

Christ, center of our faith

Jubilee Mennonite Church
October 29, 2017

Purpose: To declare the centrality of Christ to all things.

Message: As Anabaptists, we have placed a centrality on Christ which places the life and teaching of Christ at the center of our faith and practice.

Text: Luke 4:14-21

Synopsis: We often run into the term 'Christ centered' as a general adjective for a whole host of church related items. Christ centered worship, Christ centered education, Christ centered media, to name a few. But what does it mean to say that as a principle, we are Christ centered, not just in our self-description but as a way of being church, making disciples, and reading scripture? Placing Christ's life and example as the central lens through which we understand God and the world is a hallmark of Anabaptist understandings of Christianity. This does not necessarily prescribe who we need to think Christ to be, but are called to follow in the mission of Christ in the world.

Luke 4:14-21 14 Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. 15 He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. 16 When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, 17 and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: 18 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." 20 And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. 21 Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

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Today is Reformation Sunday. Not that you should know this, or, for that matter care too terribly much. Trying to keep the Sunday calendar straight is like trying to recall when international Talk Like a Pirate Day is (its September 19). Reformation Sunday is celebrated in the Lutheran church every year, a time for confirmations of the baptismal vows, and remembering what has been and what lies at the core of their tradition. It is the commemoration of Martin Luther, the first well known church reformer to acted to pose questions to the wider church by nailing 95 theses to the Wittenberg Door. That was 500 years ago this week (October 31st 1517 in case you are counting). By in large, we paint this moment with a heroic brush; the first clear statement of something different as if Luther himself had a clearly formed image of a new churches and new ways of following Christ formed in his mind at the moment of putting pen to paper. I am guessing that is not the case. Like so many before him and since, his moment of history was but a beginning, simple action with a massive historical consequence that no one with any amount of foreknowledge would dare undertake for fear of the enormity of it all. When we step out into something new, seldom if ever can we fully appreciate where it is about to land us. Yet, this is what started a whole new conversation in the church, and that is something to remember.

Our text for this morning, though, seems to be contemplating precisely that, though. This is Jesus' opening statement for ministry and purpose, the mission statement for all that was to come after this. From Luke's account, he goes from the Jordan and the confirmation of his identity as the Son of God, into the wilderness to be tempted, and this is his first activity of his ministry. These are the words by which he would live his life, and would guide him to Jerusalem and beyond, launching the whole of Christianity by looking backwards to the words of Isaiah describing the suffering servant that was to be the saving of Israel. At which point the people with whom he had grown up try to kill him and run him out of town. One wonders whether Jesus, the one person in all of human history with the wherewithal to reasonably predict what was to come his actions, knew on that morning the rock that he was kicking off the cliff, triggering a landslide that is still moving and shaking us to this very day, this very hour. I wonder whether he saw us 2000 years later trying to make sense of this radical statement, and what it might mean for us to go and do likewise?

We have undertaken to engage some of the fundamentals of what it means to be an Anabaptist person of faith. We are attempting to articulate concisely (a harder thing to do than to use far too many words) what it means to be a Christian in this particular way. We start with the most fundamental statement we can make: Christ is the Centre of our faith.

At first blush this would be an almost laughably obvious statement. Surely any self-respecting reasonably Orthodox Christian could say this, and probably should say this. Because if Christ isn't at the centre, one must ask what possibly could be? It is almost as if by saying it that way, we are proposing that we have it right in a way that others do not (let's be clear—that is not what is being said). Which can by all means be fighting words when you come to a theological argument, and often enough have been within the church as we try to sort out our differences. It is only in the last 20 years that the Lutheran and Anabaptist groups have reconciled sufficiently to contemplate sharing the same table together, let alone all the other fragments of Christ's body. What we say about our faith matters. Things like this need to be explained with a good long story of what we mean by that.

I want to give exactly this sort of explanation, but first I need to do some history. Let's start here. Jesus is the consummate trouble maker. Witness the way he starts out—not the most politically sensitive opening statement ever made. When we read the Gospels, there is a whole raft of sins and misbehaviors that are credited to him in the Gospels—working on the Sabbath, claiming to speak to and for God, openly mocking the powers that be, healing those thought too sinful to be touched. The list goes on. We can understand why this person came into such conflict into the powers that be, and why those powers would want to kill him. But it is after his resurrection and ascension is when things got really sticky. Instead of dying out and going away, the church spread and grew as they emulated Jesus' life; trying to do exactly what Jesus was doing, being about what Jesus was about. If you were to ask the average Christian what the center of their faith was, they would likely respond that it was the life of Jesus, and following in his footsteps. They wanted to follow along and be like Jesus, which was then and still is a good way to end up rather unpopular.

So when Christianity became the official religion of the state, the rough edges of the Jesus profile needed to be sanded down. Following after someone who does not exactly model conformity to a life of law and order is rather problematic. How can you maintain an army when the center of the faith open questions the applicability of armed conflict? How do you protect the rights of the powerful (which any government needs to do at least if it wants to survive of any length of time) while centering yourself on one who starts his public career declaring release for the captives and recovery of sight for the blind? How do you make these notions work for a church of power and influence, when the guiding founder routinely runs afoul of the powers that be?

The answer is quite self evident if you have ever played a board game with someone under the age of 10. When the chips are down, changes the rules and alter the focus. That is precisely what happened here within the church. Starting after the year 312 when the Emperor Constantine declared publicly that Christianity would be tolerated and encouraged by Roman Empire, we see a lot of the ways of thinking about Jesus altered in significant ways to make in compatible with life in empire. Gone was the assumption that the meanings of Christ's teaching were meant for the here and now. The love of enemies was tempered with the idea of Just War, a Christian filter through which war could be made holy. Now the center of the Christian faith was far more the death of Jesus than anything to do with Jesus' life. The Nicean creed which forms the backbone of universal Christian practice since the 4th century as a statement of essential doctrine skips the entirety of Jesus' life, jumping from 'he was born of Mary' right over to 'he was tortured by Pontius Pilot' leaving out all the juicy bits in between. The belief in who Jesus is and what Jesus does as a saviour in the world was given primacy over what Jesus did and what Jesus calls those who follow after him to do. This is a massive oversimplification, but it will have to do for now.

Anabaptists, at their idealistic centre are trying to suggest that we go back the Early church and emulate the way of Christ. This is in no way to minimize the power and the impact of the saving work of Christ. Early Anabaptist writer Hans Denck argued "No one can truly know Christ unless they follow after him in daily life, and no one can follow Christ in daily life unless they truly know him." Writer Palmer Becker who has formulated these three cores of

Anabaptist thought, puts it well in saying “Salvation in the Anabaptist tradition means being transformed from a worldly way of living that exemplifies the spirit and actions of Jesus. Salvation is not merely a change in God’s attitude toward us. It is a change in our attitudes and actions toward God.” We tie our faith both to the acceptance of salvation and to the way that this acceptance forms us to respond like Christ.

This has some profound consequences for how we do church, how we read the Bible, and how we practice our faith. I will detail these more next time when we take this up again. But for the moment, it is enough that this is what brings us cross wise with much of our brothers and sisters in the Christian tradition, let alone other parts of society—seeking to practically apply the Sermon on the Mount and other ways of being that call us to behave differently because of Jesus time and again. It is a good deal easier to follow a code and set of belief than it is to follow the life and work of an individual, even one so central as Christ. What Would Jesus Do, as simple as that question is, opens the door to a myriad of responses, and almost endless conversation as we try to apply the life and times of Jesus to here and now.

The highest complement ever paid me was given to me by a security Guard at the Orlando convention center. When the Mennonite Church USA convention was held in Orlando in 1997 I attended as a team assembling the first web based coverage of a convention. This involved long sleepless nights and even longer hours manning a booth during the day. Through these days, one of the hired security guards and I had an ongoing conversation. Sooner or later the conversation turned to the reason why we were there, and we had a marvelous conversation across ethnic, cultural, and religious lines (he was an African American Muslim). We parted good friends. When I returned to Indiana for college some weeks later, I was called to the administration offices. It seems that my friend wrote Goshen College general delivery, not knowing my address to express appreciation for our conversation. I do not recall the whole contents of the letter, largely because I was completely humbled by his conclusion; ‘I saw in him Jesus reaching out to me.’ I know I shall never receive a better complement than this should I live 100 more years.

I say this only by way of emphasizing that who we are matters. I can not say whether or not I deserve such praise as this, and I am pretty sure that I don't. When we say that Jesus is the center of our faith, we are not talking about high minded, obscure ideas of theology and acceptance of belief. We are talking about changing who we are and how we respond to all of life around us. What we believe does matter; what we claim or not is consequential. But it pales in comparison to who we are when we live. When we strive to live these words of 'declaring the year of the Lord's favor' and 'setting the captives free' understanding that these ethics are more than just good ideas as to how to be good people, but are the calling of our Lord asking us to come and participate with him in the work of creating the kingdom right here and right now that makes a huge difference. Our work is not simply to get right belief down; it is to learn and to teach the difficult lessons of discipleship, of following after the one who comes before. It is too easy to get hung up on the details of theology and forget that the heart of the matter is found in the living way of God.

This is not to say this is easy. Being a disciple is difficult. Being a church which claims discipleship at its core is a ready set up for hypocrisy and getting it wrong; something we have done and continue to do more times than not. I will never claim we are good at this; we are not. Yet the aspiration to place the life of Christ at the centre of everything remains. We do not declare that we hold Jesus at our center to place ourselves over against other traditions who have different emphasises, different ways of following Christ. In saying that the life of Jesus lies at our core, we are laying claim to doing church differently, a difference that is noticed and desired by many of our brothers and sisters around us. Many evangelical and mainline protestants are coming to us now asking what we do and why we do it, and beginning to appreciate what it can mean to recover this vision of a church of time past whose time perhaps has come again.

May we be given the strength and the means to connect again to the one who calls to like him 'bring good news to the poor' and to all who would follow after Christ in the work of establishing the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, and have the courage to continue to follow where ever the paths that this begins leads us.