

The Word In Edgewise

“I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.”

John 1:1-5

I Believe: Timeless Faith worth keeping #2

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The Question that Won't Let You Go

What is it about Jesus that captures your heart and makes you want to belong to God?

One of my friends who were not at all pleased with my decision to become a pastor really struggled with this. He couldn't understand the changes he saw in me after I started to take my faith seriously. Both of us had spent a lot of time in church when we were kids: he in his Presbyterian and me in my Methodist. Both of us had gone through a time of questioning the notions of faith we had been taught; and both of us had tested other alternatives in life. But while I had decided to come back home with God he had gone the other direction and said he didn't even believe there was a God. And he got pretty angry with me over the decisions I had made. He said, "I think it's Laura's fault. She's the one responsible for this." Well, in a way he was right; she was the one who paid attention to my spirit and challenged my faith.

Then one Christmas break I came home from my school and he came home from his we got together and started talking. He said that he'd thought more and had come to decide that there was, too, a God. How else could there be the existence of the universe and the earth and all the life that is in it? And how else could there be any sense of justice and morality that's more-or-less shared the world over? These were reasons enough, he supposed, to believe in God.

I was glad for him. I was also glad for the fact that he wasn't so hostile. And then I guess I assumed too much for the moment; and presumed that he had bought into the whole Christian program.

That's when he corrected me. He said, "Wait a minute. I said that I believe in God; but right now I don't really know what to do with Jesus. But all I can say about him is that this one person influenced so many millions of people over two thousand years. I just have to wonder, 'why?'" This was the question that wouldn't let him go.

Believing in Jesus

Maybe it won't let go of any of us. Why Jesus? It's a question that wants to take you by the arm while you're busy with other things and not let you go until you pay attention. It's a tune you can't get out of your head. What about Jesus? What are you going to do...with Jesus?

Bishop Edsel Ammons was our United Methodist leader here in Michigan during the '80's; and before that he was one of my favorite professors in seminary: Professor of Church Ethics. He was a tough teacher. During the first five weeks of one of his classes, he assigned five substantial books for us to read: all about people and cities and the church's role in society. It was serious theology and serious sociology and serious ethics; and he expected us to learn our subject because he believed it all made a difference. He was so intelligent, had such command of knowledge.

Several years ago he returned to Michigan to preach, now in the later years of his life. Still so sophisticated and well-spoken; yet he came with evidence of even more wisdom and spiritual depth than before. He rose before us, he confessed that the more he experienced life and the more he came to face the end of his days, the more his attention was drawn to Jesus. For all the sophistication and all the knowledge to be gained, it all boiled down to this one person who embodied the presence of God. Jesus: just that simple.

"I believe in Jesus Christ, (God's) only Son, our Lord." Without Jesus, it makes little sense to be a Christian. So why, why believe?

Aside from his Bethlehem birth with angels singing and shepherds adoring and a missing person incident when he was still a boy, Jesus appears before us full-grown, making decisions about how he is going to spend his life. He leaves a home and a decent trade that could have kept him comfortable throughout his life while others

struggle to put food on the table. Yet he rises from his Baptism to pour out his life for God and for others – entirely pour himself out.¹

He is intent on embodying the compassion of God. When others are concerned their own wealth and privileged status, Jesus is concerned with others. He wants them to know that God already loves them no matter what, and his actions are always consistent with his words. Jesus wasn't born poor; he chose his poverty for us. He says the Kingdom of God is at hand: in other words, it's now and it's for you.

So he goes to the poor who have been told and told again that God would have nothing to do with them and he tells them, they are the first to enter the fold of God's arms. He goes to the injured and the blind, lame, and deaf; he goes to the sick and he lays his hands on them in prayer, exposing himself to their diseases. He goes into the homes of those who have been declared off-limits and he breaks bread with them; they are friends. At every turn he pours on the power of God's love as he pours his life out. "Foxes have their holes and birds of the air have their nests," he says, "but the Son of Man has no where to lay his head."²

It's inevitable that people in power will not tolerate that kind of message for long. He wins over people and challenges their authority: he's subversive in the eyes of the Romans who don't take kindly to people who say there's another kingdom; and in the estimation of religious and civil leaders who profit from the way things are with the rich staying privileged and the poor staying poor. So, they tell Jesus to stop it: take it all back, or else.

And Jesus won't take it back. He won't take back what he said about letting the children come or that God runs to us like a father who forgets himself and runs to a wayward son who's made his way home. He won't take back what he said about sin and debt being forgiven and he won't take back the hope and new chances at life and life with God that he's given.

Jesus goes to the Cross because he won't stop pouring out his life, pouring on God's love.

And then, after it's done and they think they've finally stopped him, his life is raised to never again go away. That's the Resurrection. Peter saw him. Paul saw a vision. And billions have claimed: *he lives*.

My friend had said, "I still don't know what to do about Jesus. But all I can say about him is that it's challenging to think that this one person could influence so many millions of people over two thousand years; and I just have to wonder, 'why?'" It's the question that will hound you until you make up your mind...or maybe make up your heart.

Do you think Jesus embodies the very presence of God?

Those of us who say, "Yes," then, are bound to buy into him. We'll say the creed we repeated this morning and mean it. "I believe in Jesus Christ his only son our Lord," because we will hear what he says and believe sins are forgiven, brokenness is healed, evil can be defeated, and we can live in victory even when the stocks are down and the world's a present mess.

Those of us who believe in him are convinced that God believes in us. And we let his life affect our lives to the point that we get formed and reformed by him, shaped in every way. Priorities, attitudes, beliefs: they all get characterized by the character of Jesus. God's love poured out for us...in Jesus...we want to be Jesus' people with the same mind and passion to be convincing to others.

Nowadays I can't even imagine who or what or where I'd be without Jesus. And I'm only part-way where I think he wants me to be.

He's everything. In him...is the fullness of God.

Not Letting Go

A couple years after that conversation I had with my friend we got together again. Lot's had happened to us: Laura and I were married; he'd met someone and they were engaged. In fact, it was when he and his fiancée came to visit Laura and me in our apartment in Kalamazoo that he took me aside with a kind of smile on his face, as if he had something good he had to share with me. As far as faith was concerned, he had shifted even more.

He said that before he had never really known what it was like to be loved without conditions or blame. He said, without understanding love, he could never really understand Jesus and what it was others saw in him. But now he understood love. And he understood Jesus. It turns out, it was a woman messed with him, too! And her tampering helped to change his life.

The question that would not let him go was finally answered. And actually, I had never seen such a smile on my friend's face.

“What are you going to do with Jesus?” Perhaps it's God's question that won't let us go. Maybe it's the question that's been God's Word from the very beginning.

¹ Philippians 2:5f.

² Matthew 8:20