

## February 5, 2023

# Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places

### Luke 4:14-22

On whim, Calum went to a church. He picked up a pamphlet and began looking up the Bible verses in it. But there was a problem. Being unfamiliar with the Bible, he didn't really understand the "verse system." When it said to read "2 Corinthians 5:17," Calum didn't realize you were supposed to stop reading when you came to verse 18. The pamphlet intended for him only to read this: *"Anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new creation. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!"*

Calum naïvely, but wisely, read all this: *"Anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new creation. The old life is gone; a new life has begun. And all of this is a gift from God, who brought us back to himself through Christ. And God has given us this task of reconciling people to him. For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people's sins against them. And he gave us this wonderful message of reconciliation. So we are Christ's ambassadors; God is making his appeal through us. We speak for Christ when we plead, 'Come back to God!' For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ"* (2 Corinthians 5:17-20).

Something profound struck Calum that many of us don't consider. As he read the phrase, "new creation," he naturally wondered, "What does that mean?" And because he was too naïve to stop at the end of verse 17, he kept reading and found the answer in verse 20: We are **Christ's ambassadors**. In other words, Paul says, *"If anyone belongs to Jesus, he is something completely new – a new kind of person with a new purpose – namely, an ambassador of Christ, inviting people to be reconciled to God."*

Something similar happened to me. I went through a time of intense spiritual searching when I was a teenager. I read the Bible, virtually from cover to cover. I came to believe in God, and then in Jesus. One of the things I did was share with my friends at school what I'd discovered ... God isn't dead! He's alive! And I saw Him everywhere ... in the woods on Keats Island, in the faces of people, in things that just happened. I couldn't keep it to myself. I didn't "Bible thump" anyone. I just talked about what I was discovering. So Doug, Winnie, Anita, Shirley, Zoltan, and I started talking about God. None of us went to church or had much, if any, Christian background, but we would talk and talk and talk.

Without realizing it I was *an ambassador of Christ, inviting people to be reconciled to God*. With some people that was easy. With others, it was a LOT more difficult. Let's be honest, talking about our faith can be hard. That made me think. What did Jesus talk about? What did Jesus do? How could I talk about God? How could I live like Jesus? What about us?

### ***What does Jesus talk about? What did He do?***

Jesus talks about life. "Life" frames John's Gospel: *"In Jesus was life, and that life was the light of all people (John 1:4) ... These things are written that, by believing, you may have life*

*in his name"*(John 20:31). It runs through everything: *"This is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life"*(John 3:16). *"I have come,"* says Jesus, *"that you may have life, and have it to the full"*(John 10:10). What is this life? *"This is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent"*(John 17:3).

Life means knowing God and knowing Jesus. That's the good news I discovered.

How does Jesus bring life? He does so by talking about and modelling God's love. Everyone, everywhere, with all their issues, is invited by God's grace to be loved by our amazing God. No provisos. No quid pro quos. It is radically different from any notion of God in any other faith, including the Judaism of Jesus' day. FYI "radical" comes from the same root word as "radish," meaning "rooted" Jesus was rooted, deeply rooted, inseparably rooted in the character and being of God. God loves us. Unconditionally. Jesus loves us. Unconditionally.

**Jesus speaks** as God. He teaches people about God and His love. He challenges the religious people of his day, moving them out of their comfort zone and challenging their understanding of who God is. People expected words like *"I have come to preach good news to the rich, punishment for the prisoners, 'serves-you-right' to the blind, 'grin-and-bear-it' to the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's judgment on the sinners!"*

Jesus speaks words of "good news" in Luke 4:16-22. *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the Lord's favor has come."*

God brings love and life. No judgment. No condemnation. He speaks of good news of great joy – new life – for all people.

**Jesus acts** as God. He spends time with people the religious folks of his day despised – the "tax-collectors and sinners," the physically and mentally ill, the outcasts, even women and children. He does things for them and with them – loving things like bringing healing and caring, forgiveness and compassion, a loving touch, and a blessing (e.g. Luke 4:31-41). When Jesus' actions are questioned, He responds, *"The Son does only what he sees the Father doing. Whatever the Father does, the Son also does ... We must carry out the tasks assigned us by the one who sent us"*(John 5:19, 9:4).

Jesus' words and works are intimately connected. He says, *"God loves His world."* **Then** He models God's radical, unconditional love. He cares for people in practical ways, **then** He says why He does it: because God loves them. His words/works are two sides of the same coin.

People who hear Jesus' words and experience Jesus' love in action see the character, the nature, the reality of God. When you see Jesus, you see God. When you hear Jesus, you hear God. If you believe in God, you believe in Jesus. If you believe in Jesus, you believe in God. *"If you believe in me, you are believing not only me, but also in God who sent me. For when you see me, you are seeing the one who sent me"*(John 12:44-45).

Believing in Jesus, we are loved, forgiven, and given new life by God. We are new creations.

Believing in Jesus means more than this. After his resurrection, Jesus says, *"As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you"* (John 20:21). That's what His people did. As the first Christians went about their lives, they talked about God's love. And they lived lives of love. They were *ambassadors of Christ, inviting people to be reconciled to God*.

As Jesus' followers, we **spea**k of the good news of God's unconditional love, and who **live out** the good news of God's unconditional love, as well. We are people who, like Jesus, say, *"God so loved the world,"* then live a life of love, the same kind of unconditional love God shows us. We care for others in practical ways, then tells them in words why we do it – because God loves them. The words/works are two sides of the same coin.

### ***Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places***

A few years ago, I mentioned a dream/a vision I had. I was looking over the City of Lethbridge at night, seeing dozens – hundreds – thousands – of stars shining in the darkness, all over the city. I sensed Jesus saying to me, *"This is a picture of the church. Every day and every night, my people go out into the city, where they shine my light. My people are everywhere, all the time, shining as lights in the darkness."*

I don't get these kinds of visions often. When I do, following the biblical model, I run them by some trusted Christian friends to see if I'm way off base, or if this could be legitimately from God. With this one, everyone I talked to sensed this was God speaking to us, giving us a picture of His church.

It echoes Jesus' image Matthew 5:14-16: *"You are the light of the world – like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so everyone will praise your heavenly Father."*

We are the good news of Jesus, shining the light of Jesus, all over the city. I'm thankful for that. I'm excited about that.

This past Fall, as I was praying about our church's mission, vision, and purpose, the phrase that came to me was from Luke 2: *"I bring you good news of great joy for all people."* As we are those lights of Jesus, we bring the good news of His love, to all people. I'm thankful for that. I'm excited about that.

Yes, can may share **words**, talking about the life – the new life, the love – we have found in Jesus. But we also simply share the love of God in our **actions**, as we care for the poor, encourage the lonely, help out those in need, read to a child, make a toque for someone in need, volunteer at the soup kitchen, smile at the checkout clerk, shovel a neighbour's walk, and so much more.

Poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, wrote a poem in which he says, "*Christ plays in ten thousand places / Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his.*" In other words, wherever we are, whatever we are doing, as people who love Jesus, Jesus is there, with us and in us. He is not physically present, but we are. We are His ambassadors, inviting people to meet God.

All those ways we make a difference as we just naturally live out our faith in Jesus – calling, caring, encouraging, helping, loving, praying, knitting, teaching, blessing, shoveling – we are the hands, feet, arms, eyes, and ears of Jesus. *Lovely in limbs and lovely in eyes not his.* All those little stars I saw all over Lethbridge? That is Christ, playing in ten thousand places through you, I, and everyone else.

Eugene Peterson borrows Hopkins' phrase, "*Christ plays in ten thousand places,*" as the title of a book on the theology of the church. He writes, "*A primary task of the community of Jesus is to maintain a lifelong cultivation of love in all the messiness of its families, neighborhoods, congregations, and missions. Love is intricate, demanding, glorious, deeply human, and God-honoring, but — and here's the thing — never a finished product, never an accomplishment, always flawed in some degree or other.*"

We are those lights shining all over Lethbridge. Yes, we are imperfect. We are always flawed, to one degree or another. But that's OK. We simply do our best. What we do and say, even imperfectly, is the natural extension of who we are as people who know Jesus. God loves us. Unconditionally. As we are. Flawed in some degree or other.

As people loved by God, we do our best love others. Unconditionally. Even those other people are also all flawed in some degree or other. As people blessed by God, we do our best to bless others. As people forgiven by God, we do our best to forgive others. As people cared for by God, we do our best to care for others.

We are good news of great joy for all people. How can I be an "*ambassador of Christ, inviting people to be reconciled to God*"?

- Maybe I can share something of my story of knowing God's love?
- Or maybe I can just be a little bit nicer to someone this week?

Copyright ©2023 by Bruce Martin  
First Baptist Church  
1614 – 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue South, Lethbridge, AB T1J 0W3  
(403) 327-2082  
[bruce@firstb.net](mailto:bruce@firstb.net)