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13

Who Is Christ for Us Today? A Holy Week Sermon at United Theological Seminary

> Once when Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples near him, he asked them, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" They answered, "John the Baptist; but others, Elijah; and still others, that one of the ancient prophets has arisen." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"
>
> (Luke 9:18–20a)

Quite aware of what might be waiting for him on his last trip to Jerusalem, Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" The disciples gave him a variety of answers: "Some say this . . . some say that . . . and still others say . . ." Then Jesus pressed them. "But who do you say that I am?"

In this seminary we study Christology. "Who do the crowds of theologians say that I am?" And we answer, "The Council of Chalcedon says . . . Calvin says . . . Schleiermacher says . . . Ruether says . . . Sobrino says . . . " Yet, the Christ will not let us go. "But who do you say that I am?"

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, awaiting his execution at the hands of the Nazis, wrote from his prison cell, "Who is Christ for our

day?" The words are important. Not simply "Who is Christ?" but "Who is Christ *for our day*?" Now the question is both inescapably personal and contemporary. And, "How can we reclaim for Christ a world which has come of age?"[1]

In retrospect, I realize that I have met many Christs. I first met Christ at my mother's knee as the gentle Jesus, meek and mild. He seemed to me, as best I can recall, some combination of a clean, smiling baby in the manger, Sallman's *Head of Christ* in sepia tones, and perhaps a bit of the Easter bunny—all mixed together. I liked that warm and friendly Christ. Gradually that Christ disappeared as my childish sentimentality faded. But even now, years later, something of that warmth remains.

Growing into adolescence, I met Christ as the ideal of religious purity and moral perfection. Here was the model for the Presbyterian youth group, where my attendance was an enforced ritual. But here, also, was one who left me feeling guilty. I did not measure up. That Christ's purity was asexual, but as an adolescent my hormones were in high gear. The holiness of that Christ was a religious perfection, but I constantly felt rebelliously irreligious. That Christ seemed unreal and oppressive. That image too began to fade. Yet something of that Christ's challenge to my integrity and wholeness is still very real.

In college I met a Christ who was both theologically incomprehensible and unbelievable. I could not fathom the formulas of Nicaea and Chalcedon, the miraculous union of one who was fully God and fully human. Though I could not then articulate it, I knew that the dualistic assumptions lying behind such formulas were not good news for me, but bad news. I could not believe that there was an infinite gulf between divinity and humanity, a gulf bridged only once, leaving the rest of us fated with our deficient humanity and needing rescue by a supernatural Savior. I fled from that Christ, and from all things Christianly orthodox. Yet there remains a sense of Christ's unfathomable mystery that will not let me go.

Sometime in my twenties, I met Christ the healer. Years earlier I had dismissed the miraculous New Testament healings as quaint remainders of a first-century worldview. The healing of the blind and disabled, the raising of Lazarus—these were fanciful things a young modern could not believe. But through a study of Paul's letter to the Romans, my eyes were opened in new

ways. I realized that I too was blind and disabled, hungering for a healing, gracious God. In Christ I had now heard a rumor of grace. I am still strongly drawn to that rumor of grace.

It was some years later that I began meeting a prophetic, liberating Christ. I first met that one in the 1960s embodied in courageous Mississippi blacks, in whose modest homes there always hung a picture of Jesus. I met that one in the 1970s in the peaceful anger of war protesters commanding my country to put away its swords. A decade later I saw that one in the faces of amazingly hopeful Nicaraguans who knew that American-financed contras could not finally destroy those for whom Christ was liberator. I met that gender-transcending Christ in women pronouncing a clear and firm "No" to patriarchy and holding up a vision of a different world than I had known. I met that Christ in gay men and lesbians who could have voted with their feet, but who stayed in the church because they believed that the gospel is for all people. That liberating Christ remains strong and pointing to the future.

Something of each of these Christs is still with me, something even from the childhood and youthful images. But there is one more Christ I must name—one who is increasingly important to me. That is the Christ of the empty tomb.

The event occurred in a garden. "Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb." Weeping, she said, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." Then one whom she had mistaken for the gardener said to her, "Mary!" But when she recognized him, he said, "Do not hold on to me." (John 20:1–17, selected.) Or, as other translations have it, "Do not cling to me" (John 20:17, NEB and JB). Go to my brothers and sisters—the power of God is in the world, and in you.

So the tomb is empty. Christ is alive. Christ is not confined in Jesus of Nazareth, or in the first century, or in the sixteenth, or in any doctrinal theories. I dare not cling too closely to Christ as a past event, lest I miss the incarnation present now. It is now or never, for the now is all we have.

Where is God's embodiment now? Where does Word become flesh? Walt Whitman wrote:

Why should I wish to see God better than this day?
I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four,
and each moment then,
In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face
in the glass.[2]

Come then, to still another garden, a garden of lovers. Listen to words from the Song of Solomon. The woman speaks:

Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away; for now the winter is past,
the rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth;
the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtledove
is heard in our land.
(S. of Sol. 2:10–12)

And the man speaks:

How fair and pleasant you are,
O loved one, delectable maiden!
. . . . . .
Oh, may your breasts be like clusters of the vine,
. . . . . .
and your kisses like the best wine.
(S. of Sol. 7:6–9)

Can this too be a picture of the christic presence today? To be sure, the Song depicts an almost idyllic picture. It looks like sexuality without the fallenness of that other garden, Eden. No fig leaves needed here. No bodily shame. In this garden there is no sexism, no dominance or submission. The woman is fully the equal of the man. Each honors the worth and beauty of the other, and together they embrace their sexuality without hint of guilt or exploitation. The lovers delight not only in each other but also in the sensuous delights of the natural world around them—flowers, fruits, fountains.

Here, surely, is God's gift of the erotic. Here is love with passion and heart, love that is warm and moist, love that searches for fulfillment in both giving and receiving. Here is our hunger to taste and smell, to see and touch. Here is the flow of our senses, the sacred power of our desire. Without all of this,

love as sacrifice and self-giving becomes cold. Without this, the world itself becomes hard and metallic.

Can God's own love be erotic? Not a dispassionate, self-sufficient deity dispensing divine favor to helpless humans, but the Lover yearning, seeking, desiring? Can that be true? "In the beginning was the Word" (John 1:1). When that Word came to dwell with us, it became no abstract doctrine, no sacred book, no code of morality. It became flesh.

Jesus, to the horror of squeamish Christians, was a laughing, crying, sweating, eating, drinking, digesting, urinating, defecating, sexual, sensuous bundle of flesh just as we are. If we cannot believe that, we shall have difficulty believing in the holiness of our own bodies. If we cannot believe that, we shall have difficulty believing that we have met God in one of us—and still meet God in flesh. But there is the good news! God embraces human flesh as the fitting vehicle of divine presence. God's embodiment continues wherever our love becomes flesh and our flesh becomes love. The divine dwells among us full of grace and truth. The tomb is empty. Matter is blessed. Incarnation is still real. Might we still "behold that glory"?

In a culture that does not really honor matter but cheapens it, in a culture that does not love the body but uses it, belief in God's incarnation is countercultural stuff. We will need some death and resurrection. Yet those realities are not foreign to our faith.

Do you remember that resurrection scene in Thornton Wilder's homely, wise play *Our Town*? Through the miracle of the playwright, Emily Gibbs, who had died in childbirth in her mid-twenties, is allowed to leave her grave on the hill above Grover's Corners and return to life for one day. Against the counsel of others in the graveyard who tell her that the return will be too painful, she decides to come back for one day, and chooses her twelfth birthday.[3]

The scene of her return opens in the kitchen, where her mother is busy fixing breakfast. Fourteen years have gone by. Emily pleads with Mama to look at her, just for a moment, as though she really saw her. Mama, however, is too busy.

This is the way the day unfolds. People are too busy to notice or to touch. Before long it is too much for her, and Emily cries out that she can't go on. It is too painful. It goes too fast. She

never realized all that was going on, and people never noticed. She pleads to be taken back up the hill to her grave. But first she takes one more look and says her goodbyes.

How sensual and bodily are her farewells! The divine yearning for the incarnational mystery is there. Emily says goodbye to the world, and to Grover's Corners, and to Mama and Papa. She bids farewell to clocks that are ticking and to Mama's sunflowers. She says goodbye to food and coffee and newly ironed dresses, to hot baths and sleeping and waking. She exclaims that the earth is just too wonderful for anyone to realize it. Does anyone, she wonders, ever realize life while they are living it? Or are we blind to it all? A moment later the Stage Manager suggests to her that perhaps saints and poets do, at least sometimes.

Who is Christ for us today? And where do we meet the christic presence? No single answer will be adequate. But perhaps the empty tomb might have its place among our answers. Then, in the midst of an often painful, unjust, and terror-filled world, we might also find Christ as the erotic presence of the Cosmic Lover who still meets us in the flesh of our days: the One who promises that the winter shall be past, the flowers shall appear on the earth, the time of singing shall come, and the voice of the turtledove shall be heard in our land.

Amen.

lishing Corporation, 1988), esp. 83–86. See also David G. Hallman, ed., *AIDS Issues: Confronting the Challenge* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989).

3. See Susan Sontag, *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989), to whom I am indebted for many insights here.

4. See Kent L. Sandstrom, "Confronting Deadly Disease: The Drama of Identity Construction and Management Among Gay Men with AIDS-Related Infections," *The Life Course Center Working Papers Number 89-4* (Minneapolis: Department of Sociology, University of Minnesota, 1989), whose excellent empirical study informs the paragraphs to follow.

5. Victor Turner develops the notion of liminality in *The Ritual Process* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1969).

6. See Sandstrom's applications of liminality to AIDS, *Working Papers,* 9.

7. Sandstrom, *Working Papers,* 29. For an illuminating account of the process of embracing a different disease, see Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals.*

8. Brian Coyle, *Coming to Terms: The Coyle Journals* (Minneapolis: Equal Time, 1991), 5.

9. The American Medical Association survey, published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association,* was reported in the (Minneapolis) *Star-Tribune,* Nov. 27, 1991. The survey also stated that 50 percent of the doctors surveyed said they would not work with AIDS patients if given a choice and that 26 percent said that dying patients made them uneasy.

10. Role and relationship issues are well addressed in Leonard I. Pearlin, Shirley J. Semple, and Heather Turner, "The Stress of AIDS Care Giving: A Preliminary Overview of the Issues," in *AIDS: Principles, Practices, and Politics,* 279–290.

Chapter 12. I Thank God for You: A Sermon for Lesbian and Gay Awareness Week at United Theological Seminary

1. Carter Heyward, *Our Passion for Justice* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1984), 93.

Chapter 13. Who Is Christ for Us Today? A Holy Week Sermon at United Theological Seminary

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Prisoner for God: Letters and Papers from Prison,* 157.

2. Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," *Walt Whitman's Leaves of*

Grass, ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York: Penguin Books, 1959), sec. 48, p. 83.

3. See Thornton Wilder, *Our Town,* Harper Colophon edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 99–100.