

Cling to Jesus

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This was my address to the Juniors and Seniors of Prairie Bible College at their year-end banquet on April 17, 2010. It is inspired by the Gospel of John—see my comments at the end for more details.

Introduction

I've been pondering my words for tonight for many months. Yes, many months! I'm not sure what it is about this event that has stirred up such reflection in my heart and mind. Perhaps it is the good memories I have of teaching in Prairie's classrooms, teaching many of you, seeing you and many other students over the years walk through dark valleys and up bright mountain tops in such a crucial season of your life. Or maybe it's just that I'm coming on 40 and something about this event has triggered a mid-term evaluation of my life. In any case, that is what I have done. Over the past few months, as I have pondered my words for tonight, I have thought back to a half-life of learning and teaching, of reading and writing, of ministry and being ministered to, of love and laughter and loss and lament. And out of all that reflection I have only three words to share with you, half a lifetime of experience distilled down to three words of advice: Cling to Jesus.

Cling to Jesus. This is no bumper sticker theology. This is not the clever arrogance of "Jesus is the answer; what's the question?" (yes, arrogance, for it doesn't first hear the world's questions). This is no mere "What would Jesus do" inscribed in a Christian tetragrammaton on a bracelet (especially when "what Jesus would do" looks remarkably like what we wanted to do in the first place).

It is, though, as simple as a little child entering the kingdom of God. It is as simple as "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." It is that simple. Yet that simplicity is as complex as thirteen volumes of *Church Dogmatics* or a lifetime of scholarship; it is as complex as the eternal Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us, the Son forsaken by the Father as he gives up his Spirit on a Roman cross, the three-in-one God drawing us into his eternal dance of love and light and life.

It is all this simple complexity, this complex simplicity, that I have in mind when I say to you: cling to Jesus.

Questions

When questions come that rattle your faith, pushing the boundaries of your thinking about what it means to be a Christian, look to Jesus.

It doesn't matter what the question is. The biblical creation stories in light of evolutionary biology? Scripture's inspiration in view of its similarities with other ancient texts? The exclusive claims of Christianity in light of religious pluralism? The existence of God in the face of the world's latest calamity? These questions and more are all good and important and necessary to wrestle with, but they can create an uncomfortable theological anxiety, they can create such cognitive dissonance for you that the temptation is either to ignore them or to ditch your faith. I know—I've been there many times. But when that happens, look to Jesus.

I don't mean, "Look to Christology, build up a solid doctrine of Christ." I mean, "Look to Jesus himself, the Jesus who taught and healed among the dusty hills of Galilee, the crucified Jesus who died for you, the risen Jesus who walks with you." When those hard questions come, when you feel your faith eroding under their weight, read the Gospels, reflect on Jesus' actions, ponder Jesus' teachings, drink deeply of Jesus' self-giving love for you on the cross, think deeply of Jesus' new life in the resurrection. Let the story of Jesus draw you in again.

And look to Jesus in the lives of others; keep close to those who have been captivated by the story of Jesus and who thus live out that story in their own lives. Keep good friends that will embrace you fully, like Jesus did for a doubting Thomas, friends that will show you Jesus' wounds for you and be willing to be wounded for you themselves. And follow Jesus and your Jesus friends right into the heart of all the hard questions of life. Go boldly where others have gone before. The Christian life can be difficult; faith is not easy. Yet it really is all about Jesus. Open up your mind with a heart open to the love of Jesus, and so stretch your faith. Let your "Yes" be a "Yes" of humble faith, not some vain certainty, and let your "I don't know" be a genuine "I don't know."

So when questions come that rattle your faith, look to Jesus.

Decisions

And when decisions need to be made that could change your life, follow Jesus.

Where do I go after Prairie? Should I take this job, or that one? Should I go to university, or to graduate school, or to seminary? Do I even have what it takes to do more school? Is this person the right one for me? Am I even ready to get married? You've faced some of these questions already, and there will be many more where those came from, many life choices that need to be made. Don't shy away from them, but don't tie yourself in knots over them.

Jesus isn't playing hide and seek with you; you don't have to guess the right answer for the flashing door to open and Jesus to wave you through with a ten-megawatt smile—only to run ahead and hide again behind another door. No: Jesus is right with you; he is guiding your steps by his Spirit each day. Follow him in his self-giving love for others, his God-directed faith, his persevering hope; be shaped into the pattern of his cross and resurrection. Then you will already be in his will regardless of the decision you make, no hide-and-seek required. Yes, the hard

decision still has to be made. But you are free to make the best decision you can—and Jesus is with you each step of the way.

So when decisions need to be made that could change your life, follow Jesus.

Suffering

And when suffering hits you hard, walk with Jesus.

Life doesn't just throw curveballs; sometimes it pitches right at your head. And you can't always duck out of the way, then get up and dust yourself off to face another pitch. Sometimes you writhe around in pain on the playing field of life, and sometimes you have to be carried off in a stretcher.

At those times, there is no vocational skill that will make sense of any of this for you; but neither is there any theology that will share the pain searing your soul; there is no philosophy that will come alongside you and wrap you in its arms; there is no biblical exegesis that will weep with you and sit with you in silence. But Jesus will, and your Jesus friends will, and you will do this for your friends, being Jesus to them even as they are Jesus to you. This is God's answer to your suffering: he weeps with you, he wraps you in his arms, he absorbs your pain into himself, he enters into your suffering as truly as he has already entered into the suffering of the world in Jesus.

So when suffering hits you hard, walk with Jesus.

Distractions

All this and more is what I mean when I say to you: Cling to Jesus. But there's much to draw our attention away from Jesus, isn't there?

Christians are very good at detonating some powerful weapons of mass distraction. Believe it or not, Christianity isn't about inerrancy, or even in the end about Scripture at all. Christianity isn't about being able to state a correct doctrine of justification, as if life is all about prepping for the ultimate pass/fail theology exam. Christianity isn't about eliminating sexual thoughts or opposing gay marriage; it's not merely a system of private morality or social ethics. Christianity isn't really about hymns or choruses or organs or drums or liturgies or extemporaneous preaching; it's not merely a system of proper religious worship—or the lack of such a system. All these things may well be important, but they are not at the heart of Christianity.

Rather, Christianity is about the Father sending his Son, the holy and almighty and loving and faithful God become flesh and blood, Jesus who lived and taught and died for our sins and rose on the third day, and whose Spirit dwells within us and among us to continue the resurrected Son's mission of faithful love in renewing a fallen world. Cling to Jesus—Jesus the person, Jesus

himself, Jesus the heart of this thing called “Christianity”—for it is in Jesus that Scripture and doctrine and ethics and morality and ritual and tradition live and move and have their being.

Then there are those weapons of mass distraction exploding in the world around us. Madison Avenue promises the good life, Hollywood acts it out for us, and Wall Street makes it happen: wealth and wisdom and strength and beauty, the good life of success packaged in a bottle and sold for \$1.99 at an everyday low price.

To be sure, “everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving” (1 Tim 4:4). But all too often the good things of creation get skewed by our world—beauty becomes skin-deep, truth becomes spin and propaganda, goodness becomes a polling question—and our own Christian faith begins to reflect these distortions without even realizing it, our spiritual senses dulled to distraction. Enjoy the goodness and beauty and truth of our world in all its rich diversity, but watch out for claims to goodness and beauty and truth that are merely stagnant wells of putrid water. Cling to Jesus, for he is the spring of living water.

Christians and the world are not the only detonators of distractions from Jesus. Sometimes we’re bombarded with weapons of mass distraction simply by living life. Just when things seem to be working out, when your family is growing and your wife is contented and you have settled into a job you love, your father-in-law is diagnosed with a brain tumor. Then when you have buried your much-loved and desperately-missed father-in-law, you find out own father’s prostate cancer is back with a vengeance, and he needs constant care until he, too, passes away in a cloud of exhausted suffering and grief. Life rebuilds itself, life is good again—family and friends and job all seem to be moving toward something beautiful—until it all collapses in apocalyptic catastrophe. Friendships severed; family wounded; dreams shattered.

All this has been my experience over the past few years, and all this, combined with all the distractions I’ve already highlighted, so easily draws my eyes away from Jesus, sapping my faith and sucking the marrow from my life. And so I don’t merely say this to you out of a head swelled with learning, I plead with you out of a heart humbled by life: Cling to Jesus. Cling to Jesus. Cling to Jesus.

Conclusion

Perhaps this all sounds too dour for an evening of celebration. You’ve let the grumpy old man speak at your banquet! Indeed, we have celebrated tonight, and that is right and good; you have learned much and loved lots in your years at Prairie, and that is worthy of a feast.

But here’s the reality of life: often we feel like Peter in John 6. You know the story. Jesus has just given some hard teaching, and many of his disciples have left him. So Jesus turns to the Twelve disciples and asks them if they, too, would like to abandon him. Peter’s response is brutal in its honesty, yet moving in its simplicity: “Where else can we go?” The reality of the Christian life is that we often cling to Jesus simply because we don’t see any other good option

out there. But don't miss the rest of Peter's statement to Jesus: "You have the words of eternal life." Jesus may be the only seaworthy boat out there, but clinging to Jesus does not leave us stranded on a deserted island, alive but left to die. No: clinging to Jesus brings us to an abundant life in his glorious kingdom. Cling to Jesus, and you will know life—full life now, and the fullness of life in the future.

And you may just discover at the end of the road that it has not been about you clinging to Jesus after all. Jesus has in fact been clinging to you.

This Christocentric or Jesus-centered vision is inspired by the Gospel of John. See especially John 1:1-18; 3:16-21, 31-36; 4:10-14, 19-24; 5:19-30, 36-40; 6:60-69; 10:7-10; 11:25-26; 14:6, 10-31; 15:1-17, 26-27; 16:12-15; 17:1-5, 20-23; 20:26-31.