

November 17, 2019

The Good News is Jesus

Colossians 1:15-23

"Who am I and what am I doing here?" No, I am not having a midlife crisis. I am simply reflecting on why a self-confessed skeptic, who had no time for God, has ended up being fascinated by Jesus for the past 40+ years. Why someone who knew nothing about Jesus, has tried, very imperfectly, to follow Jesus for 40+ years. Why someone who had never been to church has ended up volunteering or working in church 40+ years ...

It hasn't been that there haven't been other options. It hasn't been that "church" has always been wonderful. It hasn't been that living with Jesus has been easy. In fact, when I hear of people who have walked away from church, or given up on Jesus, or "de-converted," I ask myself, "What about me? Do I still believe in Jesus? Do I still love Him? Do I still believe in His church? Could I, in good conscience, walk away?"

And the clear, unambiguous, relentless throb of my heart is that God is very real in my life, Jesus *is* at the core of my being, His Spirit *is* inextricably entwined in my soul – nothing and no-one can take that away. And the clear, unambiguous, relentless call on my heart *is* to love and honour Jesus, to love His world, and His people, the church.

An unexpected journey (to faith)

I grew up in the 1970's and '80's. It was the era of the Cold War, when people lived under the threat of Soviet aggression, global thermonuclear war, and the first pandemics. It was an era of economic recession, when you desperately begged for a menial minimum wage job. My Vancouver contemporary, Douglas Coupland, wrote about Generation X – my generation – a generation of losers, struggling with hopelessness, emptiness, relationship breakdowns, lost in the shadow of the Baby Boomers (but really, really good music ☺).

In the midst of that our family went on holiday in the UK. In the grand old cathedrals, I felt a mysterious Presence of God as solid as the stone buttresses. In the war cemeteries, I felt the Presence of God, of peace and profound power, I could not put my finger on. I had no real interest in God, or spirituality – certainly not in church – but I became more and more aware of a Presence that, try as I might, I could not escape.

My grandmother gave me a tiny, family heirloom King James Bible. I began to read the tiny Bible (beginning, as with all books, on page 1). There was a powerful Presence in the words. I sensed God's reality through the words on the pages. My teenage rebellion was going to church. There a kind soul encouraged me to save reading the prophets for later and skip to the gospels. There I met Jesus. Coming to Jesus afresh, with no prior knowledge or preconceived notions, I found Him amazing. Astonishing. Unlike anyone I had encountered before. And a bit at odds with the Jesus I was hearing about in church.

Fascinated by Jesus

I'm not sure what your preconceived notion of Jesus is. I didn't grow up in Sunday School with any notion of who Jesus is. I knew nothing at all about Him. So for me, discovering Him in my mid- to late- teens, it was all new.

I found His life intriguing: it wasn't the "victorious Christian life" I might have expected, but one of humility, compassion, servanthood, sacrificing-to-make-the-world-a better-place, and abuse. I found His death disturbing – a sobering indictment of fake news, greed, selfishness, corruption, and violence. I found His resurrection overwhelmingly hopeful. And I found His real Presence in my life and in the world – the Holy Spirit He breathes into us – profound, comforting, and challenging: *"As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you,"* said Jesus (John 20:21). Would I listen to that call?

A few friends and I set out to study His words seriously. I resonated with writers who commented only Jesus would be crazy enough to suggest that if you want to become the greatest, you should become the least. Only Jesus would declare God's blessing on the poor rather than the rich and would insist it's not enough to just love your friends.

I discovered Jesus, coming, announcing the Kingdom of God. It's a Kingdom that belongs to those who are motivated by peacemaking not war, by generosity not greed, by righteousness not doing-whatever-it-takes, by compassion not self-advancement. The Kingdom of God is not about making the most money, paying the lowest taxes, or gaining the most power. There are no political parties, no geographic boundaries, no single language or culture or ethnicity. People from the margins are lifted up to places of honour. Jesus' Kingdom advances through acts of love and mercy, joy and hope, kindness and gentleness. It arrived then, as now, not with fanfare and the destruction of enemies, but with a baby's cry and forgiveness, not on the back of a warhorse but on a donkey, not with triumph and conquest but with sacrifice and resurrection.

One thing I appreciate about Jesus is He names and addresses sin. He is realistic that there is real evil in the world. There is real evil within us. He tells the truth about the human condition: our world is not OK. I'm not OK. And He has a realistic solution. On the cross, He took upon Himself all the evil, pain, sorrow, and sin of the world. Through His death and resurrection, He destroyed its power once and for all. My challenge is to live His way, at times in stark contrast to the world around me.

But Jesus did mess with my pre-existing plan for my life: to be rich, famous, or both. Making a fortune didn't seem important to Jesus. Having a mansion on SW Marine Drive in Vancouver didn't seem important to Jesus. What did seem important was being part of His mission to make a difference in His broken world, to bless His hurting people (ALL people are His people), to care for His ruined creation (ALL of creation is His creation). And I began to wonder if anybody still believed Jesus meant what he said.

When you take Jesus seriously your friends react in different ways:

Some people think you're a bit mad. There is a smug arrogance among some friends and relatives who "knew" better. Who knew really smart people didn't believe in God. Who "knew" the right political party could fix all our ills. Who knew there is a technical solution to evil. And yet I was getting to know some fantastically intelligent people who loved Jesus, followed Jesus, believed Jesus. They were wise enough to see that no politician, system, or human solution could satisfy the deep longing in their (and my) souls. They could articulate their faith – in combination with their vocation and calling as scientists, educators, doctors, lawyers, social scientists ... and pastors.

Some people think you're a bit soft. Real men don't need God. Real men make it on their own. Real men read *Iron John* and rediscover the hairy wild man within. I discovered in Jesus a really strong person, not in some back-to-primitive-wild-man-lone-ranger sense. More in a person-who-knows-His-strength-in-God, takes-on-the-powers-that-be, and cares-for-others-despite-the-consequences sense. Really being human, I was discovering, was found in relationship, vulnerability, compassion, sacrifice, and concern for justice. Real strong people believe in what is right, true, and good, and take a stand for it. That can actually require more strength than rugged individualism.

Some people think you're an escapist. You're too heavenly minded to be earthly good. But I discovered in Jesus a social revolutionary who touched the untouchable, loved the unlovable, championed the cause of the poor and he outcast, and took on the powers of greed, fear, and hate. He was definitely not an escapist. I discovered people like William Wilberforce who championed the anti-slavery movement, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who lived his faith in Nazi Germany and died a martyr. Or Martin Luther King. I discovered a world of followers of Jesus in society who worked in skid row, with refugees, on environmental issues, with First Nations, and much, much more.

When you follow Jesus seriously, you find yourself asking different questions because the BIG issue is not "What's in it for me?" but "What's right for the Kingdom of God? What does God value for people? For His creation?" You can find yourself in uncomfortable places. You find yourself working with drug addicts in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver. You find yourself working with struggling ex-cons in Edmonton. You find yourself working with people with some "interesting" backgrounds, experiences, and challenges in Lethbridge. You find yourself being concerned about climate change and God's creation – because this IS **God's** creation and the changes that are occurring disproportionately affect the poorest of the poor globally and nationally – even though it challenges your lifestyle. There are safer ways to live than by being a Christian.

Jesus is Great. But what about the Church?

It seems like a bait and switch. Jesus came announcing the Kingdom of God. What we got was the church. And the church is not the Kingdom of God. Not yet anyway.

The church is far from perfect. After all the church is people (*"to refer to the Church as a building is to call people 2 x 4's,"* quips one pundit). And people – even people saved

by Jesus, redeemed by Jesus, infilled with His Spirit – are still messy. People are difficult. And imperfect. And selfish. And petty. And dishonest. And mean. And greedy. And racist. And cruel. We shouldn't be all those things – we are trusting His Spirit to help us NOT to be all those things, but we are not there yet.

The challenge for us, as the people who follow Jesus, is to become less and less difficult, imperfect, selfish, petty, dishonest, mean, greedy, racist, and cruel. Paul writes, *"Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there. The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things! Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives"* (Galatians 5:22-25).

One of the fascinating metaphors the Bible uses for the church is "the body of Christ." On the one hand, this image helps us appreciate the church is like a **body**. Each of us is as unique as the different parts of our bodies: fingers, kidneys, hands, ears, feet, spleens, and sciatic nerves. On the other hand, the image helps us appreciate that all have a role and a purpose. A body needs hands, feet, ears, lungs, pituitary glands, and all those "less honorable" bits (Paul's words, not mine 😊).

This image also helps us appreciate we are the body **of Christ**. We are **His** hands, **His** feet, **His** ears, **His** eyes – **His** Presence in the world. Teresa of Avila once said, *"Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours."*

When we ask God why He still allows evil and injustice to exist in the world, we may hear the Spirit whisper to us, *"You tell me why you allow this to happen. You are my body, my hands, my feet."*

The Good News is Jesus. The Good News is also the body of Jesus, the body of Christ – the church. We are His hands. We are His feet. We are His Spirit-filled people. *"Who am I and what am I doing here?"* I AM part of this amazing "Body of Christ."

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by Jesus, redeemed by Jesus, infilled with His Spirit – are still messy. People are difficult. And imperfect. And selfish. And petty. And dishonest. And mean. And greedy. And racist. And cruel. We shouldn't be all those things – we are trusting His Spirit to help us NOT to be all those things, but we are not there yet.

The challenge for us, as the people who follow Jesus, is to become less and less difficult, imperfect, selfish, petty, dishonest, mean, greedy, racist, and cruel. Paul writes, *"Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there. The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things! Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives"* (Galatians 5:22-25).

One of the fascinating metaphors the Bible uses for the church is "the body of Christ." On the one hand, this image helps us appreciate the church is like a **body**. Each of us is as unique as the different parts of our bodies: fingers, kidneys, hands, ears, feet, spleens, and sciatic nerves. On the other hand, the image helps us appreciate that all have a role and a purpose. A body needs hands, feet, ears, lungs, pituitary glands, and all those "less honorable" bits (Paul's words, not mine 😊).

This image also helps us appreciate we are the body **of Christ**. We are **His** hands, **His** feet, **His** ears, **His** eyes – **His** Presence in the world. Teresa of Avila once said, *"Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours."*

When we ask God why He still allows evil and injustice to exist in the world, we may hear the Spirit whisper to us, *"You tell me why you allow this to happen. You are my body, my hands, my feet."*

The Good News is Jesus. The Good News is also the body of Jesus, the body of Christ – the church. We are His hands. We are His feet. We are His Spirit-filled people. *"Who am I and what am I doing here?"* I AM part of this amazing "Body of Christ."

How can you bless one person today? How can you encourage one person today? How can you practically help one person today? How can you work to make this world, God's world, a better place today? How can you be Good News/Jesus today?

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