

Sunday - January 23, 2011  
Pastor - Rev. Walter W. Westbrook  
Sermon - **Jesus Manifesto II**

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Bishop Augustine (354-430) wrote dozens of books, including his *Confessions*, which was the first autobiography. But, one of the most confusing things he ever wrote was this one sentence: “Love God, and do what you will.” It sounds like a license to behave any way we want to, as long as we love God. But, this is not how it works.

If we love God, God’s love will bend our will. Rather than a license for hedonism, this is liberty for sacrificial living based on Christ’s words, “**Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another,**” and, “**Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.**” (John 13:34 and 15:13)

This is part of what the Incarnation means. In Jesus Christ, God became a human being. That’s the Incarnation. But, the Christian life is also an incarnation: Christ living in us. And there is a big difference between Incarnation and Imitation.

Being “Christlike” is too small, too shallow. There are several problems with trying to be Christlike. If we want a relationship with God like Christ, we are looking to develop that relationship on our own terms. But, a loving, living relationship with Christ begins on God’s terms. In other words, it begins with the cross, or “dying with Christ.” Parts of us have to die, the parts that are hampering the Spirit’s work within us, the parts that work towards stopping our liberation from the controlling powers of this world, like addictions, consumerism, selfishness, hedonism and others.

Second, if we thought we could be like Christ, would we need Christ? We know his teachings, shouldn’t that be enough to make

us like Christ? No.

Finally, the fact is we don't have a prayer of becoming like Jesus. Imagine if you were a musician, and you were told that the goal of your life is to be like Mozart. If you were an artist, would you be excited at the idea of having to be like Michelangelo? Most of us could practice piano every waking moment or stand at an easel for 12 hours a day, but we'd never be like Mozart or Michelangelo.

What does it mean to really be like Christ?

Always turn the other cheek.

Always walk the second mile.

Always love your enemies.

Never think an unsanctified thought.

Never have even a hint of a pity party.

None of us could ever do this. So, being like Christ is a lost cause. But, the Good News is that Christ doesn't expect us to be like him. He wants to share his resurrection life with us. He doesn't want us to imitate him. He wants to live in and through us. The gospel is not the imitation of Christ. It is the implantation and impartation of Christ. We are called to manifest Jesus' presence here and now.

It is safe to say, "I'm going to try to be like Christ," then pick the parts of his life that we want to copy. It is scary to say, "I am going to let Christ live in me and shape my life any way he chooses."

But, beware cuteness. Our culture is cute-driven: puppies, kitties, bunnies, babies. But, the Christ who wants to be born in us is not a cute little baby in a manger. Christ wants to be conceived anew in our hearts, in our hopes, family, community, but not as a pudgy little newborn. Jesus Christ is the author and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:12). For him to be born and live in us, we must choose to enter into a dynamic relationship with him, so that he radiates from us in everything we say and do. When Mary said to

the Angel Gabriel, “Let it be to me according to Your word,” she had no idea where that “**it**” would lead. **It** brought about many things in her life, and almost none of them was cute. That “**it**” will bring our faith out of “cuteness” and into “acuteness” of mission and ministry. **It** will lead us where we never would have gone, because God deals in promises and possibilities. And that allows us to live and move in the element of the impossible, because Christ lives in us.

You can see, when the authors talk about Christ and Christianity, they are not discussing the *idea* of Jesus or a belief system. They are not discussing ethics and ethical behavior. They are telling us that ***our goal is to follow Christ***, not just an idea about Christ or a system of organizing his teachings. Jesus does not say, “Follow my teachings.” Socrates, Buddha, Confucius and Mohammed said that. Jesus says, “Follow ***me***.” He teaches love. He lives love. He is not interested in laws and commandments, in principles or beliefs. And that is why Christianity is not about principles, points or propositions. It is about a person.

According to Paul, the person of Christ is a mystery, God’s mystery. Now, in this case, a mystery is not a puzzle to be solved, but a condition of just being in awe of something - something which cannot be known fully. Here are two observations about the mystery of Christ Paul shared with the Colossian church -

**I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God’s *mystery*, that is, Christ himself., in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.**  
(Colossians 2:2-3)

**At the same time pray for us as well that God will open to us a door for the word, that we may declare the *mystery* of Christ, for which I am in prison.** (Colossians 4:3)

As church-goers, we have been exposed to the mystery of Christ, the wonder of God in human form, the One who is the Source of love, who loved us first, before we loved him. We cannot explain everything about Christ, but we have a choice. We can hide the mystery, keep it to ourselves; or we can display the mystery. We cannot know the truth or share the truth without living the mystery.

We read the Bible, and every time we open it, there is something new for us. We never master the Bible, we can only listen to it as it tells us about God. But, even the Bible doesn't tell us everything we need to know about God. Our lives, our experiences tell us something about God that is unique to us. The Bible paints the picture of God and human beings and the relationship between God and human beings. But, it paints in beautiful broad strokes. If we want a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, we need to step into the mystery and discover what God has for us, personally.

What kind of relationship could you have with someone if all you do is read things about that person? If you want a real relationship, you need to meet that person. Listen to what Paul said to the Colossians - the mystery is not just the existence of Jesus Christ. It's the fact that Christ has chosen to live in you, the hope of glory.

We are not going to be in control of that relationship. It is still very much a mystery. We strive to know as much as we can about Christ as we read the Bible and pray and worship and serve. But, most of Christ will remain a mystery. He is simply too deep and too high for us to completely know. He will let us know what we need to, but, as Clifford Scott once said, **“The more you know, the more you know how little you know.”** Who among us will admit to discovering this first hand?

We cannot fully know God. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, an anonymous

Englishman wrote the Christian spiritual classic, *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Basically, he says that God is hidden in a cloud, and the closer we get to God, the thicker the cloud becomes. So, the closer we get to God, the less we know. The good news is that we don't need to know God fully, even in Jesus Christ, in order to have a loving relationship with God. Let's face it: A finite human mind bound and limited by time and space simply cannot understand the eternal and infinite God, creator of everything that has ever existed, seen and unseen.

Now that we understand the limitations of our minds, let's address another limitation. The Church does not own Christ. This would include fundamentalists, evangelicals, charismatics, progressives, workers for social justice and literalists, among others. The theologians don't own Christ. The Bible scholars don't own Christ. Even the clergy don't own Christ. Every system that tries to envelope Christ is bound to break down somewhere. **“Christ is too immense, too imponderable, and too alive to be tied into any immovable system of thought constructed by finite humans.”** (pg 89)

Therefore, Christ will always break out. We cannot control what he does, who he helps, how he works. **“How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable his ways!”** Paul cries out in Romans 11:33. Paul was a brilliant man, a scholar of the Hebrew Bible. It must have torn him up to find that there is more to God than the 613 Laws of Moses. More than the Prophets' writings. More than his whole Bible. He had studied so hard and so long, only to miss the point.

So, the task of St. Matthias UMC is not to take Christ out into the world, as though we own him and keep him here. He is already out

there. Our job is to point towards him, share what we know about him, how much we love him, how much he loves us and them. The light is there. We just have to gently turn our neighbors around so they can see him.

Here is one last thing I'd like to leave with you. WWJD? is the wrong question. Here is the big problem with that question: it supposes that there is one answer, a single Christian response to every situation. Aren't we looking for that one right answer when we ask WWJD?

But, because you incarnate the living Christ, the question is not WWJD? It is, **“What does Jesus want to do now through me, through us?”** And the answer to that question will be unique to each Christian asking it. Two Christians asking that question might find themselves on opposite sides of a cause or an issue. Clear-thinking Christians of good will find themselves on both or all sides of questions about abortion, the death penalty, euthanasia, evolution and homosexuality. Christians must be allowed to disagree without becoming disagreeable. If I believe the universe is over 13 billion years old, and you believe it's 6,000 years old, do we need to fight about that? Is that what Jesus would want to do now through us?

If God IS love, and Christ expresses a very deep concern about his followers loving one another, shouldn't our concern be how to make it happen in our own lives, and in our own church? If we are trying to do what Jesus wants us to do, can we afford to simply set aside the love that the Church is built on when that love would demand that we accept something or someone we'd rather not accept?

Remember Augustine's quote: “Love God, and do what you will.” The only way this advice works is if we love God first. And if we do that, we'll be living in God's love, breathing in God's love, and

eagerly sharing God's love. Paul tells the church in Corinth, **“Let all that you do be done in love.”** (I Corinthians 16:14) He wouldn't have told them that if they didn't need to hear it. Church families have had “issues” for almost 2,000 years. Somehow, that's reassuring.

Let's hear Christ tell us, **“Just as I have loved you, so you should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”** (John 13:34b-35) We are Jesus' love letters to the world. We should also be his love letters to one another. Let's decide that our first order of business is to love God, and let's see where that leads us.