

## *Christ Without Religion*

*Sermon by Rev. Robert V. Thompson*

Lake Street Church of Evanston

March 21, 2010

During the coffee hour several weeks ago a Lake Streeter came up to me and said, “ I want you to know that I feel like you suckered us into joining Lake Street Church. “ I was mystified. Smiling wryly, he said, our first Sunday here you played a Beatles song, and I haven’t heard once since.”

So, after hearing this plea I realized that today’s sermon could be best introduced by the Ballad of John and Yoko. “Christ you know it ain’t easy, you know how hard it can be, the way things are going, they’re going to crucify me.”

John Lennon was making music not theology. But as we move closer to Holy Week, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter—that famous Beatle puts his finger on the pulse of the Passion Narrative that opens us to our inevitable and reoccurring theme of life in this world: Christ, you know it ain’t easy; sooner or later in this life, everyone gets crucified.

Last Sunday evening, the Hidden Wholeness group gathered to continue our conversations around the work of the Christian contemplative, Thomas Merton. The question we asked last Sunday evening was “what does Thomas Merton have to say about Christ?”

Christ, now there’s a charged word. In the year 1095 Pope Urban II summoned Christian warriors to take up the cross of Christ and reconquer the Holy Land. Christ is a charged word. In classical Roman Catholic theology, Christ is the bridegroom and the Church is the bride. In evangelical Christianity at the conclusion of every service an altar call is given and worshippers are invited to either give or rededicate their lives to Christ.

Every Christmas Eve we gather and sing that stirring carol: “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”

In the checkered history of Christianity, Christ has been something to kill and die or hope for. Christ is a charged word. Do you believe that Jesus Christ is the one and only son of God who died on the cross to save the world from its sinful self? Do you believe this or not? Are you for or against Christ?

Most Christians are taught that there is only one Christ, and it is Jesus. Moreover Jesus Christ is an external redeemer who comes from beyond this world into this world to save believers from the wages of sin. By his death on a cross, this external redeemer, redeems humanity—or at least those who believe. Of course, there are other versions and visions of what the word Christ means. Theologians distinguish between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith.

Christ, you know it ain't easy to sort all this stuff out. And this is why the very first question I asked the Merton study group last Sunday night was, “when you hear the word Christ, what comes to mind for you?”

I found the responses in the group to be fascinating. Several said that Jesus and Christ are not the same thing. Others said when they hear the name of Jesus they think of a loving and compassionate human being, a spiritual teacher, a rabbi. Those who grew up Catholic said the word Christ is entirely associated with the crucifixion. Everyone had an opinion about Christ. But what was really fascinating in our conversation of Sunday evening was that every person said that over the years they have changed their mind about what “Christ” means to them.

So I pose the question here and now. Over the years of life have you changed your mind about Christ?

Nearly a decade ago I read a book called, *Christ of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. The author, Catholic theologian, Ewert Cousins, writes:

With the emergence of global consciousness, we can no longer think only in terms of Christian history, or even Western history. When Christians raise questions about Christ they must now ask, “how is Christ related to Hindu history, to Buddhist history, (to the common global history that religions of the world now share)?

Ewert Cousins is saying how we see Christ depends on the way we view the world.

Earlier in the service we listened to the Gospel reading where Jesus gives the parable of the wine and wineskins. He says if you try to put new wine into old wineskins, as the new wine ferments it will break open the hardened and brittle

wineskins. If you're going to make a new wine you've got to put it in a fabric that has some elasticity; you've got to store it in a container that has the capacity to hold the chemical changes that occur over time.

I take it Jesus' point is that you can't put a new life into an old way of living. The old and familiar way of living in this world is to divide it into Us versus Them—my tribe against your tribe; my people against your people. Of course this kind of thinking is what causes human beings go to war. Not to mention that a tribal worldview is what also gives terrorists their rallying cry.

But tribal consciousness is not all bad. When you are a part of a tribe, if nothing else, your longing for belonging is satisfied. If you are sick, your tribe will care for you. When you are hungry, you don't have to find food all by yourself. To be a part of a tribe is to know that you are not in it alone.

Ewert Cousins is saying that global consciousness is a new wineskin; it is a new container, a new frame of reference that helps us see the world in a brand new light. Global consciousness, he says, is our newest spiritual teacher.

The lesson of global consciousness is that there are not many tribes on the earth, but only one tribe—the human tribe. To see every human being as a member of this earthly tribe is to see the world as our shared and sacred home. The birds of the air, the beasts of the field, the fish in the sea are our kith and kin. In this world there is only one human tribe. This, Ewert Cousins says, is the new wineskin of global consciousness. Global consciousness provides a new frame of reference for the Christ question. If your worldview is based on *tribalism*, so your view of Christ will be based on exclusion.

A week from this coming Friday is Good Friday. This, of course, is the day when Christians around the world gather to remember the crucifixion of Jesus. According to the legend, Jesus was crucified between the hours of 12 to 3.

As the son of an evangelical Christian minister I always found myself in church on Good Friday. One of my Good Friday memories goes back to the age of 9 or 10. I was sitting with my mother in church. We had been sitting there for nearly two hours when I pulled on her sleeve and whispered, “can we go now”? She turned and whispered, “Bobby, if Jesus could hang on the cross for three hours to save us from our sins the least you can do is sit here for three hours.” Christ, you know it ain't easy!

My mother meant well. But her worldview, her wineskin, was essentially tribal. Christ was of our tribe. And everyone in the Christian tribe must believe that Christ died as a ransom to save us from our sins. That worldview says that Christ is a tribal dividing wall that separates believers from non-believers. This is what many of us were taught, but like many of you my idea of Christ has also evolved over the years.

We naturally assume that our worldview comes from our religion, but I believe that, more than not, it's the other way around. Most people assume that it is your religious point of view that creates your worldview. Increasingly, I am persuaded it's the reverse. Our worldview comes first

So, a week from next Friday is Good Friday. On this coming Good Friday we will gather with friends from the Jewish Reconstructionist Congregation for a Passover and Good Friday Service. This service reflects the worldview, the new wineskin, of global consciousness.

As we were planning this service Rabbi Brant Rosen shared that for many centuries Jews observed Passover in secret. They feared anti-semitic Christians. They didn't want Christians to know they were celebrating the Passover. There was this rumor that many anti-semitic Christians believed that Jews used the blood of Christian babies in the making of unleavened bread. The Jews were afraid that, if Christians knew they were celebrating Passover, these Christians would come after them. The tribal worldview of Christian antisemitism runs deep. For many centuries anti-semitic Christians have labeled Jews as Christ killers. So what better time than Good Friday for Jews and Christians to come together to pour the wine of human community into the new wineskin of global consciousness.

Now is the time.

If you are able, please join us on Good Friday, April 2. If you are able, please help us get the word out about this service. There are service flyers on the refreshment table in MacLeish Hall during the coffee hour, and we invite you to pick up a few and share them; post them in your neighborhood.

It's time to begin a new conversation and let us begin by insisting that Christ is not a tribal warrior but a presence that brings healing.

All of this brings us back to a story about Thomas Merton. Merton had taken up residence in Gethsemani, the Trappist monastery several miles from Louisville, Kentucky. One day he went into Louisville for some monastic errands. As he stood on a street corner in downtown Louisville he had an epiphany.

Looking at all the people walking around, all the strangers, he said: “Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God’s eyes. If only they could see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time, there would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed . . . I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other.”

This Merton story is nothing if not touching. But, as I read it again last week, what struck me was the phrase, “I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts.” It’s true. In every human being, there is a secret beauty hidden from plain sight. I call this secret beauty, this hidden wholeness, Christ. But it doesn’t really matter what you call it so long as you see it.

The secret beauty of the heart is not in some of us; it’s in all of us. Christ, you know it ain’t easy to see it in everyone. But this I believe. In every human being lives this secret beauty, this Christ—if only we have the eyes to see it.

This I believe. Christ is not a person but a power. I do believe that Christ was in Jesus, but this secret beauty of the heart lives also in every human being. It doesn’t matter what you call it. Christ is not a person but a power. Christ power is the capacity to understand without judging. Christ is the power to give love without expecting anything in return. Christ is the power that seeks to uncover the beauty hidden in every life. This Christ power always manifests itself through humility, trust, kindness, the spirit of non-violence, a forgiving and open heart.

In the final analysis, it doesn’t matter what you call it—call it the Buddha, the Great Spirit. Jesus might call it Shekinah, the radiant presence of good in the world. Call it what you will—the Christ power is the secret beauty of the heart that connects us—one to all.

This I believe.

Whenever you glimpse this secret beauty in another human being—you are seeing Christ without religion.