

Encountering Christ in the Community of Christ

Today we are having a Congregational Meeting and this sermon is designed as an opportunity for me to place before you as clearly as I can the choices that I think are before us as we begin this fall. Last week I made mention of the fact that I see us as a church at a tipping point. By 'tipping point' I mean a critical intersection in our life as a church, where if we make the right choice we will find ourselves radically redefined. It's like we're standing at a 'Y' in the road with two choices before us. Or it's like the situation Neo found himself in in the movie *The Matrix*. He was being faced with the fact that all that he had experienced in life was an illusion, an elaborate deception. He thought he was free but he was in fact a slave. And as he stood before Morpheus he was offered a choice. You take the blue pill and things stay as they are or you take the red pill and a whole new world opens up to you, the real world where you see the truth and are set free.

The lie we are being told as believers, the lie that has been told again and again to us in a thousand different ways since Christianity burst onto the scene is that the church is no more than a community of like-minded individuals who believe in Jesus who died and is raised again and now sits at the right hand of the Father. That statement is loaded with truth and yet contains a deception that keeps us enslaved and unproductive in the service of Christ. The truth is that Jesus through the Spirit resides in us as a community; that he is very present among us; that he is at work in and through all of us from the smallest to the greatest to sustain us and transform us into his community – a community of Christ; a community that is the very presence of Jesus Christ in the world. This truth, if embraced, will set us free to be all we are in Christ.

The lie, that we exist as individuals and not as a community is pervasive in our present Christian world. This lie tells us that the path to personal transformation is found in an individual pursuit of Christ. This lie tells us that you in the privacy of your home and on your knees in solitude before Christ, praying your prayers and reading your Scriptures, is **the way** in which Jesus will transform your life to be like him. This is a slippery and deceptive lie for it contains great truths. You **are** called by Jesus to be individually responsible to live your life in devotion to him. And he **does** meet you profoundly there with the power of transformation as you find yourself on your knees before him. But the lie is that this individual route is the only, or the primary way in which Christ will speak to you and transform your life. This is simply not true. When we were baptized into Christ we were baptized into the community of Christ and in and through that community we encounter Jesus Christ in ways that are in no way inferior to the ways Peter, Andrew, James and John encountered him in the first century. In fact Jesus himself insists that our present experience in Him is superior to that which the early disciples experienced when they felt his touch and looked into his eyes. If you don't believe this you need to go and spend some time in the gospel of John, chapters 13-17. In that context Jesus is about to leave his disciples and he is telling them that the absence of his physical presence will in no way mean that he is any less with them.

Listen to these highlights from that conversation:

John 13:31–33 (NIV)

³¹ When he (Judas) was gone, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man is glorified and God is glorified in him.
³² If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once.
³³ “My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come.

This glorification that Jesus will experience is a reference to his being lifting up on the cross. Jesus is going away and the disciples are understandably anxious. Jesus’ whole point in these chapters is to assure his disciples that he will not leave them alone. Far from it; his going away will mean that he will be with them in profoundly new ways, new ways that will equip them and empower them to do great things.

John 14:12 (NIV)

¹² Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.

John 14:16–20 (NIV)

¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—
¹⁷ the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. ¹⁸ I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.
¹⁹ Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live.
²⁰ On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.

This whole section deserves our careful attention. But for today we’ll just notice one more quote from Jesus.

John 16:5–7 (NIV)

⁵ but now I am going to him who sent me. None of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’ ⁶ Rather, you are filled with grief because I have said these things. ⁷ But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.

It is for your good that I go away??? I like the translations that say, “It is to your advantage that I go away.” To our advantage??? How can that be? Jesus insists in these chapters in John that he will be with us in richer and deeper ways after the cross, after his resurrection and ascension than he was before. So where does that leave you and me? Are we at a disadvantage compared to those early disciples who actually ate and drank with him? Not according to Jesus!

John 14:20 (NIV)

²⁰ On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.

Jesus is not in heaven while we are here on earth slugging it out on our own. We are not a collection of individuals who merely believe in Jesus; who, if we work hard at it and get our heads together, might manage to get some good things done. No! Jesus is present within us. And the point is not that he is present in each one of us individually. True though that may be (and I believe it *is* true) the point is not that that he dwells within us individually. No he dwells within us communally. If someone was to ask where Jesus is now, the answer is that he is in that little community of believers over there. And if someone then said, "Well I'd like to go meet this Jesus!" we'd be right to tell them that the place to encounter Christ is in the community of Christ.

Do you mean that Jesus is here? I thought that Jesus was sitting at the right hand of the Father in heaven, far above all rule and authority and dominion and power?

Ephesians 1:20–21 (NIV)

²⁰ ... he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, ²¹ far above all rule and authority, power and dominion...

Indeed this is absolutely true! But the point of this language is not to tell us how far away he is from us. The point of Paul's words here in Ephesians is to insist that because Jesus has been exalted we have been exalted with him.

Ephesians 1:18–23 (NIV)

¹⁸ I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, ¹⁹ and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength ²⁰ he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, ²¹ far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. ²² And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

Jesus is not up in heaven, leaving us here on earth to muddle through things on our own. We are not merely an assembly of individuals who come together professing our common faith in Jesus. We are that, but we are profoundly more than that. We are the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

We are the fullness of him??? Yes! There is no place where Jesus is more present than in us, the church, the community of Christ. He is not up in heaven while we are down here on earth. No... we are in the heavenly realms with him! We are?? Do you believe this??

Ephesians 2:1–7 (NIV)

2 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ² in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. ³ All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. ⁴ But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. ⁶ And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷ in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

Brothers and sisters when you assemble with the church that belongs to Jesus Christ you come into the very presence of Jesus, you enter into the heavenly realms. You don't enter into the community of Christ merely to hear a message about Jesus and to remember him around the table of the Lord. When you enter into the community of Christ you encounter Jesus Christ. The church is the fullness of Jesus Christ! Paul said it but we don't believe it.

Brothers and sisters here is the truth that I believe we must take hold of with both hands; this is where I believe that this truth must hit the ground in our lives.

This is what I believe:

If we want to encounter Jesus Christ, to fully experience all that is on offer for us in him, we must embrace the truth that that encounter with Jesus Christ will be experienced in the community of Christ. The church is the very presence of Jesus Christ. And if we want to fully experience him, we must embrace the truth that it will happen in and through the church, which is his body. If you want him to touch you and transform you; if you want Jesus to heal you and set you free from your burdens; if you want new life then we must embrace these truths and enter into the community of Christ in profoundly deep ways; in ways that we have, up until now, determined with all of our strength not to embrace.

This is the choice that lies before us. The blue pill or the red pill. Slavery or freedom; the truth or the lie.

Have you ever wondered why James puts such a profound weight on the need for us to confess our sins to one another? Is it just good psychological advice? Why don't we do it?? What stops you from confessing your sins to your brothers and sisters? James says that this confession will result in healing.

James 5:16 (NIV)

¹⁶ Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.

Who will do this 'healing'? Well who does **all** the healing? Jesus does! So if Jesus does the healing why doesn't James tell us to confess our sins to Jesus? That's what **we** do isn't it? I'm assuming that's you confess your sins to Jesus because we're not in the habit of confessing our sins to one another! So why do we say, "Confess your sins to Jesus," and yet James says, "Confess your sins to one another." Let me suggest an answer. Because we don't believe what James believed about the church. We don't believe that if we want to confess our sins to Jesus the way to do it is to confess our sins to one another. We think that confessing our sins to one another and confessing them to Jesus are two entirely different things. And so we take James' words here as no more than a bit of friendly advice for those of us who like to do these sorts of things. "This is an option we are free to disregard." That's what we believe. "This is not an imperative; we don't have to do this." We don't believe that we encounter Jesus in some profoundly glorious and authentic way in and through the confessing of our sins to one another. We don't believe that Jesus resides in us as a community. We don't believe that we, as a community are the fullness of Christ. If we did, we'd act differently. If we did we'd rush together to encounter Christ. And we'd line for an opportunity to confess our sins to one another! For in the confessing our sins to one another we are confessing our sins to him!

When we assemble Jesus doesn't show up and sit in the back pew! He's not off in the corner somewhere watching us worship. He's not 'with us' in that sense! No! When we assemble to worship and to pray he is **in** us. And that means that when I encounter you I encounter Jesus himself. That means that when I love on you I love on Jesus. That means that when you love me I receive the very love of Jesus Christ. This means, brothers and sisters, that if I want to draw close to Christ I must draw close to you. This means that if I yearn to be authentic and transparent before Christ; that if I yearn to confess my sins to him and ask for healing that it looks like me being authentic and transparent before you and confessing my sins to you.

Brothers and sisters I'm not making this stuff up. It's all over the place in Scripture. And we have trouble seeing it because the very idea of walking that deeply with one another terrifies us. Let me suggest something rather shocking. What if the measure of how willing we are to give ourselves to Christ is measured in the willingness of our giving of ourselves to one another? What if our reluctance to confess our sins to the church is a picture of our reluctance to confess our sins to Jesus? Is this true? Brothers and sisters I'm convinced it's true.

I believe it's true that central to the confessing our sins to Jesus is in the confessing of our sins to one another. I believe this theologically and I believe this experientially. I understand this to be both what the bible teaches and what I have personally experienced. There is something profoundly powerful that happens when brothers and sisters in Christ enter into deep relationship with one another to the degree that they can be transparent and authentic with each other before Christ. Jesus is encountered in those settings in profoundly deep and rich ways. Let me say it another way: when we enter into deep relationships with those who are Christ's it is not **like** entering into deep relationship with Christ it **is** entering into deep relationship with Christ.

This is my experience, not just some theoretical ideal I hold to. I am a part of a small group of believers right now – myself and a handful of others who meet together on a weekly basis and enter deeply and

unreservedly into each other's deepest struggles. We share our victories and we share our failures. We confess to one another the burdens that we carry on our hearts and deep within our souls – burdens that we long to be free from. We pray for one another. And we find healing there. Jesus heals us there. In our sharing and journeying together we encounter more than ourselves, we encounter Christ. We've grown to expect to encounter Christ there. And he isn't sitting in the corner watching us. No, he's in my brothers and sisters and he's in me. I hear him in my brother's voice. I feel him in my sister's touch. And when I look into their eyes it's His eyes that look back at me. When I confess my sins there, in that very safe place, I get them confessed to Jesus in some way that I cannot get them confessed on my own. And when I experience forgiveness there I experience it in some way that is beyond the experience of forgiveness I have in my private times of devotion.

I don't have a long list of things in my ministry where I can say, "I **know** God orchestrated that!" Perhaps that's because I'm particularly dense. But sometimes God writes it on the wall so large that you've got no choice but to see it. This group I meet with is not something I orchestrated, God orchestrated it. He put these people in my path in only ways that he can do; people that were hurting who recognized their desperate need of healing. I found myself in the midst of a situation where one, then two, then three, then four, then five different and unconnected people approached me with the very same burden; a wound they carried deep in their hearts that they longed to be set free from. And I so it was inevitable that we journey together. And on that journey God has been profoundly at work.

I have come to believe that the encounter with Christ that we repeatedly experience in that setting is what Jesus would have us all experience. He has designed the church to be his body, his hands, his heart, his touch, his eyes and his ears, and he yearns for us to come to him. Jesus longs to set you free as you come to him and confess your sins to him. He longs for you to name your burdens and lay them down before him. And where will we find this Jesus in order that we can bring him our burdens? Of course he will hear you as you go to your knees in the privacy of your prayer room. But if you want the richest and fullest experience of Christ this side of heaven it is found in the church, his body. We, brothers and sisters, are the fullness of Christ.

Is it any wonder that the Satan wants so desperately to convince us that our journey with Christ is a solo venture; that it's OK to get together to sing a song or two and hear the preacher preach but your burdens are not to be shared there – they are yours to carry! Is it any wonder that the evil one is desperate to insist that the church is not a place where you can talk about your pain; it's not a place to confess your sins. He wants us enslaved to our burdens and he knows that if we come together as the community of Christ that he has no power over us. He doesn't want us to believe that the church is nothing less than the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Satan knows this is true and he will do all that is in his power to insist that you don't.

We stand at an intersection church. We have a choice to make. Will we take the blue pill and leave life as it is – more of the same. Or will we take the red pill and embrace the truth of who we really are. One is the path to life; the other is the path to death. Will you help me to make this transformation – this choice. Will you enter into conversation with me as to how we can learn how to authentically encounter Christ in the community of Christ. The truth is, that if we will do this together, it will not be me and you

figuring this out. It will be Jesus Christ who puts this on the ground. For our conversation with one another is none other than a conversation with Jesus Christ.