

Sermon April 21, 2024
[Acts 4:5-12; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18]

Knowing Christ
Pastor Dan Peterson

Grace to you, and peace, from God the Creator, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

[*A very sunny morning sent a shaft of light onto the pulpit.*]

Do you remember the movie “Indiana Jones and Raiders of the Lost Ark”? There’s a scene where Indie holds up the Staff of Ra, through which the sunlight points to the location of the Ark. That is exactly how I feel. The folks who designed this building made this happen. So it’s saying, “Look, this is the Word of God!” And notice how the sunlight is actually on what I’m preaching, not on me. So, it’s really subtle, but, I think, very important.

Our message this morning is on “knowing Christ.” This is language that we find in our Gospel reading for today. Last week, we heard from Pastor Abby D’Ambruso, who is a longtime friend of mine, as well as now the pastor of Holden Village. Pastor Abby called our attention to two words in last week’s readings. Can you remember what they are? Now, it’s not fair – not only do I have the light on this text, but I had Pastor Abby’s sermon to refer to throughout the week, so I can remember them with great ease. It always makes me think about how Alex Trebek or the new host of Jeopardy sort of condescendingly looks down on people who don’t get the right answers. It’s like, “He’s got the answer right in front of him! It’s not fair!” So do I.

The two words are **repentance** and **forgiveness**. Repentance, and forgiveness. Pastor Abby described these as “loaded terms.” Because they are a loaded term, she said – and I say – it is crucial to ask: What do they mean, and how might they apply to our lives? What do they mean, and how might they apply to our lives?

In a moment, I’m going to introduce a few more terms that appear in today’s reading. But first, let’s conduct a brief review.

Our first word is as noted, “repent.” When you hear the word repent, who or what comes to mind? How many of you ever go to Mariners games? When you hear or see the word “repent,” who or what comes to mind? There is always – and this is great PR for the Christian faith – there is always some person holding up a sign that says, “Repent and believe! The Lord is near!” So, typically, I think, we often associate “repent” with the threat of hellfire and brimstone, as evident in the signs we see, for example, at baseball or football games.

The question then, is, what does it *actually mean* to repent? And Pastor Abby helped us to see the answer. In Latin, she pointed out, the word repent is translated “redo.” That is, to do something over again. And this makes sense. If at first you don’t succeed, try, try,

and try again. Right. But the challenge is, what if you’re stuck? What if for example, you have an addiction, like somebody-I-know, to screens? What if, for example, you notice that this addiction somebody-I-know has to screens ends up undermining his

attention span? What happens, in short, when you're *stuck*, when you haven't been *able* to change, when you fall into the trap of "doing what you do not want to do," as Paul says in Romans 7, and doing the very thing you hate?

The Greek word thankfully offers us a better understanding of repentance. The word it uses is *metanoia* which literally means "change of mind." The implication being, "take a new direction." Pastor Abby pointed out that it's as if Jesus is accompanying you on your journey and tapping you here on the shoulder by saying, "Okay, now it's time to turn. Now it's time to take a new direction."

I love to see examples of this in the Old Testament, not simply with respect to other people, but to God as such. You may recall the third chapter of Jonah, where God sends Jonah the prophet to preach to the Ninevites. The Prophet here becomes the best missionary of all time, because the Ninevites repent. And so, "God" it says, "changes God's mind" – or in the Hebrew "changes God's heart," or in the Greek, the way we're talking about it here, "changes direction." Instead of bringing God's wrath upon the Ninevites, God treats them compassionately and forgives them their sin.

So, our first word, "repentance," which means, not simply to redo, as in the Latin, but to take a change of direction, to try something new, when old habits otherwise persist.

Our second word last week, as you recall now, was "forgiveness." Now when it comes to forgiveness, what comes to mind? Certain phrases we all love, for example, "forgive and forget." I don't think forgiveness need imply forgetting. A lot of horrible things that happened to us or that we do to other people that can't be forgotten. So, forgiveness is something deeper than that. It's the same thing with the phrase "let bygones be bygones" or if you turn to the Gospels, when Jesus says, "Forgive not seven, but 77 times." Pastor Abby points out that the Greek word here is *aphiemi* which is best translated, not to forgive and forget, not to let bygones be bygones, but to *let go* of something, and she used the example of holding your fist tight, something that you're hanging on to, you that you can't let go of, a grudge, for example, and then letting go to be the release of that, howing how forgiveness is *freedom*. It's freedom from being focused on what somebody else has done to you or on something that you've done to somebody else. It's letting go.

So when Jesus says, "Come to me, all of you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" in Matthew 11, he's implicitly inviting us to let it go, to forgive. What's one thing you need to let go? I invite you to contemplate that question this morning. What's one thing in your life that you need to let go?

Now today, I'm going to stick with the theme and invite you to consider two more loaded terms in our readings. After each I'll ask the same question. What does it actually mean? And how does it apply to our lives?

Our first term is from the first reading in the Book of Acts chapter 4: "**salvation.**" In 4:12, Peter famously says, "There is salvation in Jesus and no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."

Now, this is a stumbling block for a lot of people, including some of us. Can you imagine why? It seems to suggest that God exclusively deals with humankind through Jesus of Nazareth. But what about, as the Catholic Church refers to them, “the spiritual and moral rays of truth” that exist in other religions? How do we make sense of God’s activity there?

You may recall the other famous verse from the Gospel of John where Jesus says, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father but by me.” And of course, we say every week in the Apostles Creed that “Jesus Christ is God’s only Son, our Lord. “

So how do we address this, this stumbling block of particularity or exclusivity? Isn’t God the God of the whole world, indeed, the whole cosmos, and not just the God of Christians? So, what does “salvation” here actually mean? That has to be our first question. According to Acts 4:9, we hear a story, just several verses prior, of a man who has been healed or made whole or made well.

This term “healed” shares the same root with the word “saved” in Acts 4:12. One commentator captures it perfectly:

“Relevant,” he writes, “to Paul’s claim of salvation is the specific event of healing in chapter four verse nine, the wholeness that is fundamental to the proclamation. The Gospel affects the physical, as well as the mental, emotional and spiritual.”

It may be, accordingly, preferable to translate *salvation* in verse 12, as “healing” rather than as “salvation,” considering the immediate context.

“There is healing in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be made whole.”

Well, that has a very different sound to it, doesn’t it? The church, in turn, becomes what St. Augustine called “a hospital for sinners,” (excluding its pastor, of course), a hospital for sinners.

So what do we need to be healed from? Is it from a digital addiction? Is it from a more conventional addiction? Is it from idols like perfectionism, or achieving status? What do we need to be healed from?

The same commentator answers this also perfectly. He says, “Here the pregnant force of “hath been made whole” in Acts 4:9 comes out, and St. Peter rises to its highest meeting and proclaims salvation, not only from the disease and infirmity of the body, but from the great disease of sin.”

And sin, as you know, is separation. And separation is threefold. We’re separated from our deepest self. We’re separated from each other. We’re separated from God. And now I would actually add, we’re separated from the Creation we are destroying.

So when it comes to healing, Jesus is reuniting us with each of those things, calling us back to Creation, reconciling us with God, reconciling us with one another as the body

of Christ “that does good to all people,” as Paul says in Galatians, and reconciling us to our deepest selves.

The question then is this, how do we find such healing? The kind of healing that addresses the whole person, rather, for example, than just the soul? Well, our Gospel reading for today has an answer. We must come to know Jesus Christ.

We must come to know Jesus Christ.

“**Knowing Christ**,” I submit, is the last of our four “loaded terms.” It’s loaded because it’s a phrase some Christians lord over others. Let me give you an example. Years ago, I went to a coffee shop that was owned by a large nondenominational church in the area. I’m not going to tell you where it was (Tacoma). I’m not going to tell you the university by which it was near (Pacific Lutheran University). What I *am* going to tell you is about the conversation I had with the barista. I noticed above the sign it said, “Accept Jesus and you will be saved.” And so, me being me, of course, I had to start to argue with this person.

So I said, “That’s interesting. That sign,” I said, “it assumes we have the capacity to accept Jesus. Isn’t it Paul, though, who says that ‘no one comes to Jesus or no one calls Jesus Lord, but by the Holy Spirit?’”

Well, as you can imagine, that did not go well. The first thing the barista said to me was, “You’re denying freewill.”

And the next thing I said to him was, “Your argument is not with me, it’s with the Bible,” which is also not a good move. So, knowing that I had now claimed the Bible’s interpretation as my own, and knowing that this person felt he was backed into a corner, he said to me, “Okay, but do you know Christ?”

Ha. The Evangelical trump card: Do I know Christ? Now at the time, if I had a little more self-possession, I would have said, “Does having lunch with him last Tuesday count?” But instead, I ended the conversation there. Looking now in retrospect, I can see that a much better question I could have raised in conversation was, “What does knowing Christ mean to you?”

How does one know Christ? How does one learn to know Christ? Well, in our reading for today, the Gospel reading, chapter 10 from the Gospel of John, we hear, “I know my own and my own know me,” from Jesus, “just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.” So again, what does it actually mean, as the barista said, to know Christ? More importantly, how do we learn to know Christ?

Well, for a definition, I find the explanation of Sinclair Ferguson of Ligonier Ministries to be especially helpful. “Knowing Jesus Christ,” he writes, “is certainly at the heart of the Gospel, the heart of the good news, because it’s in and through Jesus Christ that we have access to and come to know God.”

In other words, if we’re simply reflecting on Creation, we will not necessarily come to the conclusion that God is Love. It’s *Jesus* who puts us in touch with God that way. He

is the embodiment of what God is. The only direct statement concerning what God is occurs in 1 John in the New Testament: God is love. So, Jesus gives us access to God. He even says in John 14, "He who has seen me has seen the Father." Knowing Christ therefore means accessing God through Him. Simultaneously, knowing Christ means resting in Jesus Christ.

You recall here the passage I read a moment ago from the Gospel of Matthew, where Jesus invites us to come, all of us who have heavy burdens, and rest in Him.

So my next question is this. Okay, if to know Christ is to rest in Christ and, through Christ, to have access to God, who is Love...

how do you and I get to know Jesus better?

Three suggestions. Are you ready? You should write this down.

Number one, read and read and reread and reread your New Testament.

Let me share with you an interpretation of Mark 16. So Mark, as you know, is the earliest gospel to have been written, and it ends abruptly at chapter 16 verse eight. The ending was so abrupt that you'll find two additional endings that were appended to the document in the second century. So what does Mark end on and why? Here we have the story of how three women encounter the empty tomb, and the young man standing next to it dressed in white, (probably a Lutheran pastor). And what does this Lutheran pastor tell the women when they ask where they can find Jesus? (Probably a middle-aged Lutheran pastor, actually.) He says, "Go to Galilee and there you will find him." Oh, that's interesting. After that, the story ends. And why does the story end so abruptly? Some scholars say the author, who is writing during the time of Nero, famous for persecuting Christians, may have been martyred and was unable to finish the document. Others argue that the abrupt ending was *deliberate* on the part of the author, which is to say, now it's our turn to continue the story of Jesus Christ. My preference, however, is a third option and that is: by going back to Galilee, we go to where it all started from. That is, the first chapter of Mark's Gospel. This is a literary technique. The author is inviting us to read and read and reread and reread his gospel such that we can come to know Christ better.

There's a second way that we can learn to know Jesus better, and that is when we break bread together in his name.

And here I'd like to cite Joel Matter's favorite verse or chapter from the Gospel of Luke, and that is Luke 24. The story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, who encounter a stranger and discover this stranger is the risen Christ in what specific act. What do they do together? They break bread together.

Every single Sunday when you and I do this, we find ourselves in the midst of Christ. In fact, as I've pointed out before, communion is a rehearsal for finding Christ in the act of sharing. Whenever we break bread together in His name, we are participating in His spirit. Luke writes, "When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed

and broke it and gave it to them.” Then – and this is a favorite expression for Luke – “Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him and he vanished from their sight.” So, when we break bread together in his name, we are coming to know Jesus.

The third way we can get to know Jesus better is to stop looking *up* when it comes to finding God. Stop looking up beyond the clouds to some faraway heaven, and instead, turn your gaze back to your neighbor. It is in your neighbor that you will find Christ, especially your neighbor in need. In other words, as Martin Luther points out, we should become Christ and find Christ in our neighbor. And this references to also Matthew chapter 25, where Jesus famously says, “Whatever you do to least of these, you do to me.”

So by reading and rereading our New Testament; by breaking bread together every Sunday, which is why it’s so good, you’re here; and by seeking Jesus, not above the clouds, but in your neighbor, you can come to know Christ better.

Gosh, if only I had that handy at that conversation in the coffee shop...

This morning, we’ve unpacked four loaded words or phrases central to the Christian faith.

Repentance, which in Latin means to redo but in Greek means to change your direction.

We talked about **forgiveness**, which doesn’t simply mean “Let bygones be bygones,” but to let go of something that’s troubled you, whether it’s something you’ve done to someone else, or something someone else has done to you.

We heard about **salvation** and how in context, it’s better to understand salvation as being healed, or my favorite expression “being made whole,” which is to say salvation concerns the entire person, not simply one dimensions of our personhood.

And finally, we talked about **knowing Jesus**, which is to say, resting in Jesus, and how to do that – three ways: Read your New Testament, break bread together in His name – i.e. come to church – and seek Him in your neighbor.

Here’s my invitation.

I would like you this morning to select one of these as your Word of the Week: repentance, forgiveness, salvation, or knowing Jesus.

Remember it, meditate on it, contemplate it, try it, practice it. That is your assignment. I’ll check in with you next Sunday.

In Jesus’ name.

Amen.