

Union Bridge Church of the Brethren

Sermon for Sunday, October 2, 2005

Philippians 3:4b-14

“What Do You Want To Know?”

What is your idea of the world’s worst job? Poultry processor? Prison guard? Pig farmer? They have all appeared on one list or another of the “10 Worst Jobs.” How about garbage collector? Burger King bathroom cleaner? Ditch digger? None of those sound like much fun to me.

Last week, when I visited the public library it occurred to me that there is another job which – while it may not be among the 10 worst – I wouldn’t want. No, not “librarian.” That sounds okay. What I don’t want to be is a door-to-door encyclopedia salesman!

Right there in the library’s section of used books for sale were two entire sets of encyclopedias for sale. They were marked \$5 a set, but it looked like they had been there a while. They weren’t that old. I’m sure they still contained lots of useful information, but people just don’t buy many encyclopedias these days, especially in book form. And encyclopedias on CD often come free as part of the package with new computers, monitors and printers.

And then there is the Wikipedia, which I mentioned last week – an encyclopedia on the Internet that is free by design. Wikipedia is a multilingual, Web-based, free-content encyclopedia written collaboratively by volunteers. There are almost three quarters of a million articles in the English language version, including articles about the Church of the Brethren and the Town of Union Bridge (I know because I checked). Because anyone can edit or write articles for Wikipedia, it has thousands of writers and makes a huge amount of information available.

So, despite the demise of encyclopedias in book form, we clearly live in an information age. Thanks to the computer, we have almost instant access to enormous amounts of information on almost any conceivable subject. If it isn’t in the Wikipedia, you can always “google” it. Google began as the name of a specific Internet search engine and has become a verb meaning, “to use a search engine.”

Yet, while there may be a lot on the Web, not everything we want to know is available on-line, or in a book, for that matter. You can google all you want and there are still some things you’ll never know.

I was reminded of this as we heard the text for this morning from the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Philippians. Paul, in this emotional passage, is explaining why he has left behind the religious and cultural world he grew up in to become a Christian. As he explains it, he had all the advantages growing up in traditional Judaism. He writes:

“I was circumcised when I was eight days old, and I am from the nation of

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Israel and the tribe of Benjamin. I am a true Hebrew. As a Pharisee, I strictly obeyed the Law of Moses.”

But, in spite of these advantages and credentials, he had become a follower of the risen Lord, Jesus Christ. He was no longer motivated by a desire for righteousness under the law. Instead, he was motivated by something else – a desire “to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings.” That is what Paul wanted to know, and he wasn’t going to find it in a book or on the Internet.

Of course, if all Paul had wanted was to know information *about* Jesus, then books or lectures or Internet searches would do. Why, on Wikipedia, you can learn the basic facts of Jesus’ life, according to gospels; you can learn about the search for the historical Jesus, you can learn about Jesus as a leader of non-violent resistance, and you can even learn what Hindus and Buddhists believe about Jesus. Just for fun, I googled Jesus. You’ll never guess how many hits I got! (For those who aren’t familiar with computer jargon, that means how many different web sites were found that mention Jesus.) Almost 67,000,000! And I’m sure that if you had time to read them all, you would learn a great deal *about* Jesus – not all of it true and some of it downright sacrilegious, but a great deal nonetheless. Still, you would only know *about* Jesus, and that isn’t the same as knowing Jesus.

Of course, Paul could have talked to people who had known Jesus. In fact, he did. But it wasn’t on that basis that Paul wanted to know Jesus. That was just another way of knowing about him. Sometimes, when we meet a friend of a friend, the person will say, “You know, I’ve heard so much about you, I feel like I already know you.” If you listen closely, you will hear a careful distinction in that sentence. “I feel *like* I already know you.” We can feel *like* we already know someone because we know a lot about them. But it isn’t the same as knowing them ourselves. What we know about them is always filtered through someone else. And that isn’t what Paul wanted.

It isn’t what I want either. And I hope it isn’t what you want. I hope you aren’t willing to settle for less, to settle for knowing about Jesus, instead of knowing Jesus. But if we want more, how do we get it?

Paul points us in the right direction by talking about Jesus’ resurrection. Because Jesus has been raised, he is not just a person in the past. He lives! Isn’t that what we sing and celebrate at Easter? He lives, and because he lives he can be known.

But where does he live? Because if we don’t know where he lives, how can we find him in order to get to know him.

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Well, the same song that tells us, “He Lives!” tells us that “he lives within my heart.” That is, your heart, my heart, the heart of anyone who believes in him. Well, I’m not going to argue with that, but that isn’t where Jesus told us to look for him. If I was going to look for the risen Christ, I’d look for Jesus where Jesus said he would be. Two texts come to mind.

First, there is his promise, “Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them.” Jesus says he can be found in the midst of the community that gathers in his name – that’s the church; not the church building, but the church people, in worship, in fellowship, in work and witness, in study and service. If someone wants to know Jesus, then, it makes sense for them to participate in the life of a church. No church is perfect, of course, and in every church we are bound to experience more than Jesus. But if we are attentive, we will sense the presence of the risen Christ in the life of the church.

The second text that comes to mind is the famous story of the judgement in the 25th chapter of Matthew’s gospel. There, as he explains his decisions to those affected by them, he states plainly: “Inasmuch as you did it to the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you did it unto me.” If we want to find Jesus, then, we should spend some time with those counted least in this world – the poor, the prisoners, the addicted, the terminally ill, the terribly lonely, the orphans and widows and widowers that everyone seems to have forgotten, the abandoned and the abused. In the end, that was Jesus’ lot in life – he was betrayed, rejected, abused, stripped, and executed. So if we want to know Jesus, we can’t hide ourselves from these harsh realities in our time. Jesus is with those most everyone else has given up on.

Finally, when it comes to knowing Jesus instead of just knowing about him, there is no substitute for walking a while in his footsteps. Call it re-enactment if you want, but doing what Jesus would do and doing what Jesus did is a great way to get in touch with who Jesus really is.

That is why, for me, tonight is so important. If there is any time when the church comes together that I am sure Jesus is in our midst, it is at our Love Feast and Holy Communion. I never feel closer to God in worship than I do when I am washing feet, being washed, sharing a meal, and partaking of the bread and cup. It all started with Jesus and the original twelve. This is something Jesus did and asks us to do. Jesus knows it isn’t easy. Jesus knows it makes some of us uncomfortable. It made some of the original disciples uncomfortable, too. But Jesus had a word for those who weren’t willing: “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.”

It may sound harsh, but one way to hear it is to take it as Jesus saying, in effect, “If you don’t do this, you’ll never really know me completely. You won’t

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understand who I am, what I'm about, what it means to be one of my followers.”

Some things just can't be learned in a book or on-line. They have to be learned by doing, learned by living, learned through action. Learning to know Jesus – not just know *about* him, but really *know* him – is one of those things.

If you want to know Jesus, look for him in the midst of those who gather in his name. Look for him in the faces of the least, the last and the lost. And look for him in the ritual of Love Feast, where we come together to do what he did, to show his love continues to live in us.

Amen.