

Christ: the Head of the Church

A sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,
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Text: Colossians 1: 18

“Christ is the head of the body, the church; Christ is the beginning,
the firstborn from the dead, that in everything Christ might be preeminent.” ~St. Paul

Years ago, I did some work with stepfamilies. One man after just marrying his wife told me this story about his new third-grade stepson. In the middle of a discussion about the new family the child said to him, “I just want to know one thing. I know who my father is. I know who my mother is. I know you are my stepfather. But I still don’t understand: who is my boss?” For that little boy, the cluster of new authority figures created confusion about who was in charge. In this world, someone is always in charge or trying to be. In the world of politics, leaders want to use every bit of leverage they can muster. To the conniving, even God’s power is fair game. They talk about God but one has the feeling that they are using God in the wrong way.

The United Church of Christ acknowledges as its sole head, Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior. It acknowledges as kindred in Christ all who share in this confession. It looks to the Word of God in the Scriptures, and to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, to prosper its creative and redemptive work in the world. It claims as its own the faith of the historic Church expressed in the ancient creeds and reclaimed in the basic insights of the Protestant Reformers. It affirms the responsibility of the Church in each generation to make this faith its own in reality of worship, in honesty of thought and expression, and in purity of heart before God. In accordance with the teaching of our Lord and the practice prevailing among evangelical Christians, it recognizes two sacraments: Baptism and the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion.¹

What I’ve just read to you is the Preamble of the Constitution of the United Church of Christ. Its 145 words represent the core of the theological consensus that brought together the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational Christian Churches into covenant as a denomination. The line that begins our Preamble, that the church “acknowledges as its sole head, Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior,” is an echo of our text this morning in Colossians 1. That Jesus is in charge of the church seems obvious, but it is not.

¹ The Preamble of the Constitution of the United Church of Christ, adopted 1957.

The church as any other human institution often faces conflict among its members. Our church council struggles with it from time to time. Ignoring conflict, some hope it will go away. Of course, it doesn't. When not dealt with openly the strongest personalities in a group try to force their views on the rest. Then the rest resent the strong ones and the conflict gets worse. It is far better when a church group stops and offers a prayer to the one who is the head of the church and seeks his guidance and direction. This is so obvious it is often forgotten. But it is absolutely necessary if we are to be a church. There is only one head of the church. It is Jesus, not the clergy, not the member who gives the most money, not the senior lay leader. It is only and always, Jesus.

Too many churches listen to other voices when trying to discern what Jesus wants the church to do. Many assume certain political leaders and slogans are the way of Jesus. This happens on the right and left. The church rushes into a decision because they behave as if they are the Republican or Democratic Party at prayer. Now there is no way to eliminate outside voices but it is important to recognize that every voice is attached to an ego. How do we hear the voice of Christ?

We remain silent and listen. We talk about an issue with Christians we trust. Above all we search the scriptures. My class on the Gospel of John a few weeks ago read the famous third chapter when Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin. No doubt he was a skilled interpreter of Scripture, and, as a Pharisee, he lived by a very rigorous code of conduct. Jesus gave him the well-known piece of advice: *"I assure you unless someone is born anew he cannot see the kingdom of God."*² The class talked around and around on that one. What did Jesus mean? Why did Nicodemus come to him at night? Nicodemus didn't understand Jesus and said to the young rabbi, "I'm an old man. How can I be born again? Do you expect me to climb back into my mother's womb?"³ We spent time looking at the plural 'you' later in the chapter, wondering whom Jesus addressed in the plural: the Jewish nation, John's first audience, or us? Jesus spoke a few verses later about the Spirit and the scary thing about the Spirit is that you can't tell what the Spirit might ask you to do! I said to the class, *"Jesus asked Nicodemus to relinquish his religion that he controlled for a faith in a God who controlled him."* Religion, we all know, can be used by strong egos to dominate others. It is what Jesus called acting the wolf while in sheep's clothing.⁴ The words of Jesus can also be twisted by those who want power for themselves. What is required to find the way of Jesus is silence. We listen to other disciples who know Jesus and have long lived with him. We listen for his voice in the Biblical sermons, sacraments and music of the church.

² John 3:3.

³ John 3:4.

⁴ Matthew 7:15.

I think I may have told you this story of Mother Theresa. She was interviewed by a newspaper columnist who asked her about the many hours she seemed to spend in prayer each day. “What do you tell God?” he wanted to know. “Oh, not much, I mostly listen.” “Well, what does God say to you when you pray?” he then asked. “Oh, not much, he mostly listens, too.” It is that humble, trusting quiet that is the mark of the disciple who awaits a call from Jesus before he or she acts or speaks.

The stepson asked in his new cluster of authority figures, “I just want to know, who is my boss?” That is the issue that we all must decide, too. “Jesus 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.” He is the head of the church. We listen for his instruction and then we go his way. This is the foundation for everything the church is and does.

End

The Head of the Church.DOC