’ claim about himself in the passage from John that was our Gospel lesson for today, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”_Notice that Jesus did not say that he is the way to the truth or the way to life. Though that is true, I hear him asserting here that he is the way that God has established for the world and human life to work. I hear him asserting here that Jesus is the final truth about God and the universe and that he is the source of life that is full and abundant and free and eternal.

Our calling and task then is to look at Jesus to learn how God designed the world and life to work and when I do that I see that God is love and grace and offers forgiveness and builds community. In Jesus I see one who reaches out to others in small acts of kindness but also in acts of healing and transformation of life. In Jesus I see one who is always honest and one who can, therefore, be absolutely trusted. In Jesus I see a reverence for the creation that compels us to treat it with reverence and care. In Jesus I see that God loves all people of every nation, race, and sexual orientation, especially the poor and downtrodden among them. In Jesus and his Holy Spirit I see that God calls us to join in living in his way and calling others to know him and to see that God’s way that we know in Jesus is the best way to live life.

Some of you might question that the Jesus way is the way that works best. If so, I challenge you to look at your own experience and observations. When are you the happiest and most fulfilled? When you live in hate and resentment or when you live in love and forgiveness? Are you the happiest and most fulfilled when you seek and hoard things for yourself or when you generously give of yourself and your resources to others? When are you the happiest and most fulfilled, when you seek to put other people down or when you try to build other people up? When are you the happiest and most fulfilled, when you are careless with the truth and when you steal what doesn’t belong to you or when you are impeccably honest in all your relationships and dealings? When do you feel the best about yourself, when your vocabulary is vulgar and profane or when you use language that is clean and wholesome?

I dare say that all of you answered that by saying that you are the happiest and fulfilled when you live the way of Jesus.

I know, there are many times when the ones who try to go against God's law and the way of Jesus seem to have it better in this life, but I believe you will agree that they do not usually command the love and respect of others and probably suffer from a lot of guilt and lack of self-respect.

I contend that the way of Jesus works best not only with individuals but also in the larger communities of our society. To be sure, we are living in a world where money and power are paramount but I do not believe we are better off because of it. I contend that we are better served when business and industry and education and government are more committed to serving humanity than making profits or seeking personal advantage. I contend that the self-serving approach lends itself to corruption and suffering and the self-giving approach produces more honest and healthy relationships and dealings.

There is no question about it, we are living in a world in which most of the world's people do not believe in Jesus or the Jesus way. Many of them admire his way but find it unrealistic in today's world. And there are evil people who would like to destroy his followers and his way. We do have to defend our loved ones and our civilization but, I believe that as Christians we should be diligent in bearing witness to that way in our personal and corporate lives and show the world that the Jesus way is the best way.

The Jesus way is the way of good character and we are sadly living in a time when many Christians are willing to overlook good character to pursue personal and political agendas.

At the very least we can work to put people, who might or might not be Christians, but who do seek to live the Jesus way, in the highest levels of government, business, academia, athletics and the professions. At the very least the more people are connected to him and seek to live his way the less we will have to deal with hate and bigotry and tragic acts of violence.

Jesus claimed not only to be the way and the truth but also the life and I have found that to be true. The Jesus life is what he calls abundant and is life that is fulfilling and deep enough to be joyful even in difficult circumstances. It is life that has experienced love and grace and forgiveness from God through Jesus and that responds with more love and grace and forgiveness. It is life that is committed to giving and honesty and integrity in all relationships and dealings. It is a life that is eternal because it is the life of God. Because I find Jesus to be absolutely honest in all matters I believe his promise in our gospel lesson that he has gone to prepare a place for us in God's eternal kingdom and will come to take us to be with him so that where he is we will be also.

Some of you will probably say that I am an impractical visionary, but in my 60 years of ministry I have become convinced that, whatever events or issues we might face, Jesus is the way, the truth and the life and, therefore, he is the same yesterday, today, and forever.