

“Thankful for Christ” Jeff Thompson Laity Sunday October 18, 2020

Four and a half years ago I had a life altering experience that led me immediately and dramatically to Christ. Reflecting, especially in this last year, has made me understand that so many people throughout my life have been involved in my faith journey. One such person was my dad. Many of you know that my dad's sudden hospital stay and the experiences I had that week impacted my life forever. The last years of his life he was a devoted follower of Christ.

At the time I didn't know this. But his life reflected his faith. He was very active in his church. He went on mission trips. He was a district lay leader. He felt the call to serve and embodied his faith through service, prayer, study and the way he lived, just as my mother does to this day. In the hospital he kept repeating to us all: “Love God and Love One Another.” This got my attention. Thankfully, I asked him about his faith and more specifically when he came to Christ. He told me on the Walk to Emmaus about 10 years earlier. We had a very good time of fellowship that late night when we were alone in that hospital room.

I didn't know what the Walk to Emmaus was and still haven't gone to one. But about a year and a half later I attended my first Kairos Prison Ministry weekend and found out that many of the volunteers facilitating the Kairos weekend had been through the Emmaus weekend which subsequently changed their lives. I've missed the Kairos ministry. We joke sometimes that we go to prison to see our friends. Really it's no joke!

We get to Love God and Love One Another in a prison gym! True Christian Fellowship comes from prayer, study, discussion, singing and worshipping together. We've seen miracles most every time we go to prison in one way or another. If you want to deepen your faith, join Doug and me in the Kairos Ministry. Hopefully, we will be back at it soon.

Our Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy this morning talks about Loving God with all your heart and soul and might. Leviticus 19:34 talks about loving your neighbor. Our gospel lesson this morning ties these 2 ideas together. Jesus was actually the first to emphasize these 2 commandments. Verse 40 in our gospel lesson states, “All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” At the time of Jesus there were considered 613 laws or commandments to follow. I don't know about you, but my brain can handle 2 better than 613! Thank you Jesus for that simplification.

The Old Testament has always fascinated me.

But thinking about and reading the Old Testament in light of Jesus being there from the beginning really adds a depth and power to the scriptures that I had never felt before!

Think of Jesus being there for the Creation, with Moses and the Exodus, during the times of Samson, Gideon, Esther and all the Judges. Think of Jesus being there with King David and his son Solomon as he built the temple to the Lord. I'll never forget reading in 2Kings about Elijah bringing the dead woman's son back to life. And all the other miracles of Elijah and Elisha. Remember the alphabet to keep them straight! Jesus was there.

Jesus was there in the beginning, and Jesus is here now. This I know because Jesus changed my heart suddenly and immediately 4 ½ years ago.. From that day on my priorities changed. Jesus took my anger away. I felt a peace and joy that I'd never felt before. Money and status had been my idols for 10+ years prior to my heart change. Sadly, my sons never got the chance to see this change in me on a daily basis that Christ brought about. My wife Sandy has seen it as I try to keep Jesus in my heart every day. Praise Jesus for changing my life.

Throughout my life as a child on up, I would be inspired by a sermon or something I read and say, “I'm going to read the whole bible!” I don't think I ever got past Exodus until I was 50! My heart just wasn't there at all. As I got older and “smarter,” my arrogance and pride told me that I didn't need church. I didn't need to learn anything about God. And then in, 2009 it started! My wife Sandy had a conversion experience starting with a book. And she wanted to go to church! All the time! Gradually, especially in the winter when I wasn't working as much and had no excuse, I started to go. Little by little, though I didn't really know it at the time, my heart was beginning to change.

I've been puzzled by this heart change of mine. How could I have built such a huge wall between myself and God that got bigger and wider with each passing year? And then all of a sudden, in an instant, everything changed. How is that possible? It's not logical. But I found answers in scripture. And yes the Old Testament really spoke to me.

The first passage that got my attention was Ezekiel 36:26. The scripture reads, “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.” I'll never forget when I read that. I was inwardly leaping around like a kid on Christmas morning knowing that scripture was totally relevant to my life!

The second passage that got my attention came from Isaiah 65:1. That one got my attention as Ce and I were finishing up our 16 - month - long Isaiah study. It reads, “I revealed myself to those that did not ask me; I was found by those that did not seek me.”

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I had wondered for 3 1/2 years why Christ changed my heart, and at a time when I was really questioning my faith and my call, I read that passage. The word of God is a living word. It's one of the ways that we can communicate with the living God. When we read Gods word, we can remove those barriers. We can get closer to God through His word. We can get closer to God with prayer. We can get closer to God through music. We can get closer to God through service.

One area of my life that combines all of the above is singing in the Rockingham Male Chorus. Unfortunately due to Covid, we have not been practicing or singing. I especially enjoyed when we would go to nursing homes. The light that came on in the eyes of those listening to that more traditional music was something to behold. Worshiping God through song is so meaningful. Both the words and the melodies and the chords played together are so moving. In lieu of singing I'd like to recite one of my favorite songs. This song has meant so much to me these last few years. The lyrics are very poetic and will take us from Christmas to Easter and beyond. The song is “In Christ Alone.”

“In Christ alone, my hope is found. He is my light, my strength, my song

This cornerstone, this solid ground, firm through the fiercest drought and storm.

What heights of love, what depths of peace,

When fears are stilled, when strivings cease!

My Comforter, my All in All, Here in the love of Christ I stand.

In Christ alone who took on flesh, fullness of God in helpless babe.

This gift of love and righteousness, scorned by the ones He came to save.

Till on that cross as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied-

For every sin on Him was laid: here in the death of Christ I live.

There in the ground his body lay, light of the world by darkness slain:

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THEN BURSTING FORTH IN GLORIOUS DAY!

UP FROM THE GRAVE HE ROSE AGAIN!

And as He stands in victory, sin's curse has lost its grip on me,

For I am His and He is mine – bought with the precious blood of Christ.

No guilt in life, no fear in death, This is the power of Christ in me;

From life's first cry, to final breath, Jesus commands my destiny.

No power of hell, no scheme of man, can ever pluck me from His hand:

Till He returns or calls me home, here in the power of Christ I'll stand.

Till He returns or calls me home, here in the power of Christ I'll stand.

Till He returns or calls me home, here in the power of Christ I'll stand.”

IF WE ARE TRULY THANKFUL FOR CHRIST, WHY NOT DEDICATE OURSELVES TO HIS SERVICE IN A NEW WAY?

WHY NOT SEEK THAT PURE HEART OF CHRIST WHERE PEACE, HOPE, AND LOVE RESIDE?

LET US GO FORTH FROM THIS PLACE AND HONOR HIM AND PRAISE HIM BY FOLLOWING HIS MOST IMPORTANT COMMANDMENTS OF LOVING GOD AND LOVING EACH OTHER.

LET'S PRAY

Dear Christ Jesus. We thank you so much for our many blessings. We thank you for allowing us to know you through your holy word. We thank you for giving us the chance to find you and loving us unconditionally. We pray that we honor you in the way that we love you and love each other.