



**North Shore  
Congregational  
Church**  
FOX POINT, WI

*From the Pulpit...*

## ***“Christ in Me”***

**Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching**

*John 14: 15-27; Colossians 3: 1-14*

*May 31, 2020 - Pentecost*

I stared at a blank computer screen for a long time yesterday. My sermon on the Holy Spirit was all set – with a connection between the limbo-like circumstances of those early believers gathered at the festival of the Pentecost and our pandemic realities of today. But, as the last few days unfolded, it became abundantly clear that a typical Pentecost message wasn't going to fit this year. That's not the world in which we have laid our heads to rest these past few evenings, and that is not the world to which we awakened this morning. As I gazed upon the images and stories of unrest unfolding throughout our nation, I knew I needed to go back to the drawing board – but the page sat blank. My heart was pulled in so many directions.

- I'm a preacher seeking to breathe the Gospel into a circumstance with roots that reach back for centuries.
- I am father, trying to find ways to make sense of the inexplicable. Longing to bring a little peace into the hearts of my children as they struggle with the scenes, the social media rants, and the strife of it all.
- I am a white American with all but no frame of reference for any true understanding of the personal impact of the social and structural barriers that exist for people of color in our society – and I'm speaking to a congregation that is almost entirely the same.
- I am a human, flawed, broken individual looking within to try to discern those places in which my subtle and unspoken prejudices shade the manner in which I see the people and circumstances around me.
- And, yes, I am a person overwhelmed by the rhetoric, the media sensationalism, and the extremist claims – crying out that those officers were wrong, that the arsonists are wrong, that the looters are wrong, that those climbing atop of cars in the middle of the interstate are wrong, that the opportunists using these tribulations for personal gain are wrong – and that we have to find some way to begin to bridge these ever-growing chasms that are ripping at the very fabric of our cultural identity and stability.

Pulled this way and that as those many perspectives spun in my mind, I stared at that blank page – completely at a loss for words. I'm no wiser than any of you. I'm certainly no better, smarter, or more attuned to these tectonic fractures in our social construct. I stared at a page knowing that what I was going to say would miss the mark – but at a loss as I prayed for that which might help us take just that one next step. The thoughts raced and the tensions pulled but, the more I stared

at that frighteningly empty page, the more the same three words kept ringing in my mind, “Christ in me!”

In those familiar words from the fourteenth chapter of John’s Gospel, Jesus shares the promise of the Holy Spirit. In doing so, however, he makes a subtle, and yet extraordinarily important connection.

*“I will ask the Father,” Jesus says, “and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. 17 This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you... 20 On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.”*

‘He abides with you, and he will be in you...On that day you will know that I am in you.’ The Holy Spirit – that gift that came upon those believers with the sound of a violent wind and tongues as of fire – that Spirit is the very channel of Jesus’ presence in us. In Matthew 28, just at the moment of his ascension, Jesus promises to be with us to the end of the age, and what Jesus is expressing here in John is that the Holy Spirit is the manner of that presence. In the gift of the Spirit – in this somewhat ubiquitous third member of the trinity – we receive the presence of Jesus in us! I’m not sure, on this Pentecost day riddled with cultural conflict and dissension, that there is anything more important to remember than the fundamental fact that the gift of the Spirit means the eternal presence of Jesus with and in us!

- Christ is in me!
- The one who healed the lepers and welcomed the sinners is in me.
- The one who ate with the prostitutes and entered the homes of tax collectors is in me.
- The one who was willing to stand up for the poor, the downtrodden and the societally discounted is in me.

Christ Jesus is in me, and the letter to the Colossians makes abundantly clear what that ought to mean. *“In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!”* This was no small argument in those apostolic times of the New Testament. Whether it was the cultural wars of the secular public or the theological battles of the early Church, these were people with clear divisions among the social strata and structures.

- There were the cultures that were worthy and those that weren’t.
- There were those who were clean and those who weren’t.
- There were the slaves who were the property of others and the free that weren’t.

These were people with clear divisions among the social strata and structures, and the letter to the Colossians erases it all. Christ is in all! Period! Hard stop!

Now, I don’t mean to imply that these arguments were meant to push for a fundamental change in societal structures at the time, I don’t think that was the intent – these weren’t socio-political letters. The intent was more fundamental than that. The intent was to help people of the Church see one another for who and what they were – equally loved and loving brothers and sisters carrying the very presence of Christ.

And that, right there, is the cornerstone on which I find myself standing today. If Christ is in me, and in those around me, what does that say about who I am and what I do? The letter to the Colossians explains...

*2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth...*

*5 Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly...*

*11 In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!*

*12 As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. 13 Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14 Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.*

There's an old adage, sometimes attributed to the roots of Mother Teresa's magnificent life of Christian compassion, that says that we should treat 'all as though all were Jesus himself.' It's often grounded in that parable from Matthew 25 in which Jesus reminds everyone that when they fed the hungry, clothed the naked and visited the imprisoned it was as though they did those things for Jesus himself. It's a rich and meaningful concept to consider how I might view, engage, or serve the 'other' if I were convinced that he/she were Jesus himself. I have often struggled, however, with the underlying principle that the concept – as intriguing as it is – inverts the more important consideration.

Christ is in me!

Yes – Christ is in them too. Absolutely. No question. The very reason that the myriad of social delineations that we make ought not to be made finds root in the principle that we are all one and the same in the One who reconciled us to God. For countless reasons on a social and societal level, we need to see the Christ in others. What I think goes even deeper than the question of how I would view others if I saw them as Jesus, however, is the question of how I would see them... how I would engage them... how I would serve them... if I looked towards them through the Christ that is in me!

- What if we saw the stranger through the compassionate view of Christ instead of our own worldly experiences?
- What if the manner in which we understood societal inequities were informed by the perspective of the Christ within us and not the hard-spun rhetoric of the pundits?
- What if our first step in seeking to heal these tectonic fractures in the core of our social structure was to set aside the blinders of our broken humanity and envision the world, and everyone in it, through the eyes of Christ himself?

I think the reason I stared at that blank page for so long yesterday is that the errancy in all of this is nearly universal. Everyone has their point of view, and every one of those points of view is skewed by the tinted lenses of personal experience and agenda. Those police officers were wrong. The looters and arsonists are wrong. Those using these circumstances to advance

political agendas on both sides are wrong. Those turning peaceful and meaningful protests into destructive riots are wrong. I could go on and on, but the point is that the errancy in all of this is nearly universal, and the blame gets us nowhere. And, the more I stared at that blank page yesterday, with that slew of my own lenses pulling me left and right, all I could do was keep coming back to that fundamental conviction that at Pentecost we are reminded that, by the gift of that Spirit, Christ is in me!

We are not going to fix centuries of systemic inequity overnight, and I'm not delusional enough to think that I, or any one of us, will be able to initiate some manifest shift in our cultural fabric with a simple change of personal perspective. What I can do, however, is start with me.

- I can own that some of the errancy is mine.
- I can acknowledge that there are places in which I feed into that societal fracture.
- I can admit that I have my own predispositions and prejudices that sometimes subtly, and perhaps at times not so subtly, undergird a small part of the much greater problem.
- And I can set my sights on the gift of the Spirit and begin to view this world, and my part in it, through the Christ in me.

Despite my frail humanity, I know that Christ is in me – creating me anew – allowing me room to be better than I am. And I know that my one first step, the first place I can take a stand, is in me, and by way of the Christ in me. I'm not naïve enough to think that I, or any of us, will be able fix centuries of systemic inequity overnight or to initiate some manifest shift in our cultural fabric with a personal change of perspective. What I am certain of, however, is that what I can do is start with me. What I am certain of is that, in the face of what seem to be insurmountable challenges, turning my heart to see the 'other' through the Christ in me is the one place I know I can make a difference... right here... right now... in this moment... today.