

"Christ"
September 6, 2020
St. Paul's UCC Church
Rev. Mary Beth Mardis-LeCroy

Colossians 1:11-20

May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

I always love it when I'm teaching confirmation, and we arrive at the part of our course where we get to study the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ: fully human, fully divine. ("Christology" is the fancy word for it). Who is Jesus? Who is this Christ? "100% human and 100% God," I always tell the class.

"But that math doesn't work out!" one of the clever confirmands will often shoot back at me. "Doesn't that add up to 200%?"

Which is correct, of course; not so much about the 200%, but that the person of Jesus Christ, in so many ways, defies logic. How can he be *both* fully human, and fully divine?

Today I am going to try to address who Jesus is. I will talk first about how he is human, and then I will talk about how he's divine. Finally, I will try to say a word or two about why all of this matters.

Here's a preview: when we know who Jesus is, we know who we are and why we belong to each other.

So, first of all: Jesus is human. Completely human. When the confirmands and I study Jesus, we will often write up several statements about Jesus, all taken from

scripture, and I'll then post them up in various places all around the room. Some of the statements include things like, "Jesus slept,"¹ "Jesus got hungry,"² "Jesus celebrated,"³ "Jesus got mad,"⁴ and, our personal favorite, "Jesus upset his parents."⁵ The confirmands and I read through all of these descriptions of Jesus, and then, sometimes, I invite them to go stand by the ones that describe them, too. The point of the exercise is to show that Jesus was totally human, just like us: with all the emotions, desires, pains, and hungers that come with it.

The confirmands and I also sometimes talk about how we in the church can get kind of... protective of Jesus. We believe, rightly so of course, that Jesus is God; but what that means is that sometimes, we have a tendency to underplay his humanity. Maybe it makes us uncomfortable to think about God crying or sleeping or doubting, even. Think of Jesus, in Mark's gospel, crying out on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus experienced the whole range of human emotions, from laughter to sorrow, from faith to doubt. He got hungry, he slept, he used the bathroom (that is always a fun one to talk about in confirmation). Jesus was, and is, human. Completely, totally, utterly, 100% human.

...And Jesus is divine. Completely, totally, utterly, 100% God.

Our reading from Colossians this morning captures Jesus' divine nature so well. Our scripture comes from the beginning of the letter to the Colossians, and really is more like poetry, more like a hymn or song, than it is like prose. (*sung*): "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created... He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead...For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell..."

These words, they *sing!* They absolutely sing! This is what scholars call "high Christology," which simply means we are focusing on the divinity of Christ more than on his humanity. Jesus is the image of the invisible God. In Christ, all things in heaven and on earth were created. In Christ, all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning.

Passages like the one from Colossians describe Jesus as Ruler of the Whole Universe: Jesus is Lord, Jesus is King, Jesus is sovereign, "raised up" – not just on Easter morning – but raised up over every place and everything, not just in our personal lives, but in this community, in this church, in every age, for all of creation.⁶

¹ Mark 4:35-38

² Matthew 21:18

³ John 2:1-2

⁴ John 2:13-16

⁵ Luke 2:41-51

⁶ See <http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/november-24-2013.html>.

Jesus, in other words, is fully God.

In her book *Amazing Grace*, as she reflects on her own Christology (her own understanding of Jesus), Kathleen Norris writes, “I began to realize that one of the most difficult things about believing in Christ is to resist the temptation to dis-incarnate him to not accept him as *both* fully human and fully divine.”⁷

Both fully human and fully divine.

I remember when my daughter Ellie first learned the word “both.” (This was, oh my gosh, at least eight years ago, maybe more!). She was so delighted that such a concept could exist: *both!* I would say, “Ellie, do you want to read a book, or watch *Dora the Explorer*?” Or, better yet, “Ellie, do you want a chocolate chip cookie, or do you want ice cream?” And her eyes would light up, and she would grin from ear to ear, and she would exclaim, “I want BOTH!” What a glorious thing: *both!*

And of course, as Christians, we believe that Jesus Christ is *both*, too.

Jesus is a human being who went to parties and got hungry and slept and wept and laughed AND Jesus is Alpha the Omega, the beginning, the end: the firstborn of all creation. Jesus is the one who became flesh, and dwelt among us AND Jesus is the one who is before all things, and the one in whom all things hold together. Jesus suffered human pain, loss, and grief AND Jesus rules over our whole lives, and over all of creation in every time and in every place. He is the Word-made-flesh, Emmanuel, God-with-us. As one scholar puts it, “The same Christ who rules over [the whole world] enters [it] as a vulnerable baby.”⁸

Fully human. Fully divine. *Both*.

And because of this mystery – because Jesus is fully human and fully divine, because Jesus is both – we are all One. When we belong to Jesus, we aren’t an “either/or” people. We are a “both/and” people. We are all One.

Do you know that we have a motto in the United Church of Christ? It comes the Gospel of John, the 17th chapter, from a prayer that Jesus prayed for his followers. “That they may all be one.”⁹ What does Jesus want for us? What is his dream for us? “That they may all be one.” These are powerful words, true words, and nothing short of the heart of what it means to live as the Body of Christ. No matter what divides us – and so many things have the potential to divide us – we are bound together by love, by God’s love in Christ, and that’s more powerful than any fight, any division, any difference of opinion, large or small.

⁷ Norris, Kathleen, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (Riverhead Books, New York, 1998), p. 162 (emphasis mine).

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹ John 17:11

Is the church liberal or conservative? Black or white? Old or young? Rich or poor? Rural or urban? Cyclone or Hawkeye?

It's both. Because we belong to Jesus Christ. Fully human, *and* fully divine, Jesus is the one who binds us all together... whether we like it or not.

Ever and always, the mystery of Christ comes first: fully human, fully divine, a church made one in him.

He is both; and by the grace of God, so are we.

Thanks be to God!