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## *Re-Member: Why Jesus?* Colossians 1: 15-20

Last Wednesday night the Presbytery of Olympia voted to dismiss Chapel Hill from the Presbyterian Church (USA). The vote was unanimous! I would never, ever have imagined a unanimous vote. Over a year ago, we began a process of discernment and it seems that God's hand of favor and grace has been upon us the whole way. We felt strongly that God was calling us out of our denomination and yet we wanted to leave in a way that honored Christ and our longstanding friendships. That unanimous vote felt like one more affirmation from the Lord saying, "I am with you! This is the right thing!"

So, next Thursday, Pastor Jeremy and I will be examined on the floor of the Presbytery of the Pacific of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church down in California. If we don't screw up, Thursday afternoon, Chapel Hill will be an EPC church. I cannot express how excited I am to be a part of this new denomination. These people share our deepest convictions about Jesus and the Bible and our call to share the Good News with the world. I know I speak for your Session when I say, "I feel like I have come home."

All along we have said the same thing: Chapel Hill is not going to change. We are joining the EPC, not because we want to be different, but because we want the freedom to be who we are... within a denomination that supports, encourages and celebrates our mission. So your pastors have made their commitment. Your elders have made their commitment. Guess who's left? Yep! You, the members of Chapel Hill and our not-yet-members who have been waiting for this moment, it is **your** turn to make your commitment. And we are calling this six-week process "Re-Membership."

If you are a member, your Re-Membership card is available in the foyer. (How many grabbed theirs already?) We will not be mailing these cards out. They will not be available during the week—only on Sundays—because this commitment is an act of worship. I hope that today, a thousand will be picked up, filled out and turned in.

If you are not yet a member, our next WTTF starts next Sunday. I hope we have a flood of registrations for that class. It will be your last chance before we are officially received into the EPC on June 3. I want you to be able to stand with us on that that day and declare, "This is **my** church. I am a member of this congregation. I'm all in!"

But what does it mean to be a member. What would you suppose is the core **requirement** for membership in this church? Here it is: *I will confess Jesus as my savior and intentionally submit my life to His lordship.* The one non-negotiable requirement for membership in our church is Jesus. You must affirm Him as your Savior and Lord. What we believe about Jesus...and what we do with what we believe... is the essential of our life together as a congregation. If we share that conviction, everything else we do arises out of that. If we do not share that conviction, nothing else matters.

So then, who is this Jesus? Who is He that deserves to be called Lord of all; that claims to save us from our sin?" Everybody has an opinion about Jesus and they run the gamut, don't they? If following Jesus is the core requirement of membership in this church, who is the Jesus we must follow? Well, He is the Jesus that Paul describes in his letter to the Colossian church which I read earlier.

Did you know that Paul's majestic words about Jesus are a song? Colossians 1: 15-19 is an ancient Christ hymn. When we gather for worship, we sing "How Deep the Father's Love For Us." When the first-century Christians gathered to worship, they sang this song about Jesus. And by the time you were done singing it, you had a very good idea of how magnificent Jesus is and why he deserves to be the center of all we are and all we do.

Listen carefully as Paul carries us to the mountaintops for a glimpse of this lofty Jesus. (We are going to do some hard theological work this morning. Are you buckled up?) "He is the image of the invisible God." These words alone are breathtaking. Do you realize what it says? "If you want to see God, look at Jesus! When you look at Jesus in the flesh, you are seeing what the invisible God looks like." Jesus was not just a good man, a prophet, a healer, a miracle-worker. Paul makes this audacious claim: Jesus was God in human flesh. That is our starting point for "Why Jesus." Why should we follow, trust, obey, rely on, look to Jesus Christ? Because He is God! Every human being longs to know God. It's a hard-wired need in all of us. Well, take a good, hard look at Jesus...get to know HIM... and you will know God. "He is the image of the invisible God."

But Paul's not done. (16) "For by him all things were created, things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities..." Let that sink into your cranial matter for a moment. This Jesus— this man who walked on earth 2000 years ago—is actually the image of the invisible, Creator God. And it is by Jesus that every single thing that has ever been created, was created... on earth, in the heavens, outside of our galaxy. Jesus made it all! Everything we see, everything we cannot see—every spiritual being, every power, every authority—Jesus made them! When you drive out today and see Mt. Rainier, Jesus made that. When you look up in the sky tonight and see the stars: Jesus made them. When you look in the mirror before you go to bed... Jesus made that to. And loves what he made.

But not only is Jesus the author of all creation, he is the goal of all creation. (16b) "... all things were created by him and for him." Everything Jesus made is His! It belongs to Him. It is His right to do whatever He wants with His Creation. And every created thing is like a masterpiece that hangs in a gallery with the artist's name below. It points to the Creator and declares: "He, that one, Jesus—He is responsible for this; He deserves the credit, the praise, the glory, the recognition for this wonder of creation."

(17) "He is before all things...." Jesus the Son is the eternal one. Before a clock ever ticked a tock—before there was time—the Son already was! We are bound by time; Jesus is not. We are prisoners of the years; Jesus is the Lord of them. And if you've ever wondered how atoms that are composed of positive and negative parts continue to whirl around each other...ever wondered how our earth spins in space and doesn't just fly away...ever wondered how your body and your soul and your life stays connected...Paul has the answer for that, too: "...in Him all things hold together!" Jesus is the cosmic cohesion that keeps this massively complex universe from just flying apart.

Now Paul moves from the physical to the spiritual. In I Corinthians, he describes the Church as a body... with all different kinds of parts that need to work together. Guess who's in charge of those parts? (18) "He is the head of the body, the church." This church belongs to Jesus! Every church belongs to Jesus. It is His. He is in charge! He is also the "firstborn from among the dead," the resurrected one... the first to be raised and never die again. Death could not hold him... nor can it hold anyone who belongs to him. When Jesus called out the name of Lazarus who had been dead for four days, Lazarus had no choice but to obey the voice of the Master of Life. And up he rose!

(19) "God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross." Jesus, God in the flesh, the eternal one, the Lord of Creation is also the Lord of Redemption. He came to earth on a rescue mission; to save his creation from the ravages of sin. He died a death he did not deserve to die; he took the bullet for us, pushing us out of the way and shielding us with his own body so that we might live. And by that undeserved death on the cross, Jesus Christ has brought peace that no one... nowhere... never... has ever produced. In Christ, we can have life. Only in Christ, can we have life. If you want to live now...if you want to live forever in the presence of God... only Jesus can do that for you. And because of that, only Jesus deserves the praise, honor, glory and eternal gratitude which we offer to the God who saved us.

See what I mean when I speak of the majesty of this passage? And that is why Jesus. That is why everything we are, everything we do as a church centers on, depends upon, relies upon, leans upon Jesus Christ. If we do not have Jesus, we

have nothing. If we do not have Jesus, we are lost. We might as well close our doors, donate our buildings as a community center and go home.

Our church, our membership, our life... it all starts with Jesus. But, honestly, I wasn't anxious to preach this sermon. It seems like such a big "duh," doesn't it? It's not like we don't talk about Jesus around here. Of course our church is centered on Christ. Of course it is all about Jesus. Everybody knows that, right?

And then I visited the East Coast two weeks ago. It was Cooper's birthday present. He and Cyndi and I explored DC and New York. We had a great time. But our last day in New York, we visited the Episcopalian Cathedral of St. John the Divine, the largest church in the country. It is one of the largest cathedrals in the world built to exalt the name of Christ; built to proclaim the saving power of the Jesus we just read about... the Lord of Creation, the Lord of Redemption; built to bring Jesus to the heart of one of the world's great cities. And by the time I was done with that visit, I was heartsick.

I walked into the building, and this is the first thing I saw: twenty-six pronghorn antelope skulls standing on poles in a circle in the center of the church. It was there as part of an environmental protest movement. But it looked like a pagan shrine. It was eerie... and very unsettling.

But I moved on, sat down and pulled out the cathedral's brochure to get a better understanding of this magnificent place. Here it is. I read it from front to back.. the self-description of the ministry of this great cathedral. Guess how many times the name of Jesus appears? Not once! Not one word about Jesus Lord, Jesus Creator, Jesus Savior. This cathedral, named after John who wrote a gospel that described Jesus as God's Word made flesh...has nothing to say about the Jesus he loved and served. The cathedral is, I quote, "a house of prayer... and a unifying center of intellectual light and leadership." It is a place where "people experience the immense possibility of the human spirit..." Where "priests, rabbis, monks and imams share the pulpit as together we seek understanding." Where you are invited to "become part of the spiritual energy that awaits all who walk through our doors." It is a place for the annual blessing of bicycles, the annual blessing of the pets and biannual musical presentations celebrating summer and winter solstice which remind us that we "all live and sing under the same sun." That's spelled S-U-N.

But it says nothing about the S-O-N. It spoke of advocacy groups, activism... it spoke of all kinds of political and environmental causes... but nothing about Jesus. And certainly nothing about the majestic Jesus Paul describes. I was heartsick; not because many of their causes aren't important, but because if you strip away Jesus, the causes just stand there like skulls on a pole. God desires for us to live in harmony with nature but that will never come unless we bow before the Creator of the Universe. God desires peace for this world but it will never come unless we know the Prince of Peace. God desires that all humans be treated with dignity, but

it is only when we know the God who became a human being and dwelt among us that we discover humanity's true worth. If you strip Jesus from the noblest of human causes, all you have left is an echoing shell, as hollow and hopeless as a great, empty cathedral that has forgotten its purpose.

So, my trip to New York was valuable for more than family fun. It reminded me how easily churches lose sight... lose a grip on Who is most important! It reminded me of what happens when churches begin to advocate causes instead of proclaiming the salvation and life that are only available through Jesus. It reminded me of how vibrant places of worship can morph into museums of weirdness when even one generation loses sight of the single most important affirmation in all of human history: Jesus is Lord!

So beloved, that is where we start. As we talk about what it means to be members of this congregation—what it means to be members of the EPC—the starting place is right here: Jesus. What we believe about Jesus, and what we do with what we believe about Jesus is at the center of everything we are... everything we do... everything we hope to be. If that is true for you, if the longing of your heart is to know Jesus and be known by him, to love him and follow him... then this is the place for you.

I want to take a few moments of silence to allow you to ask yourself this question: Is Jesus my Savior and am I seeking to make him Lord of every part of my life? If the answer is "Yes", you have just fulfilled the core requirement of membership in this church. (More importantly, you have just defined the core of what it means to be a Christian.) One way to testify to that is for you to fill out your Re-Membership cards today and turn them in as you leave. And may it forever be said of Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church that, "This is a place that exalts the name of Jesus."

## Sermon Questions

- **REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.

- **PRAY TOGETHER:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.

- **DIG DEEPER**

1. Pastor Mark describes our Colossians text as a "magisterial" representation of Jesus Christ. What does he mean by that? What qualities or attributes of Christ do you find in this passage?
2. The only requirement to join Chapel Hill is an affirmation that you have received Christ as your savior and will seek to follow Him as Lord. Other churches don't make such a big deal about Jesus. Why does it matter?
3. How does what Colossians teaches about Jesus affect our relationship with Him?