

PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT
“JESUS: AN INCOMPARABLE MODEL”
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
March 15, 2009
1 Corinthians 1:22-25
8:45 & 11:00 A.M. Services

Stereotypes keep us from seeing the individual. The world has stereotypical images of Jesus. In the Gospels there are pictures of Jesus some would not recognize - - Jesus ablaze with anger toward his enemies, Jesus filled with suspicions toward his friends. Jesus lived in the real world of good and evil, and had reactions appropriate to each.

The better we know Jesus the more we see him as an incomparable model for our own lives. Jesus invites us to follow him. The New Testament challenges us to be like him. It is my prayer that we may become more and more like Jesus everyday, so that others may encounter his spirit in us.

Jesus resisted the works of sin and the powers of evil, yet he conquered the forces of hate by suffering at the hands of those who despised him. Love can only conquer hate if love never stops loving even in the face of death.

Albert Schweitzer's famous statement about Jesus begins by saying, **“He comes to us as One unknown.”** The people who first responded to Jesus were looking for all sorts of things. Some became his disciples. Others turned away disappointed. Still others ended up demanding his death. Sometimes we find exactly what we were looking for. If you find a needle in a haystack, it is highly likely you were looking for it! If you find the perfect hot dog, you may have eaten a thousand hot dogs searching for it. But sometimes what we are looking for colors what we think we have found. This tends to be the case with all who first encounter Jesus.

If you find the perfect job or companion or almost anything else, beware. The perfection may only exist in your wishful thinking. In our minds, we

often transform what we find into what we were looking for. At a certain point the disciples were troubled by Jesus' teaching. They came to him saying, "*The teaching is difficult. Who can accept it?*" So many of his followers turned back and no longer followed him that Jesus asked the twelve, "*Will you also go away?*" (Jn 6:66-67)

The Apostle Paul, in writing to the Christians in Corinth, contrasted what people were looking for with the gospel he proclaimed. "*Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.*" In Paul's day Corinth was a teeming city of well over half a million. It was located on a narrow strip of land only a few miles wide, an isthmus across which all travel between northern and southern Greece had to pass. The isthmus was also at the crossroads of sea traffic between the East and the West. Corinth had a cosmopolitan population, including both Jews and Greeks.

Paul, being a Roman citizen as well as a Jew, knew the mindset of each group. "*Jews demand signs,*" wrote Paul, "*and Greeks desire wisdom.*" Jews sought signs, miraculous evidence that Jesus was from God, just as they had done throughout Jesus' ministry. They wanted signs of great power. For centuries Greeks had glorified learning, and were known for their intellectual pursuits, their rhetoric, and their philosophical speculations. Paul preached Christ crucified. Jews considered crucifixion a humiliating way to die, and a curse from God. Greeks had no place for suffering in their understandings of God. Christ crucified was a "*stumbling block*" to Jews and "*foolishness*" to Gentiles. (Gentiles were all non-Jews, including Greeks.)

Power is the ability to achieve one's purpose. If one's purpose is to destroy one's enemies, then physical force is powerful. But if one's purpose is to transform enemies into friends, then physical force is powerless. For transforming hearts and minds, self-giving and suffering love is powerful. God's purpose is not to destroy us, but to transform our hearts and minds. The cross of Christ is the supreme expression of God's self-giving, suffering love. It is God's power revealed.

Wisdom is the quality of having experience, knowledge, and good judgment. If the measure of all things is their competitive and commercial value, then wisdom is superior intelligence and shrewdness. But if the measure of all things is a quality of existence and maturity of spirit, then

mere intelligence may be powerless. For finding the meaning of human life, a caring and compassionate heart is infinitely more powerful. The cross of Christ is the supreme expression of God's self-giving, suffering love. It is God's wisdom revealed.

Jesus Christ stood in opposition to the world's power and wisdom, and was crucified. Christ's resurrection is the triumph of the power and wisdom of God.

Paul understood that Jesus Christ is the one all people are looking for, whether they know it or not. Paul prayed until the end of his life that his fellow Jews might see that the true power of God is revealed in Jesus' death and resurrection. He contended with the Greek philosophers that true wisdom was incarnated in Jesus Christ. Paul knew that both the Jews and the Greeks were looking for Jesus Christ. They did not recognize him, because their own expectations did not allow for a crucified Jewish peasant. They were hung up on provincial notions of power and wisdom.

In the beginning he comes to all of us as One at least partially unknown. It is only in following him, as Schweitzer said, that we come to know him. He ***“sets us to the tasks which he has to fulfill for our time.”*** There can be no casual relationships with him. ***“He commands,”*** and we either go or stay. But ***“to those who obey him, whether they be wise or simple, he will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings, which they shall pass through in his fellowship.”*** The only way to know him is to follow him, which is why so many only know **about** him. Concerning those who follow him, concludes Schweitzer, ***“as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience who he is.”***

Jesus cannot be accounted for by being called a genius. We could name a hundred people of genius who leave us cold. Jesus cannot be explained in terms of moral goodness or supernatural gifts. The exceptional thing about Jesus is that, in an utterly unique way, God meets us in his life. He comes to us as One unknown, but to know him is to know God.

He came to those who knew him not. It was those who followed him who came to learn that in obeying him, the very nature of God was revealed. As you make your journey to the cross, he will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts and the sufferings you encounter.

I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church. Come grow your spirit with us. The better you know Jesus the more you will see him as an incomparable model for your life.