

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

I SAMUEL 15:34-16:13

PSALM 20

II CORINTHIANS 5:6-17

MARK 4:26-34

June 16, 2024

### *The Human Factor!*

The Miller brewing company has dug deep into the vault of its advertising archives and revived the ridiculous but always funny debate made famous in the 1980s, a host of celebrities intensely arguing as to whether Lite Beer tastes great or is less filling, a monumental decision for the ages now raging on the airwaves once again. Of course, we all know the answer they want beer drinkers everywhere to acknowledge, that their brand of brew is both/and, not either/or. My dad used to say that life was too short to drink lite beer! He was a work! The late Edward Schillebeeckx, not at all a household name, was a fabulous theologian who wrote two massive volumes, one called *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* and one called *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*. Back when I was in seminary, rumor had it that this theologian extraordinaire would write a third volume, naturally titled *Jesus Christ!* Obviously that volume never came to pass because I did a thorough Google search and could not find it. If Google cannot find it, then it must not be. It does not exist. I mention these two very thick and laboriously tedious volumes because there seems to be a renewed debate today pitting the Christ of faith, the cosmic Christ as many progressives call this mysterious Christly Spirit, juxtaposed against the Jesus of history, the person about whom we catch glimpses as we read the Gospels. Each rendition reveals just a sliver of insight, each version a hint into the person of the historical Jesus, the man from Nazareth, offering at least some of our hero's adventures, all of them eloquently described in these fanciful stories. **In my travels over the last three weeks, I have seen countless billboards along the highways as well as simple signs nailed to telephone poles—most of them in the south—warning of the wrath to come, an angry Jesus returning to take care of business and take out the wicked. This perverse propaganda is offensive and does a major disservice to the man of peace who came to teach us a better way, a loving way, a hospitably inclusive and welcoming way. Guilt, judgment, and punishment is not the way of Jesus! Never has been! Never will be!**

In the Witness from the Hebrew Bible in I Samuel today we read the wonderful story about the way David was chosen to be the next king over all Israel. The text contains a contradictory image that is easily overlooked because of many other important happenings that occur in this pivotal narrative. Responding to the rejection of Eliab, one of the seven brothers who failed to make the cut in what apparently, and unfortunately, became a beauty contest, we read in the seventh verse, "But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Have no regard for his appearance or stature, because I have not selected him. God does not look at things like humans do. Humans see only what is visible to the eyes, but the Lord sees into the heart.'" Okay, sounds reasonable, never fall for the eye candy! Good luck with that! Somehow that line works knowing the salacious trial of a former president than thankfully came to its conclusion! Moving a mere five verses later in the text, remembering that the Bible originally had no

chapters and verses, we read about the gushing, “ga ga”, response when young David, the youngest of the brothers, was brought into the room. We are told, “So, Jesse sent and brought him in. He was reddish brown, had beautiful eyes, and was good-looking. The Lord said, ‘That is the one! Go anoint him!’ So, Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him right there in front of his brothers.” “Have no regard for his appearance or stature . . . God does not look at things like humans do. Humans see only what is visible to the eyes, but the Lord sees into the heart.” Okay, got it! As many a perplexed parent has said in frustrated exasperation, “Do as I say and not as I do!” For me, this story reminds me of the envy of Joseph’s brothers, he of that technicolor dream coat story, yes, that Hebrew Bible tale from Genesis quickly coming to mind. So, David was a hottie! Never be deluded by good looks, never fall for the shiny object, never be fooled by first or even second impressions. Looks can be so deceiving! Folks, we are human, so very human, DNA human, relying heavily on our senses, what we see, hear, smell, taste, and touch, feel giving us such an important and often more than subjective vibe. And in its own odd way, this statement gets us to where we are headed today as we ponder the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. It is a reminder that to relate to the illusive Spirit of Christ we need handles, tangible images that allow us to relate. Jesus, through his life and brief ministry as described in the Gospels allows us those handles.

**The early Church in its ecclesial laboratories called ecclesiastical councils was expediently quick in its transparent agenda to cast the Jesus of history as the Christ of faith, recasting, reincarnating his image to misuse that word, reconstructing, reconstituting, and to use my favorite duo of words, recalibrating and retrofitting, designed to create an interesting and intriguing transformation, a complete makeover, of the humble rabbi from Nazareth. Call it the ultimate transfiguration! The persona we are left to consider, to ponder deeply, is a hybrid, a surreal figure at best. Constructed as both divine and human the man hailing from Galilee was suddenly rendered neither, becoming something *that*, not *who*, might be described as freakish, truly considered by some back in the day, and even now, a freak of nature, an unapproachable enigma. As both/and this human/divine creation sadly has often been strangely portrayed like an ancient version of Jekyll and Hyde, revealing a yin and yang personality, playing good cop/bad cop, the polarities radically diverging within the same Bible, the same book of books describing these bizarre divine/human dichotomies.** Though the debate might be viewed, considered as mere semantics, it is of consequential import and always has been. The decisions made once upon a time and that we now make matter because we are learning that there are consequences to our conclusions. And with all that background information to cloud and clutter our minds, we are off and running on another homiletical journey together. Oh, how we long thought the early Church had settled this divisive debate, demanding, yes, insisting, that Jesus Christ, uh, Christ Jesus, was miraculously divine and human and all at the same time. The viewpoint equally affirming the both/and of the human/divine dilemma quickly galvanized in the early Church as the only viable option, galvanized as orthodoxy, an imprimatur for the ages, almost immediately becoming the only acceptable doctrinal solution. Failure to believe, to embrace this narrow and rigid interpretation guaranteed an invitation to experience a certain and torturous death, burned at the stake as a heretic hellbent on flaming the fires of heresy. Go figure! Such love and grace! **As Dale the Bishop, uh, Dale Bishop, said in this pulpit on a recent Sunday, “The worst thing that has ever happened to the Christian Church, the body of Christ, was when it got addicted to power, or rather when it entertained the illusion of having power, when it was embraced by its**

former foe, the Roman Empire. It was then that Jesus on a cross was replaced by Christ with a crown, when the suffering Jesus was replaced by a triumphant imperial Christ.”

In the dust jacket to his book *The Third Jesus: the Christ We Cannot Ignore*, Deepak Chopra says that “First, there is the historical Jesus, the man who lived more than two thousand years ago and whose teachings are the foundation of Christian theology and thought. Next there is Jesus the Son of God,” I would use the terms Christ or Messiah, “who has come to embody an institutional religion with specific dogma, a priesthood, and devout believers.”<sup>1</sup> Chopra then describes a third delineation he calls “. . . the cosmic Christ, the spiritual guide whose teaching embraces all humanity, not just the church built in his name. He speaks to the individual who wants to find God as a personal experience, to attain what some might call grace, or God-consciousness, or enlightenment.”<sup>2</sup> It is the second manifestation intoned by Chopra that has been prone to abuse, including misinterpretation and misappropriation, Jesus often portrayed as a harbinger of judgment and retribution, eternal punishment belying the Jesus of love. Chopra adds, “The early Church was rife with disputes and conflicts, just like every other faith that had come before. To emerge from this chaos, to survive as followers of the Messiah, was a life-and-death challenge. As a result, Christianity was forced to compromise Jesus’s vision: The alternative—a complete transformation of human nature—was proving impossible. Those few who could achieve it became known as saints, and they were far removed from the dirty, bustling world and its corrupt ways.”<sup>3</sup>

Chopra declares that “Jesus is in trouble. When people worship him today—or even speak his name—the object of their devotion is unlikely to be who they think he is. A mythical Jesus has grown up over time. He has served to divide peoples and nations. He has led to destructive wars in the name of religious fantasies. The legacy of love found in the New Testament has been tainted with the worst sort of intolerance and prejudice that would have appalled Jesus in life. Most troubling of all, his teachings have been hijacked by people who hate in the name of love.”<sup>4</sup> Chopra adds, “No matter where you look, a cloud of confusion hangs over the message of Jesus. To cut through it we have to be specific about who we mean when we refer to Jesus. One Jesus is historical, and we know next to nothing about him. Another Jesus is the one appropriated by Christianity. The third Jesus . . . is as yet so unknown that even the most devout Christians don’t suspect that he exists. Yet he is the Christ we cannot—and must not—ignore.” “The first Jesus was a rabbi who wandered the shores of northern Galilee many centuries ago. This Jesus still feels close enough to touch. He appears in our mind’s eye dressed in homespun but haloed in glory. He was kind, serene, peaceful, loving, and yet he was the keeper of deep mysteries.”<sup>5</sup> “This historical Jesus has been lost, however, swept away by history. He still lingers like a ghost, a projection of all the ideal qualities we wish for in ourselves but so painfully lack. Why couldn’t there be one person who was perfectly loving, perfectly compassionate, and perfectly humble? There can be if we call him Jesus and remove

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<sup>1</sup>Deepak Chopra, *The Third Jesus: The Christ We Cannot Ignore* (New York: Harmony Books, a division of Random House Inc.), dust jacket.

<sup>2</sup>ibid.

<sup>3</sup>ibid., 3.

<sup>4</sup>ibid., 7.

<sup>5</sup>ibid., 8.

him to a time thousands of years in the past . . .”<sup>6</sup> Regarding what we know of the person of Jesus, his history, Chopra observes, “. . . the more contradictions we unearth, the less mythical this Jesus becomes. The flesh-and-blood man who is lost to history must have been an extraordinary human. To be divine, one must be rich in every human quality first.”<sup>7</sup> Well said! “As one famous Indian spiritual teacher once said, ‘The measure of enlightenment is how comfortable you feel with your own contradictions.’”<sup>8</sup>

**In anticipation of this sermon, an idea that has been rolling around in my head for quite some time as potential sermon fodder, I had the opportunity to discuss my thoughts with my good friend Alan Culpepper while we fished for striped bass on Lake Hartwell. Dr. Culpepper is a passionate angler and world-renowned New Testament scholar who has written a boatload of books. He immediately reminded me of something that I was totally missing, a great point indeed! None of the major creeds, the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, or the Athanasian Creed, say anything about the life of Jesus, totally skipping over what many of us believe to be the most important, most essential, part of the Jesus story. Each one of these creeds, for centuries right down to the present recited in some churches every Sunday, came to define doctrinal orthodoxy that continues to shape Christian theology and ecclesiology today begins with the virgin birth and immediately skips to the crucifixion under Pontius Pilate. Nothing is even remotely mentioned about the profound life of Jesus during his brief three-year ministry, not the slightest hint of the man who walked the talk on earth. This vital information is totally missing, creating a huge void! In is this missing intel that speaks volumes, a sermon all its own!** Perhaps this was by accident, a mere oversight, but probably, most likely, a blatant attempt to dismiss the radically loving and gracious, merciful and peaceful, model life of Jesus as sibling, brother, friend, colleague, and mentor, a fellow traveler in faith, a seeker of God and an individual who embodied the presence of God like none other. The result is that throughout the centuries we have been required, forced, to believe a set of precepts, the creeds offering no guidelines for following in the wonderful footsteps of the one who has taught us the best way to order our lives, how to learn, live, and love in the world, yes, how to get along. It is missing, simply not there! Instead, we read of an oft guilt-inducing, judgmental figure, a condemnatory Christ who arbitrarily casts into hell those who rejected him or chose an alternative pathway. In this regard the creeds have done a huge disservice to those of us whose pathways to faith are informed and impacted by believing the words of life instilled by Jesus, inherently imbued and fully revealed in the special life of the rabbi, the one we regard as teacher and master, even calling him savior and Lord.

Now, we see the dynamics surrounding the debate about this presumably settled for all time as the only orthodox position rearing its ugly head once again, as if it ever truly was resolved, at its basics pitting progressives against conservatives and vice versa. I must quickly acknowledge that naming this dilemma comes with sweeping generalizations. But this debate is no longer simply a matter of semantics, linguistic nuance, but has reached a crisis point battling for the soul of the faith handed down to us by our forebears, our forefathers and foremothers who carved their faithful niche in response to the call of the gospel of Christ, seeking to fully follow in the way of Jesus. Sidebar! There

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 8.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 8-9.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 8-9.

is a reason that in our liturgy that for the most part, other than the familiar and traditional tagline to the Collect, I prefer to use the phrase Christ Jesus rather than the traditional Jesus Christ because Christ was not Jesus' last name, a name, by the way, we do not know because we do not know Joseph's family or surname. As you are aware, Christ was a title, not a name, Christos being the Greek term for Messiah, the Hebrew term.

Part of what has nudged me to think about these things, aside from the fact I am always pondering these kinds of things, they haunt me, pursue me, make me crazy, is the fact that the early Church seems to have quickly forgotten about the life of Jesus, whether by accident or intent, references in the letter to the Hebrews offering a delightful exception. The earliest Christian scriptures, what we traditionally call the New Testament, make rare, if any, mention of the Jesus of history, the man from Nazareth. It is as if he was being intentionally ignored, avoided completely. The apostle Paul never knew Jesus, and thus he mentions nothing about his life, his preaching and teaching, his mission and ministry. The best the former Pharisee can offer is the assertion that Jesus was born of a woman! Well, aren't we all! We hope! The Pauline epistles show a total ignorance of the historical Jesus, a total disregard of his person, Paul being the poster boy, a quintessential example of the kind of amnesia the early Church seemed to suffer and suffer quickly. **The early Church, post resurrection, ascension, and Pentecost, seems to shift gears dramatically, forgetting the Jesus who existed on this planet while embracing the Christ of faith, all the gloriously divine aspects, many of which were solely reserved for the Caesar in power.** Suddenly, these divine attributes were gloriously heaped on the post-resurrection Jesus with all kinds of flattery, call it Christological speak, Christology being the stuff about Christ as well as the study of Christ. Jesus seems to get lost in the sauce of the historical and linguistic shuffle, the human one reconfigured to fit a patriarchal power struggle driven by a blatantly hierarchical agenda, suiting the fancies of an all-male clergy club. The unfortunate byproduct of this seemingly sudden hyper-emphasis now obsessively focusing on the Christ figure, is that the Church began to embrace a saved vs. lost mentality based on a transactional acceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, sometimes even coercively confessing sin as mandatory, an unwavering profession of faith demanded for acceptance, admittance. The human, historical, Jesus seemed to no longer be regarded as brother, sibling, friend, guide, and mentor, terms of endearment and intimacy, nearer not farther away from us. Christ became a figure of judgment and condemnation, willing to send the unrepentant sinner straight to the fire and brimstone of hell, forever cast into the lake of fire to burn in eternity, the place prepared for the devil and his angels. Jesus' death became nothing more, or at the least the equivalency of a child sacrifice, something forbidden in the ancient cult of the Hebrews. Yes, Jesus would do just fine, sufficing as a perfect sacrifice, an expiation to use a biblical term, the rabbi offered in place of the many animals slaughtered for centuries in the hopes of appeasing an angry and vengeful God, yes, divine retribution, Jesus executed by crucifixion instead of us, in our place, for our sins, the ones who presumably, really, deserved such a violent death.

**As the Church gained acceptance under Constantine, while consolidating power as it spread throughout the Roman empire, more and more institutionalized with a patriarchal bent with every passing day, the Church began to unwittingly juxtapose the Jesus of history against the Christ of faith as if they were in competition, pitting them against each other as if they were adversaries, rather than harmonizing them as tandem images consisting of two sides of the same coin. All this**

tension created a host of unfortunate and unacceptable dichotomies: getting saved vs. being eternally lost, damned forever; the suffering servant motif that way too easily, conveniently, seamlessly, fit the humble rabbi from Nazareth, articulated in the prophecy of Isaiah vs. Christus Victor, the victorious Christ wielding a viciously sharp sword of derision and division while riding a white horse, all the while battling for souls and the souls of the nations; transactional theologies vs. relational engagement, all of it baptized, yes, immersed in positively transitional, transformational, call it transfigurative images; guilt, judgement, and punishment vs. gracious love, mercy and peace, all driven by good deeds fueled by a passion for social justice; humility vs. triumphalism; isolationist sectarianism, just us and no one else vs. ecumenism, universalism, interfaith, discovering the wonders of different pathways to God, all beautiful images; heaven vs. hell; and, the wonder of eternity as part of this divine creation vs. the belief in a second coming fueled by God's anger and retributive justice, carrying out an end time crusade in the righteous destruction of the world, destroying all the perceived evil within it, obliterating everything God had once called good, no, very good, at creation; a faith that is vertical rather than horizontal; and, finally, doing vs. being, believing vs. faith when being and doing should be of one accord, believing always a pathway leading to faith. Yes, these are blanket generalizations with much overlap, always exceptions because this is not a rule, but we see the mixed reviews and results in the radically different approaches to Christianity exhibited within traditional, conservative, fundamentalist, progressive, and liberal expressions of contemporary Christianity. Yes, the very Bible we read, contains a mixture of metaphors, many of which when taken literally, lead to a variety of beliefs, often agitating the anxiety ridden, instigating unfortunate splits, irreparable schism, even hatred and violence, yes, the unfortunate result that theological diversity often breeds, as well as spawning sectarian movements such as white Christian nationalism, an insult to the faith of our forebears and a blemish on the rich legacy of Jesus, a blight, a scourge, against all who sought diligently to be humble followers of the way of Jesus and his selfless egalitarian way.

I am not advocating embracing one viewpoint while abandoning another, but I am in favor of these polarities, what appear to be competing, divergent assumptions, finding common ground accentuated by generous ways of communicating, conversing, yes, crosspollinating with one another, each informing the other, keeping balance, a much-needed theological equilibrium. In other words, throwing the proverbial baby out with the bathwater is never an acceptable or suitable solution. And yet, even while saying these things, pointing out these inconsistencies, I always lean toward Jesus as the model, the best way forward for Christians and the Church. I truly believe that the only real hope for creating a vibrant and vital, relational and relevant Church, with vibrant and vital, relational and relevant local missional churches and all the people who attend and join them is to bring the humanity of Jesus back into the equation, putting the historical Jesus, Jesus the person, the man from Nazareth front and center of all that we seek to be and all that we seek to do as the body of Christ. What we see in the life of Jesus should be what we get! Our job in our local community and in the world at large is to emulate Jesus' actions, to model his behavior, to allow his life's ethic, his moral compass, to dictate, to guide everything we say and do as people of faith, as people who claim Christian faith. Yes, while it certainly qualifies as cliché, and you all know how much I hate clichés, "What would Jesus do?" should be our mantra with every thought our minds can conceive, our hearts

long, and every breath we take. The question Jesus raises in our consciousness is simply, “What have you done for me, lately?”

We can spend a lifetime trying to get our theology right, trying to live up to the doctrinal demands the creeds have imposed on us from the earliest ecclesial councils, the council of Nicaea in 325 most worthy of note, a turning point, an inflection point, a game-changer, indeed, this meeting of the narrow minds a pivotal, bellwether summit. These gatherings of an all-male leadership from the ecclesial beginnings have shaped the Church, yes from the very inception of this institutional juggernaut. It can be exhausting, certainly anything but exhilarating, trying to say the right things, believe the right stuff, recite the perfect professions, declare with conviction every fundamental of the faith that somebody, some people, somehow and somewhere, once thought was more important than the people these sacrosanct documents were meant to serve, definite imperatives that we must believe or else, beyond a shadow of all doubt. Good luck with that! Back in the day, many lost their lives, were burned at the stake as heretics because the mind could not absorb, could never begin to embrace what the heart desperately and diligently sought to receive. Ask yourselves! How much of the theological requirements, yes, most of it very biblical, would meet the Jesus test, would be essential, required by the good rabbi?

**I have always wondered what Jesus would have thought of the Gospel portrayals of his life, all the mythologies that were attached to his person as well as the non-canonical renderings and every writing since describing, devoted to his person. What would he have thought of the stories about his birth, the legends regarding his miracles, his resurrection, his ascension? How would he have read them? My hunch is that he would have thought they were all good, very nice, even great, stories, as over-the-top, embellished and exaggerated as all the “Gospelic” hyperbole was, and then he would have said something to the effect of “do not sweat the small stuff.” If you really want to follow me, heed the solid advice found in the prophet Micah, who answered the question for the ages that still speaks a word in opposition to all the theological fine print that well-intentioned human beings have created, “With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before God with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” Or put another way for our purposes, shall I believe in every doctrine, every theological precept? Shall I literally believe everything I read in the Bible, accepting this sacred story of stories, these fascinating tales of legendary expression, at face value. Shall I recite the creeds, confess the confessions, acclaim the affirmations? Shall I buy into every mythological musing which seem like nonsense to those, the many, who embrace the factual findings learned in this post-modern, post-scientific age of discovery in which we live, knowing deep in my spirit, deeper in my soul, that this language was intended to convey the awe and wonder of mystery, transcendence, and was not meant to be taken at face value, literally embraced as historically factual? We know beyond all question that these texts are bound within the confines of a specific time and space and are open to interpretation, yes, to new understanding, if we believe that God is still speaking a contemporary word today, right here and right now in our local and broadest context. Sadly, then and now the Bible is deviously used to trip or trap the unsuspecting doubter, skeptic, or cynic, the biblical narrative separating wheat from chaff on the**

human scale. Jesus might very well then give the answer that Micah once gave to that very question asked long before the good rabbi walked among his constituents, a question raised for the ages, "God has told you, O mortal, what is good! And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." Don't sweat the small stuff! God will work out the details! Don't sweat the pebbles when there are boulders everywhere! Don't concern yourself with the speck in your neighbor's eye when there is a log in your own? No one is free to throw a stone in very fragile and vulnerable glass houses, none made by human hands and all of them precious in God's sight, God's eyesight 20/20 x-ray vision into every soul. There are so many small things that loom large, obsessively consumed by the shallow people who promote and insist on the small stuff, demanding that all of their viewpoints be embraced as truth with no room for doubt or questioning! And when did we see you hungry or thirsty or naked or in prison, alone, isolated, oh, yes, we remember, when we did unto the least of these your brothers and sisters. And with that synopsis, so goes the priorities for following Jesus, for being faithful to God, for being true to self, all of it loving in every way! In the skeletal information we glean from our readings in the Gospels, Jesus takes us by the hand and shows us the way, a loving way to live our lives, a better, no, the best way, showing us who he was, and continues to be, the first time and every time. Following Jesus is best achieved when we find ways to get in touch with his being even as he touches us, to interact with his life and his words, seeking in every way to emulate the one who has taught us well, taught us everything we need to know that we will continue to become, to be all that we can be, to be and do all that God desires us to be!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and shows us the way of Christ through the amazing person of Jesus, inseparable in every way! Amen and amen!