

# JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

## Why I Follow Jesus

Sunday, July 1, 2018

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I went to Florida Southern College in Lakeland, Florida. I had a wonderful time there. After seminary I was appointed as an associate pastor at First UMC of Lakeland, which was a great appointment. I had a good relationship with the college. In fact, one of my favorite professors once invited me to be a guest speaker in his class. It was a sociology class and they were studying religion and society. He wanted a local pastor to come and speak about the church and community. I was still a little wet behind the ears but I thought I did a pretty good job explaining my role and answering questions.

As the class was wrapping up, there was a student in the back of the class who raised her hand high. I called on her and she asked, “Why are you a Christian?” I replied, “Excuse me?” “Why are you a Christian? I am taking a class in world religions and there are so many beautiful religions in the world. Why did you choose to be a Christian minister?”

Do you know why you are a Christian? If someone were to ask you today why you follow Jesus rather than a zillion other religions and philosophies out there, what would you say? Would you be able to give a solid answer? Would your answer be convincing?

I must confess that there was a time when that question haunted me and I really didn't have a good answer for it. I grew up in the church. Sang Jesus loves me. I accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior at a young age and was baptized. But when I entered my teenage years and began thinking critically I wondered if I had been born into a different religion would I still choose to follow Jesus? What makes Christianity so special? Why should people follow Jesus instead of the thousands of religions out in the world? There are roughly 4,200 religions in the world? Really! No joke. Why should Christianity be any different than the rest of them? Are we the only ones right?

Maybe some of you have asked the same question. In the back of your mind, you have often wondered why you follow Jesus instead of another religion. Is it because you were born into a Christian home? Maybe a professor challenged you or skeptical friends said something or you watched a documentary on world religions and have often wondered about the validity of your faith.

Perhaps you are someone who has always been on the edge of becoming a Christian. You want to follow Jesus but the one obstacle for you has been the question, “Why Jesus instead of another religion?”

Well, this morning I am going to tell you why. At the end of this message you will be able to tell your skeptical friends a compelling reason why you are a Christian. And if you are someone still searching for faith, this message just may be the tipping point for you.

You see, when I began to ask these questions as a teenager it sent me on an obsessive quest to find an answer. And through much prayer, study and research I made a discovery that not only moved me to make a recommitment to Christ but was instrumental in my call to ministry.

What is so unique and compelling about the Christian faith? And why should it make any difference to your life? I am going to let the gospel of John tell you. We usually turn to Matthew and Luke for the Christmas story – the shepherds, the angels, Mary and Joseph and the birth of Jesus. John doesn't include any of that. Instead John gets right to the point and explains WHY Jesus is compelling and life changing:

**In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. -John 1:1-3**

What is John talking about? He is talking about Jesus. Substitute *Word* with *Jesus*. Why wouldn't John just write Jesus? Because John is trying to tell us something unique about Jesus. *Word* means the essence of God or God's personality. Jesus is God's personality. In the beginning was God's personality and it was God's personality that made the world. Take a look at what it says next:

**In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. -John 1:4-5, 9**

God's Word, God's personality, is filled with light and life. You've heard of people who light up a room. Well, God's personality lights up the world! And that light is so strong that nothing, not even darkness, can kill it. But notice what happens:

**He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. -John 1:10, 11**

Here's the sad thing. John is telling us that even though God's personality is filled with light and love some people are not going to recognize it, understand it, or receive it. And I will explain why in a minute. But here is what happens to us if we are open to experiencing God's personality:

**Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. -John 1:12**

Those who were open to understanding and experiencing God's personality and light will be transformed by it. How is that possible? Take a look:

**The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. -John 1:14**

And there it is! God's personality took human form 2,000 years ago in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. God's personality has always existed, but that personality intersected human history when Jesus was born!

So why does John say some people will not recognize it or receive it? Because God showed up in a way no one expected. He wasn't born in a palace. His parents were not royalty. There was no earthquake that announced his coming. He was born in a dirty feeding trough inside a cold cave to poor peasant parents. Other than a few shepherds and some astrologists, no one had a clue God had shown up.

Why did God choose to display his personality this way? Because if he had been royalty, he would have been untouchable. If he had come with great fanfare we would have been intimidated. If he came swooping in on a high horse he would have been unrelatable.

But a little baby born in a humble manner? Now that warms our heart. There is nothing more disarming than a precious baby.

I think of when my son Paul was born just 8 months ago. I just fell to pieces. I felt such love, my heart was so open. I had so much love to give. If you had asked me that day to give you all the money in my bank account I would have done it! Of course, all first time parents feel that way, but it was extra special for us because we were told for 18 years we could never have kids. God had different plans. He is our miracle baby. Our little baby has changed our lives. A baby has a way of doing that.

One night we were at a restaurant with Paul and he was getting restless. Brandy and I were taking turns holding him so we could eat. Near our table there was a bar filled with people. They were loud and cynical. Not a lot of smiles. But when Brandy walked Paul near the bar so he could see the boats outside the people around the bar lit up! Their frowns turned into smiles and they reached out to play with Paul's rock star hair! They were transformed. There was life in their eyes. A baby does that to people.

You know what? Baby Jesus did that for the whole world! He gave life and love to the world. It was the best way God could convey how much he loves us and wants a relationship with us. Nobody in the history of humankind changed things the way

that baby did, born in a cave on that night. Jesus had the most humble beginning, the most humiliating ending, and yet the biggest impact the earth has ever seen. You see, it had to start like this – we had to see that God gets us. That he is with us.

So why is Jesus so compelling? Why does Jesus and the Christian faith stand out for me? Why do I love being a follower of Jesus? Because **religion is reaching for God; Christianity (Jesus) is God reaching for us.** And that is exactly what I told the student that day in class.

Christianity means we don't have to search for God. Instead God searches for us and finds us. No other religion in the world makes this claim. In every other religion people are desperately seeking to find God or the divine. There is beauty and truth in many of them. But in the Christian faith, a faith unlike any other, God finds us in the person of Jesus Christ. God seeks us out. And, to be honest, there's really no other way we could find our way.

Author Max Lucado tells about a trip his family took to the United Kingdom. They visited a castle. In the center of the castle garden sat a maze with row after row of shoulder-high hedges, leading to one dead end after another. If you successfully navigate the labyrinth, you discover the door to a tall tower in the center of the garden.

He says that if you were to look at their family pictures of the trip, you'd see four of their five family members standing on the top of the tower. Hmmm, someone is still on the ground. Guess who? Lucado says he was stuck in the foliage, lost in the maze. He couldn't figure out which way to go. But then he heard a voice from above. "Hey, Dad." He looked up to the top of the tower to see his daughter Sara, peering through the turret. "You're going the wrong way," she explained. "Back up and turn right."

Do you think he trusted her? He didn't have to, he points out. He could have trusted his own instincts, consulted other confused tourists, sat and pouted and wondered why he couldn't find his way. But do you know what he did? He listened. Her vantage point was better than his. She was above the maze. She could see what he couldn't.

It's the same way with us. We don't know where we are going. Trying to find or figure out God is like getting lost in that maze. There are so many options, so many opinions. Which way do we go? Who do we listen to? We could never figure it

out. It's beyond us. That's why we need someone from above who can show us the way. And that is exactly why God came to us in Jesus. He came down to find us and point us the way home.

If that doesn't hit home to you, let me ask you this question: What would the world be like if Jesus had never been born? Ever thought of it that way? Imagine this world if Jesus had never been born.

Many atheists claim that faith and religion are bad for the world. Well, they just haven't thought through it. Do you know what would be missing in this world if Jesus had never been born? No Christmas cards, caroling or concerts. No Christmas gift giving, candle lights or twinkling trees. But also no Valentine's Day, St. Patrick's Day, Easter, Halloween, or Thanksgiving. Each one of those holidays is based on or tied to Christianity. But that is just on the surface.

Reflecting on this question Greg Asimakoupoulos writes, "Women and children would not be valued as human beings but instead be treated as property. You see it was Jesus who elevated women and children to their rightful place of worth and value.

"If Jesus had never been born we would not have the sermon on the mount. Health care and education would be less important. The rights of the elderly would be overlooked.

"Jesus's influence on this world is mind boggling!

"Can you imagine a world without Paul's words on faith, hope and love and the greatest of these is love?

"Can you imagine a world without the writings of Augustine, Aquinas or St. Francis?

"Can you imagine a world without the masterful pieces of art throughout history that have been influenced by Christianity?

"Can you imagine a world without Handel's *Messiah*?

Can you imagine a world without the Hallelujah Chorus?

Can you imagine a world without Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Yale, and Princeton? They were all founded by Christians to train Christians. Can you imagine a world without the Red Cross? Can you imagine world without those who abolished slavery? Can you imagine a world without Bonhoeffer and those who stood against Hitler? Can you imagine a world with AA and the 12 Steps, both influenced by the Christian faith? Can you imagine a world without Billy Graham's Crusades, Martin Luther King's Christian movement against racism, or Mother Theresa's Christ like compassion to the poor and dying?

"Most of all, can you imagine living in a world without knowing God is love, approachable, compassionate, or living in a world without the assurance that we have been forgiven and redeemed?" (*Finding God in "It's a Wonderful Life"*).

Without Jesus all of that would be missing from our world.

If Jesus did that for the world, imagine what he can do for your life! Religion is reaching for God; Christianity is God reaching for us. Jesus is not a gift we find, but a gift that finds us! Imagine what your life would be missing without him. Or maybe I should say – Imagine what your life IS missing without him.

You see, here is the thing. Although Jesus searches and finds us, we still have to invite him in. That's another reason why God was born a baby. A baby is not forceful. A baby does not insist on being held. You must invite him into your life. Embrace God's embrace of you in Christ.

I recall being in seminary serving as a hospital chaplain at Emory hospital. This was a great way to train ministers. "You want to go into ordained ministry? Well, serve the sick and the dying and you will find out what real ministry is."

Well, I was doing my rounds one day. It was my first year of seminary. I was naïve and nervous. I had a badge on my coat that said "clergy," but most of the time I forgot I was wearing it. A nurse called out, "Chaplain?" I turned around to look for the chaplain and then realized she was talking to me! She said, "You see that man in that room over there? His name is Walter. He is not doing well at all and no one has come by to see him. Would you mind visiting with him?" I said, "Sure." As I walked toward the room, the nurse said, "Oh, and one more thing – Walter is a very angry man."

I walked into the room and said, "Hello, Walter. My name is Charley Reeb, and I am one of the chaplains here. He replied, "You are, are you? Well, I do not need a chaplain, and I don't need God. Just get out of here!" I said, "Well, do you need a friend?" He said, "I don't need anybody. Just leave me alone." I proceeded to walk out of the door and before I put my hand on the door he cried out, "I haven't always been this way, you know! I had life by the tail. Then this cancer got a hold of me and tore me apart..." He went on and on, and I just listened.

When Walter finished talking I asked, "Do you mind if I say a prayer for you?" He replied, "I don't think it will do any good, but you go right ahead." In the middle of my prayer I asked God to cover Walter in his loving arms like a warm blanket. When I finished my prayer, I could not believe what I saw. There were tears coming down Walter's cheeks, and his arms were up in the air, ready for a hug. I reached down and put my arms around his fragile body, and he began to rock me back and forth, repeating the words, "Cover me like a blanket. Cover me like a blanket."

I had no control over what occurred that day, but God's power and love made my prayer become flesh for Walter. Christ worked through me to reach out to Walter. Religion is reaching for God; Christianity is God reaching for us.



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