

Message: “To Learn Christ”

One day, old-time songwriter and actor, Hoagy Carmichael, decided to take up golf. He arranged for lessons with an instructor. At the first session, Hoagy was patiently shown the basics of the game: how to hold the club, how to stand, how to swing, that kind of thing.

After half an hour, the instructor felt Hoagy was ready to drive a few toward the first hole. The ball was teed up. Hoagy stepped up to it, swung, then watched the ball sail down the fairway, bound onto the green and roll into the cup - a hole in one!

The instructor was shocked. Hoagy flipped the club to a caddy with a jaunty motion, then turned to the still speechless instructor. “OK,” he said casually, “I think I’ve got the idea now.”

It’d be nice to be able to get things right the first time. But this only happens once in a blue moon, which is why we tell the story when it happens. The rest of us learn through trial and error.

Learning Christ is this way. Now the expression “to learn Christ” was common for the earliest Christians, but it’s not a phrase we use much these days. In the early centuries of the Christian movement, becoming a follower involved denying pagan gods and a period of catechism, committing to intensive study of the person and work of Jesus.

Some of you may remember confirmation. Most churches had lengthy programs of study, reflection, memorization and work. I remember a two-year program, capped off reciting the Nicene Creed publicly as part of a service.

Today, confirmation programs are a few weeks long, if that. I’m not suggesting we turn the clock back, though classes for people who want to join aren’t bad, and I do recommend small groups. But it seems to me we’re missing an opportunity.

There are two primary reasons why I recommend learning Jesus. One is devoting ourselves to growing closer to Jesus. This is how we become intimate with God, hear the promptings of the Spirit, and sense the Lord’s presence through the beauty of love. There’s great value in imitating Jesus’ life and devoted way of living. This includes spending time in scripture, prayer and serving people.

There's a second reason to learn Jesus. We need to know Jesus if we're going to share him as the reason for the hope we have. When we're living questionable lives, both the devotional and missional purposes for learning Christ intersect.

As Jesus' disciples, we're sent into the world to live intriguing lives, arouse curiosity, and answer people's questions about the hope we have. So, we need to be familiar with what Jesus would do or say in any circumstance.

Remember the bracelets: WWJD, what would Jesus do?

This seems like a great question to ask ourselves and share with our neighbors. But we can't know the answer without a deep and ongoing relationship with him. This includes study of the narratives of Jesus written by those who knew him best. These are the Gospels.

Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch co-wrote a book called *ReJesus*.

They contend the church needs to be immersed in Christ, or as they put it, "totally marinated in the work and words of Jesus." They reference C.S. Lewis, who promoted a life "preoccupied with the example and teaching of Jesus."

Of course, we can't emulate Christ's salvific birth, death and resurrection, or his miracles, divinity, authority or independence. But we can examine and reflect on the person of Jesus and what he did. In this way, we can see how aspects of his character and activity can be emulated by us as human beings.

This provides the tools for following his way of living in our lives.

When we devote ourselves to Jesus, we go beyond mining the Gospels for advice on how to answer "WWJD?". We become students of the whole of Scripture, to understand the context of Jesus' life and mission, and our relationship with God.

Theologian John Stackhouse says it well, "'What did Jesus say?' is the wrong question for Christian thought just as 'What would Jesus do?' is the wrong question for Christian ethics. 'What would Jesus want me or us to think, be and do, here and now?' is the right question.'" ¹

¹ Michael Frost, *Surprise the World*, NavPress, 2016, pp. 73-74

The concern many of us share is most people only have a superficial knowledge of Jesus. Call them Jesus' greatest hits: his birth, death, resurrection, a few miracles and a couple of parables, plus some bits from his hillside message. If we're to figure out what Jesus would want us to think, be, and do here and now, we must know his life backward and forward. But that's just the start...

We need to embrace Jesus' *incarnational* mission. You're probably wondering what that is. The term mission comes from Latin. It means "to be sent" or "to be propelled outward." A lot of people get the idea mission means going out to people with a message of love and grace, rather than just waiting for people to come to us. This is accurate.

But the term *incarnational* adds depth and body. It describes not simply going out but also the difficult work of going deep with people. God took on flesh and lived among us in the person of Jesus. This is what incarnation means. God entered the world and became human, living with us and experiencing what we experience. This is how Jesus has credibility. He knew our suffering. Through it, Jesus offers us a new life and a new way of living, renewing our relationship with God.

In the same way, as Jesus' followers, we're called to live our lives with family, friends, neighbors, strangers, even enemies. This means sharing life with all its joys and sorrows, highs and lows, passions and devotion. We are to pattern our lives on the incarnation, embodying love, grace and mercy. This seems easy, but it's not something we get right at first.

How are we to truly live with our neighbors as God's ambassadors? We embrace the example of Jesus, figuring out what Jesus would do in any instance. For example, would Jesus attend a Super Bowl party on Sunday? Would he laugh at that colleague's joke? Would he disagree with a neighbor's opinion?

Turning to scripture is the first step.

We need to hold our positions lightly, always learning from different traditions and writings. And we need to share our experiences and thoughts with each other. This rhythm of learning and theological reflection will serve us well on our spiritual journey.

This week's practice is to spend time learning Christ. For most of us, this means reading and reflecting on scripture or a commentary or topical text. I have a number you can borrow, if you like.

I recommend our Wednesday or Sunday Bible study, if you are interested in exploring this experience. For some, it may be as simple as reading the *Daily Bread* or a devotional each day. Start small with something that's easy.

Not interested in the book yet? Maybe you can find time to watch a film, like *Godspell*, *Jesus Christ Superstar* or *The Miracle Maker*. Too long? Check out *The Chosen*, which is a series on cable.

I also remind you this is just the first step. Remember our need to marinate our souls in Jesus? It's not just a cute expression. Through biblical study, theological reading, and the viewing of media, we slowly but surely orient our lives toward the things of Christ, just as Paul did. And we become deeply familiar with his story so we can share it whenever anyone asks us for the reason for the hope we have in him.

One of the beautiful things that happens to people who marinate in Christ is they start to talk about Jesus like he's their hero, their friend, their leader, their companion. Let me offer an illustration.

Michael Frost once spoke at a conference in Australia for a parachurch ministry called Christian Surfers. Christian Surfers is an awesome ministry aiming to share Jesus with young surfers. They have chapters in beachside towns all around the world.

During one session, Mike asked the attendees, all hardcore surfers, to name their favorite surfer of all time. Now, when you ask a room full of keen surfers to name their surfing hero, the room erupts. Several names were called out, but the name heard most often was surfer Kelly Slater.

This was no surprise. Slater has been crowned the world surfing champion a record eleven times, including five consecutive times from 1994-98. He's both the youngest (age 20) and the oldest (age 39) to win the title.

"Okay, okay," Mike called out to the excitable audience.

"Let's choose Kelly Slater as our example. So, what do you all know about Kelly Slater?"

This time the room didn't just erupt, it combusted. When Mike asked a bunch of surfers to tell him what they knew about the most successful surfer in history, they went nuts!

They were yelling and screaming facts about Slater's life:

where he grew up (Cocoa Beach), what boards he uses (Channel Island surfboards), which years he won, what movies and television shows he's appeared in, and on and on. It was pandemonium.

And it took a while to quiet them all down again.

Later in the session, Mike was talking about marinating in Christ so we can share Jesus as the reason for the hope we have.

He asked the same group, "What do you all know about Jesus?"

The response was very different. It wasn't as if these folks didn't know anything about Jesus. They're highly committed evangelists. They lead many young surfers to Christ every year.

But the response was much more muted. Slowly and quietly people offered things they knew about Jesus: "He's Lord," "He died for our sins," "He rose from the dead." But these were presented as doctrinal beliefs, statements of faith. Mike asked them why they didn't speak about Jesus in the same way they'd just been telling him about Kelly Slater. Again, crickets.²

This seems to be our challenge today. I don't think every Christian is an evangelist, but I do think every Christian should be able to share their faith, the reason they have hope. When we live questionable lives, people should see our strange, loving behavior and ask us about our motivations.

And when they do, we should be able to speak about Jesus the way surfers speak about Kelly Slater: with energy and enthusiasm, reverence and awe, delight and wonder.

Let us joyfully sow seeds of faith so lives are drawn to God. Amen.

Let us pray ...

² *Ibid*, pp. 81-83

Group Practice

How did your blessings and eating go this week? And were you able to spend time listening for the Spirit's voice? If not, what limits you? How can you get back on track? Remember, it's about consistency, not perfection.

This week's lesson: be patient. Stick to a pace you can sustain.

Learning to be patient is perhaps the most critical skill of all. You can make incredible progress if you are consistent and patient.

Patience is everything. If you're working out, you should probably go slower than you think. If you're adding daily meditation to your rhythm, you should probably start with less time than you expect to handle.

Do things you can sustain. New habits should feel easy, especially in the beginning. If you stay consistent and continue increasing your habit it will get hard enough, fast enough. It always does. It's better to do it right, than go fast.

This week's practice: Bless 3 people. Eat with 3 people. Spend time listening for the Spirit's voice. Learn something about Jesus.

Let's practice. Close your eyes or soften them. Take a couple of deep breaths. Imagine yourself sitting at a table with Jesus. Enjoy it. [pause]

Center yourself on him. You may say a word like Abba, love, peace, Savior, healer, teacher. Let love fill your heart. [pause]

Ask Jesus to guide your life and help you with your burdens. [pause]

When we look inside, we find Love present. When you look at the people you meet each day, Love is present in them too. Let this be oxygen to your soul. May it draw your eyes outward to your neighbors and your prayers upward to our Holy God. [pause] *Open your eyes and return to this moment.*

Gracious God, thank you for life and the many ways you bless our lives. Thank you for Jesus, who showed us by example how to walk with you and love as you do. Guide and direct our steps as we learn new habits. Walk with us as we seek to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ. In his name we pray, amen

1 Corinthians 13:1-6 (CEB)

If I speak in tongues of human beings and of angels but I don't have love, I'm a clanging gong or a clashing cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and I know all the mysteries and everything else, and if I have such complete faith that I can move mountains but I don't have love, I'm nothing. If I give away everything that I have and hand over my own body to feel good about what I've done but I don't have love, I receive no benefit whatsoever.

Love is patient, love is kind, it isn't jealous, it doesn't brag, it isn't arrogant, it isn't rude, it doesn't seek its own advantage, it isn't irritable, it doesn't keep a record of complaints, it isn't happy with injustice, but it is happy with the truth.

Philippians 2:1-5 (CEB)

Therefore, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort in love, any sharing in the Spirit, any sympathy, complete my joy by thinking the same way, having the same love, being united, and agreeing with each other. Don't do anything for selfish purposes, but with humility think of others as better than yourselves. Instead of each person watching out for their own good, watch out for what is better for others. Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus.