

To Know Christ

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren
Sunday, October 5, 2008 Philippians 3:7-11

Let me tell you about one smart kid. Michael Kearney was born in January of 1984. He spoke his first words in May. In July, at age six months, he told his pediatrician, “I have a left ear infection.” He finished high school at age six. He graduated with an associate degree in geology at 8 and graduated from the University of South Alabama with bachelor’s degree in anthropology at age 10. He went on to Middle Tennessee State University where he received a master’s degree in biochemistry at the age of 14, and taught at Vanderbilt University also in Tennessee at 16. He received a second Master’s degree in computer science from Vanderbilt when he was 17. He added a Ph.D. in chemistry before turning 22. As I said, he is one smart kid. He knows a lot about a lot of different things. But, despite his incredible intellect, not everything comes easily to Michael. In the last couple of years, he has begun dating and found someone “special” – his girlfriend, Megan. And, as Michael Kearney would gladly admit, getting to know her – really know her – takes a whole different skill set. Sure, he could memorize all sorts of facts about her: her birth date, parent’s middle names, favorite ice cream, pet peeves, even her medical history. But knowing about her is not the same as knowing her.

Grasping the difference between knowing about someone and really knowing someone is essential for understanding what the Apostle Paul was trying to communicate in his letter to the Philippian Christians. The church in Philippi was the first established on European soil, and Paul himself was the founder. Unlike some of the other churches Paul founded, the Philippians apparently always remained on good terms with the apostle, and vice versa. So it seems he lets his guard down a bit as he writes to them, in the third chapter, of his own personal spiritual quest. Paul recounts how he once was a successful and respected religious leader among the Jews, a Pharisee known for his zeal. Yet he willingly sacrificed his social standing and his reputation by becoming part of the emerging Christian movement. “More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord,” Paul writes. And he continues, “For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ . . . I want to know Christ, and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” Paul unveiled his passion to the Philippians, and his passion was “to know Christ” – not just to know about Christ, but to know Christ.

The difference is important. Any motivated person can learn a lot about Jesus. Scholars have written thousands of books on the subject. You could read them all, know all the facts and all the myths and all the opinions, but it still wouldn’t be the same as knowing Jesus Christ. Knowing someone implies something more than just knowing about someone. Paul’s passion was to know Christ.

Paul’s passion is still the essence of what it means to be a Christian. In the Hebrew language, to “know ” means to become one with. It means having a relationship, a connection, a genuine and ongoing involvement. To know Jesus Christ is to become one with Jesus Christ, to have a relationship with him, a real connection, a genuine and ongoing involvement in who Jesus is and what Jesus does.

But how do we do that, you may ask. Unlike the original disciples, we don’t have the opportunity to encounter Jesus in the flesh. Sure, we can take a trip to Israel, and “walk where Jesus walked,” as they say. But that is just another way of learning about Jesus. What if we don’t want to just know about Jesus, we want to know him?

Paul, of course, had the same problem. Jesus had ascended into heaven before Paul came on board in the Christian movement. He had a vision or two, of course, as some people claim to have yet today. But in his letter to the Philippians Paul doesn’t say that the way to get to know Christ is through visions. He never sets forth any guide on how to have a vision or any other kind of private moment with Jesus. In fact, in his letter to the Corinthians, he tends to discourage such methods of trying to know Christ.

In the letter to the Philippians, however, he does hint at a way we can come to know Christ better: "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings, by becoming like him in his death . . ." How can we know Christ? How can we deepen our relationship with Jesus, and sustain a genuine and ongoing involvement in Jesus' resurrection life? Quite simply by "sharing his sufferings" and "by becoming like him in his death."

To some, this means that we come to know Christ best in the sacraments. Typically, a sacrament is a ritual of the church – like baptism or the bread and cup of communion – where it is believed we can experience the reality of God in a special way. In sacramental-oriented churches, these rituals essentially guarantee a "close encounter" with God.

To others, the way to get to know Christ (and through Christ, to know God) is to simply meditate on the whole pageant of his sufferings and death. A few years ago, when the movie, "The Passion of the Christ" was popular, many people found its realistic depiction of Jesus' suffering very meaningful. It made them feel like they were present at events that took place two thousand years ago.

But to still others, "sharing in [Christ's] sufferings" and "becoming like him in his death" does not refer to the sacraments or to private meditation on the gruesome events of Holy Week. Instead, to share in his sufferings and become like him in his death is to become involved in the same mission. It is to pour out our lives for the sake of others, to reach out to the desperate, to sacrifice so that those who feel forgotten may know they are remembered and that they matter, to us and to God. If we want to know Christ, if we want to deepen our relationship with Christ, what we need is not rituals or meditation, but a willingness to let ourselves become the instruments of God, as Jesus was. Almost one hundred years ago, Alexander Irvine wrote a novel called *My Lady of the Chimney Corner*. The heroine of the novel goes to a mourning neighbor, and comforting her, puts her hand on her head and says: "God takes a hand whenever he can find it and just does what he likes with it. Sometimes he takes a bishop's hand and lays it on a child's head in benediction. And then he takes the hand of a doctor to relieve the pain, the hand of a mother to guide a child. And sometimes he takes the hand of a poor old creature like me to give comfort to a neighbor. But they're all hands touched by his Spirit, and his Spirit's everywhere lookin' for hands to use."

It's true – the Spirit is everywhere looking for hands to use, and so the opportunity to know Christ better is always available. The rituals of the church have their value, as reminders of who we are and how we are to live. And meditation on Jesus' suffering can be useful, if it deepens our compassion for those still suffering in our world today. But service is the real sacrament. Service to others in need is where we can most expect to encounter the real and living Christ. In reaching out to offer our resources, our physical assistance, or simply our companionship, we draw near to Christ and Christ draws near to us. In 1991, Bob Hadley, an attorney from Dayton, Ohio, went on a mission trip to Jamaica. He wrote this report for his church newsletter about his experience: "If you had told me a few months ago that in August I would be kissed by a leper, I would have recoiled at the thought. Yet it happened, and now, I consider it a wonderful gift.

"Shortly after my first meeting with Miss Lillian (an ancient, terribly disfigured, blind leper), she announced that she wanted to write a letter to my wife and our three children. I wasn't really prepared for what happened next. She slid down from her chair on to the hard ceramic tile floor and crawled across the room to the table where she and her best friend, Mr. Sam (another blind leper), would sit to dictate letters. She had no hands nor feet so crawling was not an easy task, but she did not want any help. Then, these two blind, elderly lepers proceeded to dictate letters to this American lawyer who has spent virtually every one of his working days for the past 30 years giving dictation! I guess God decided not to be too subtle in teaching me about reverse mission! The letter which Mr. Sam dictated for Miss Lillian to my wife and our children was dictated on our 30th wedding anniversary, and it is one of the nicest anniversary gifts we have ever received. "I grew to love these deeply spiritual people. Their faces were no longer disfigured to me. They were the beautiful faces of saints. They glowed with the unconditional love which comes from God. Our worship service with them later in the week was truly the way God intended for church to be. The kingdom was there in that dining room at St. Monica's Home.

"There is a thirst for joy in the midst of suffering. Yes, we know that sounds crazy to many. And yet it is true. So, how does joy flow from suffering and pain? Mother Teresa helps us to understand this process when she says, 'Suffering opens up space within that otherwise would not be there -- a space that God can come in and fill.'" To willingly share in the suffering of others, so that they will not feel abandoned and alone, so they will be reminded that they are indeed still precious to God – this is the very work of Christ. And in this work, we come to know Christ – not just know about him, but know him. This was Paul's passion – to know Christ. This is my passion, and the reason I have devoted my entire adult life to the set-apart ministry. But you need not enter full-time ministry to serve others or to reach out in love. Any of us can do that. The opportunities are everywhere. So if it is your desire, your passion, to know Christ better, become like him. Share suffering. Open your heart to a neighbor, a co-worker, a stranger, anyone in need. Pour yourself out for them. Spend yourself and your resources helping them. And pay attention, for then the sacramental moment will come, and you will have your very own "close encounter" with Jesus Christ. Amen.