

Sunday - January 30, 2011  
Pastor - Rev. Walter W. Westbrook  
Sermon - **Jesus Manifesto III**

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When I have said that Christ must live within us and we must let him guide our lives if we really want to be Christians, it might sound like we are going to disappear as Christ takes over our lives. But that is not the case. Being willing to offer our lives to Christ does not obliterate us. It completes us. As Paul says to the Corinthian church, **So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!** (II Corinthians 5:17)

I don't know about you, but I've always thought of this as being a new heaven and a new earth, something on a cosmic scale. But, the authors bring this down to a very personal level. It's not the whole world that has passed away, it is our old selves, our false selves.

Thomas Merton, the American Catholic monk (1915-1968), would talk about the true self and the false self. The **false self** is our outer self, including the various masks we wear in different situations in order to fit in, the attractive veneer we apply to make ourselves more acceptable to the world. But, our **true self** is the inner self, the self that knows that we are more than we pretend to be, the self that is able to feel the presence of Christ in our lives. Letting Christ guide us is letting the true self come to the surface and share the glory of Christ with the world. We become more well-rounded, more complete, more human.

John the Baptist recognized this situation when he said about Christ, **"He must increase, but I must decrease."** The trouble for us is that we live in a world that is determined to convince us that we are the most important thing we must think about. We are encouraged to look out for number 1. This is true, even in the field

of Christian books.

In 2001, of the Top 100 Christian Books (as reported by the Christian Book Association), 6 were about the Bible, 4 were about Jesus, and 3 were about Evangelism. Almost half the titles were about family and parenting. The rest were self-help books.

But, the self is not the point. Christ is the point. Consider the concepts of self-fulfillment and self-discovery. They sound positive, but they are all about how I can exploit the universe to meet my needs. But, the real question for the Christian is, How can I find my place in a scheme of things larger and more important than myself?

Only by shifting our focus to the living Christ within us can we be free from creating the facades to cover our old false self. And because Christ is more than happy to dwell in us, we need to understand why that would be such a good idea. Consider who we're talking about. Christ, God in the flesh who lived among human beings as one of us, the eternal creative force behind the universe, loves you enough to be a part of you, part of your deepest self. If we think about this, if we really look at it and focus on it, the magnitude of it is so breath-takingly enormous, we might be overcome with awe and find ourselves driven to reverent adoration and willing acceptance of Christ's generous offer to guide us.

When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we pray for God's kingdom to come. What exactly is the kingdom of God? It is the manifestation of God's ruling presence. It is made visible when the Church embodies mercy, peace and love - then shares it with the world. When we deal with social issues, we must begin with God. The Light of the World is our reference point. We reach out to the poor for three reasons, and I quote:

**1) The deepest hungers of the human heart are for forgiveness and reconciliation with God.**

**2) We are reaching out to Jesus Himself (“I was sick and you visited Me”). In the poor and sick, it is Christ whom we attend and feed and love. Followers of Jesus exist for others, not for themselves.**

**3) The life of Christ within us compels us to reach out to (the poor, the sick, the outcast). The Galilean prophet who healed the sick and cared for the poor continues His ministry in and through us today. (p.108)**

While the Church should be involved with social and political reform, the agenda of Christ (and his Church) is changing hearts and bringing people into the kingdom, the new society which stands often in opposition to governments and their soulless policies.

Christ was not killed by bad people, a raging mob. He was killed by **“the best religion, the most powerful state, the most perfect legal system, functioning as they were each designed to do.”** (p. 112)

Christ was not about justice or judgment. Mother Teresa said, **“If you judge people, you have no time to love them.”** I would also reverse that: If you love people, you have no time to judge them.

In Micah 6:8, we read, **He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?**

Love kindness, love mercy. We **do** justice, but we do not **love** justice. We can live only by mercy, not by justice. Don't we count on grace? At the pearly gates, will be we asking for justice or

mercy?

The problem with loving justice is that it is not unusual for people seeking justice to go over the line to seeking revenge, which Jesus forbids when he tells us to turn the other cheek and walk the second mile, among other things. (Mathew 5:38-41)

Leonard Sweet is a United Methodist, and he is deeply influenced by John Wesley's emphasis on grace. He says, "**Grace gives us what we do not deserve. Mercy delivers us from what we do deserve.**" (p. 115)

Kurt Vonnegut, famous author (*Slaughterhouse 5*), said that mercy was the only good idea that has ever been introduced in the world so far. Then he said music might be another one.

Jesus Christ presented a political challenge to the Roman Empire as well as to the elders in the Temple. Jesus represented the kingdom of God in which the poor, sick and outcast were at least as important as Pilate, Herod or Caesar himself. The kingdom of God stood as a challenge, an alternative to the Roman Empire. Ultimately, this is what got Jesus killed. He wasn't killed because he was such a nice guy. He was killed because he didn't respect the authority of the authorities, and openly preached against their policies, thumbing his nose at the powers that be.

That said, Jesus was never a political leader. He clearly stated that his kingdom was not of this world (John 18:36). His revolution was not about politics or even religion. It was a relational revolution. He didn't choose the power of the individual or the power of religion/politics. He chose a Third Way, defined as: "**His indwelling presence experienced and displayed through a community of followers who embody the kingdom of God in their corporate life together.**" (p. 119)

This is how he began to change the world. The Church is the new polis (Gk - city, politics), a colony from another realm, representing God. The Church is the New Order. **“If a church is operating properly in a given location, the kingdom of God is seen.”** (p. 120) We should be exuding mercy, peace, love, mutual care, giving. This way, Christ is seen on earth again.

Let's leap backwards from the New Testament to the Book of Genesis. In the Garden of Eden, there were two trees. One was the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. It was off limits. The other tree was the Tree of Life. Having been convinced by the serpent that eating the fruit of the forbidden tree would make her like God, Eve took the fruit, handed some to Adam, and they both ate. For this they were banned from the Garden forever, along with all the rest of the human race that would follow.

What was the problem? Is it bad to know the difference between Good and Evil? Here's the issue: Knowledge of Good and Evil makes us feel as if we don't need anyone, like God for instance, to tell us what to do. We become self-sufficient and self-determining. And we all know how that turns out.

The Tree of Life, on the other hand, represents receiving God's life into ourselves. Today, the Tree of Life is Jesus Christ. Receiving Christ is taking the first bite from the right tree. Yielding to God's life within us will lead us to live the “good” life. Intellectual knowledge of good and evil is the way of appearing to live life, but is in reality just a disguise.

Now, this is where it gets really uncomfortable. The Christian religion, like all religions, is built on the Tree of the Knowledge of

Good and Evil. Religion gives people the feeling that they have God under control. They can go to the Bible and get whatever answers they need for whatever issues they have. It's like God-in-a-box. But, **“the true God is an untamed lion.** (p. 131) The Bible can be turned into the knowledge of good and evil to help us gain control of our lives. We want things to be less unnerving, less unpredictable. We want to be in control. But, Jesus didn't use Scripture this way, and he doesn't want us to, either. We need to use the Bible to know God better and to discover how to live out his mission, not to make ourselves more comfortable (at least not all the time).

Look how Jesus pushes religion to its limits. When the Pharisees ask him a question on one level, he answers it on a completely different level. This is because their questions are from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and Jesus' answers are from the Tree of Life. He offended them because he did not respect the source of their authority, their rules, and was very plain about it.

Jesus became the champion of the ostracized and the outcast. He broke down the barriers that separated people. Paul says this in three different letters to churches in three different cities. They all go roughly like this, **There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.** (Galatians 3:26) Admit it, knowing this and living as if we believed it was true, changes everything.

How are Christians supposed to deal with the world? Many choose to keep it at arm's length. They feel morally superior to the people who don't share their religion. This is an easy trap to fall into. While we are supposed to stand separate from the defilements of sin and the world, we are also supposed to embrace the sinner, to care for the wounded, hurt and confused. We are to be friends of sinners, not their judges.

Christ's compassion is what drew people to him. ***It still does!*** Churches that aren't growing must examine themselves to see if they are living out of Christ's compassion as fully as they might be. Are we eating from the forbidden tree or the forgotten tree? Eating from the Tree of Life will bring us more deeply in touch with the living, breathing Christ. Churches empowered by that relationship are not boring or judgmental or hypocritical. They draw people because they can recognize something special, which they will eventually understand is Jesus Christ working in the lives of members and the ministry and mission of the congregation.

Here is how the authors express God's challenge for today's churches: **Move beyond the religious knowledge of good and evil and into a full *yieldedness* to the life of Christ that beats within every child of God. Human energy won't cut it. It's one thing to work *for* God. It is another thing to work *with* God. And it's yet another to have God work *through* you. The work of God is God Himself at work.** (p. 136)

We need to hear and contemplate the sort of unnerving news that it is the personal relationship with God that is the most important thing in our lives. The Church is not primarily about following the Bible. It is about following the Person about whom the Bible testifies, and to whom it points.

We don't want to be looking to the Bible for new and better laws, or improved ethics or a blueprint for our lives. The better life is the life of Christ and our life in Christ. The written Word leads us to the Living Word: **"You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is *they* that testify on my behalf."** (John 5:39)

So, we study the Bible in order to better follow Christ. In addition, we need to be reading the Bible in fellowship, in community. All

the books of the Bible, except for six letters in the New Testament, were written for communities, not individuals. And that is how we need to explore it, swim in it, ingest it, find Christ in it.

So, as Christians and as the Church, we need to stop eating from the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, the forbidden tree, and start eating the fruit of the Tree of Life, which today is the Risen Christ. There is no other way to be Christians, or to be the Church. Let's not be afraid to ask Christ for help with this. He will be delighted to enlighten us and be our inner light as we seek to become his light in the world.