

## Blessed Are You...

by Linda Rex

**January 29, 2023, 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Epiphany**—What is the value of knowing Jesus Christ? What is the big deal? Is he just part of a story or myth people tell during the Christmas and Easter holidays, but is irrelevant the rest of the time? It can appear from first glance that there really isn't anything worth delving into when it comes to Jesus, but the reality is that in Jesus there is a deep story each of us is a part of, whether we embrace it or not.

Nowadays, it doesn't seem reasonable to believe in a real, personal, tangible God. So much of life can be lived apart from any need for God. And many of the problems we face, no matter how difficult, can be solved or at least coped with without the need of calling upon a deity. What our age of reason has taught us is that we can use our minds and aptitudes and skills to run our world and deal with whatever comes our way. I imagine that it is possible to go through life and never believe in a power or presence beyond ourselves.

But it is significant, from what I've seen, that the first step in any recovery program is for a person to come to see that apart from a "higher power" or a power beyond themselves, they will never be free from their addiction. An addict will struggle and struggle to conquer their addiction until they "hit bottom" and realize their desperate need for a power beyond themselves to save them.

It is often in this encounter with a real and personal God that their life turns around and they begin to heal. But as long as they insist on doing it on their own, they remain enslaved to the substance or activity or behavior which holds them in prison. There is something real and substantial which happens in an addict's life when they surrender to that "higher power."

It's not just addicts who go through this process of coming to see their need for something or someone beyond themselves. Every person comes to places during their lives when they are faced with the reality that they cannot and will not get to where they need to be without help beyond themselves. At times we turn to another person, hoping they will do what is needed or give what is required—and for a time, they may be able to do that. But there are limits to what we can give each other as humans, and if we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that no human being can play the role of God in another person's life without there being some very destructive and painful fallout as a result.

So why do we have such an issue with Jesus? I wonder sometimes if it is because we see in him what we know we were always meant to be, as well as our own capacity for evil and betrayal as it was demonstrated during his crucifixion. We see in Jesus and in his story both the heights and depths of our humanity. We realize, in looking at him, that we are not what we should be, that God doesn't do things as we expect him to, and that the way God does things is the exact opposite of how we believe they should be done.

The New Testament passage for this particular Sunday is 1 Corinthians 1:18-23, in which the apostle Paul contrasts our human wisdom with God's wisdom. In that congregation were many believers who were poor people from the lower classes, but also wealthy people from the upper classes. Roman society venerated nobility, wealth, and status, as well as intellectual learning and wisdom. What Paul was faced with was helping these believers see that in Christ, none of this was essential or significant in the long run, since every one of them stood at the same place—at the foot of the cross.

I've personally experienced the positive and negative cultural expectations that come with wealth, status, and higher education. I've been close to people on the bottom rung as well as the top rung, and I don't really care for either place. The reason is that neither place is where Jesus lives. Where he lives is in the space where each person's uniqueness comes together in equality and unity—and other-centered love dwells.

At some point we need to come to terms with the reality that we find our true identity, not in the wealth, status, intellect, giftedness, or position (or lack thereof) in this world, but in Jesus Christ alone. He is our true identity, for in him we find our worth, our value, our connection with one another and with God.

It is significant that God's way of handling things is often the opposite of the way we prefer to handle them. One of the passages for this Sunday is Matthew 5:1-12, which is often called The Beatitudes. What Jesus put out there was an impossible agenda as the means for our participation in his kingdom life. For

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example, if you want to see God, you must be pure in heart—that's usually how we read it. Actually what Jesus said is the pure in heart are blessed, for they will see God. Yet I read in the Old Testament that the heart is deceitful and desperately wicked. How will I ever see God, if my heart is so awful?

Remember that I said Jesus is our true identity. Why? We learn in the Scriptures that all things were made through him, by him, and for him. He holds all things together by the word of his power. We find that the God who is our Creator is also the one who took on our sinful human flesh and was not stained or dirtied by it—rather, he purified it, restoring back to its original design. The original human person walked and talked with God—we see this in the story of Eden. And this was what we were created for. And this is what Jesus forged within our human flesh—our pure heart was restored in his perfect work, and offered to us in the gift of his Spirit.

There is a beauty and wonder in a life that is restored, transformed by the indwelling Spirit. Most of the time we live oblivious to the reality of God's life in us and with us. If we are content in our life as it is, we may see the cross and all that pertains to it as being foolishness and some clever man-made story. But the moment of crisis will come and does come to each of us. Are we willing to open ourselves to the possibility that there is so much more going on than this?

I cannot explain effectively what happens when I come to the place with regards to a struggle I am having and admit to myself, to God, and to another that I am not enough and I need help. When I experience a strength beyond myself, a capacity to love that is not my own, and an ability to say or do what is needed when on my own, I could never do or say it—this is the power of Christ in me. I cannot boast in myself at all. No, there is something wonderful which happens in and through me when I fully surrender to the Lord and allow his Spirit to work in and through me.

So often, we take credit for what, in reality, is God's presence and power at work in us through Jesus by the Spirit. What makes us able to love our children when they are absolute pills to be around? What makes us able to offer help to someone who most certainly doesn't deserve our help? What moves us to get up and go to work each day, to pay our bills on time, and kiss our spouse goodbye? Does that simply come from our brain cells firing a certain way? Or is it possible that along with healthy brain cells is the movement, inspiration, and power of the one who created us with the desire and capacity for other-centered love?

We are incredibly blessed, for Christ has given us himself in the Spirit, enabling us to live the perichoretic life we were always meant to live with God and each other. Perhaps it is worth our while to start each day in quiet, asking Jesus, "Are you in me?" and have received his assurance, asking him, "What would you have me do today?" We may be astonished to discover that what may be considered foolishness by many is a beautiful reality for us.

*Dear Jesus, are you truly in me and with me? Free me from every lying voice, false belief and evil spirit which keeps me from seeing you as you truly are, living in me and at work in this world. How may I participate in what you are doing right now, as you live in me by your Spirit? Amen.*

*"For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside.' Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God. But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, 'Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.' "*  
1 Corinthians 1:18–31 NASB

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