

**WHAT IS A DISCIPLE?  
Part 5: It's All About Jesus**

**Scripture: Hebrews 1:1-4**

**Preached by Eric Park on the weekend of October 7 and 8**

The last time I saw Mark Kelso alive was on the afternoon of March 13<sup>th</sup>, 1994. He was in a hospital bed at St. Clair Hospital, nearing the end of his 84-year-old life after a lengthy battle with congestive heart failure. He was weary and ready to die, but his faith and sense of humor both remained vibrant until the very end. On that afternoon of March 13<sup>th</sup>, 1994, Mark and I prayed together and then said our goodbyes. As I made my way to the door of his hospital room, he called out my name.

“Eric.”

“Yes, Mark?”

“It’s all about Jesus.”

“What’s all about Jesus?”

“Life.”

“Life,” I asked. “Yes,” he answered. “Life. It’s all about Jesus.”

Those were the last words that I heard Mark Kelso speak. He died the next evening. Three days later I officiated at his funeral. At the heart of my funeral meditation that day was Mark’s final and beautiful profession of faith: “Life is all about Jesus.” The Scripture that I read that day was the same Scripture that I read for you just a moment ago: Hebrews 1:1-4: “Christ is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become much superior to the angels and having inherited the name that is above all names.”

What does that scripture mean in a nutshell? Mark Kelso knew. In fact, he interpreted the scripture for me on March 13<sup>th</sup>, 1994, when he spoke these words that remain close to my heart, even twelve years later: Life is all about Jesus.

Over the last several weeks, Scripture has offered to us some important responses to the question of what constitutes a disciple. A disciple of Jesus Christ, for example, is a person who is growing in both faith and good works, since faith without good works is dead and since good works without faith are random and directionless. A disciple of Jesus Christ is a person whose tongue and whose speech is governed by the Holy Spirit, whose hunger is for righteousness, and whose life is devoted to the ministry of prayer. All of these responses are biblical and significant. But tonight, Scripture offers what I consider to be the most significant and foundational response of all.

What is a disciple? Tonight's scripture would have us to believe that a disciple is someone who dares to believe that Jesus was more than a great prophet, more than a great healer, more than a great moral teacher. In fact, a disciple is someone who dares to believe what tonight's scripture proclaims—that Jesus is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being who sustains all things by his powerful word.

To put it another way, a disciple is someone who dares to recognize that life, ultimately, is all about Jesus.

(A soloist sings "There's Something About That Name")

The Scripture maintains that Christ is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and that he sustains all things by his powerful word. What does it mean that Jesus is the reflection of God's glory? It means that, when we want to know what God looks like, we examine the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, because Jesus is the reflection of God. He's the spitting image of his father.

What does it mean that Jesus is the exact imprint of God's very being? It means that the very essence of God's character was stamped on to human history in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. If we want to know what the character of God is like, in other words, we examine the ministry of Jesus, since he is the very incarnation of God's character.

What does it mean that Jesus sustains all things by his powerful word? It means that the resurrected Christ is secure upon the throne of creation, from which he holds the entire universe together by the power of his mighty and all-encompassing grace. Kings and politicians might enjoy a limited authority over a region, or a city, or a state, or even a country. But the Lord Jesus holds perfect authority over all of creation, and he never has to campaign. He never has to be re-elected.

Back in August of 2000, I traveled to Estonia, one of the Baltic states (just west of Russia) for the purpose of attending a conference of the World Methodist Council. While in Estonia, I was invited to preach at a Methodist church in the city of Yickvee, just 35 or 40 miles west of the Russian border. This particular church offered 2 Sunday morning worship services—one in the Russian language, the other in the Estonian language, since those are the two primary languages in the Estonian network of communication. My preaching in that context demanded the presence of a translator, which was a new and humbling experience for me. I describe it as humbling because, somewhere in the middle of my sermon that day, it occurred to me that, no matter how clever I might try to be in my articulation or imagery, anything meaningful that might be communicated through my preaching that day would be entirely dependent, not upon me, but upon the work of the translator and, of course, the work of the Holy Spirit.

I preached that morning, with gratitude and humility, in the presence of my brothers and sisters in Christ at the Yickvee Methodist Church. I would preach a sentence or two. Then, I would pause in order to allow the translator to do her important work. The entire sermon was grounded in this cooperative litany of preaching and translation.

Following the sermon, we celebrated the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. The pastor of the church consecrated the elements and held the bread. He asked me to hold the cup. People came forward, broke off a piece of bread, then stepped over to me where they would dip the bread into the cup. For each person, I offered the familiar words of institution: "The body of Christ broken for you, the blood of Christ shed for you. Eat drink and be thankful." The translator, standing right next to me throughout, would then re-communicate those words to the people either in Russian or Estonian.

What made that experience even more meaningful for me were the words of one Estonian woman who came forward that day. She appeared to be in her seventies and wore on her face an intensity that led me to believe that she had not had an easy life. As she came to where I was standing, she paused before dipping the bread, long enough to look into my eyes and long enough to speak a few sentences to me in Russian, which, of course, were unintelligible to me. I turned to the translator. "What did this woman just say to me," I asked. "It is too hard to translate," she responded. "We will talk about it after worship."

About fifteen minutes later, when worship had concluded, my curiosity compelled me to seek out the translator. "You have to tell me," I said, "what did that old woman say to me before she received communion? I have to know, because she seemed so serious about what she was saying."

"I don't know if it will make any sense in English," the translator said. "But what the woman was telling you was that, when Jesus came to us long ago in Bethlehem, it was God putting himself under our skin. And she said it was important to her to say that to you. She wanted you to know that she knew this. She wanted you to know that she knew that Jesus was God putting himself under our skin. Does this make any sense to you in English?"

"Yes," I quickly answered. "It makes all the sense in the world. She had never met me. She didn't know anything about me. But, as an expression of our unity in Christ, she wanted to communicate to me that she knew who Jesus before we experienced his presence together in the bread and cup of the Lord's Supper."

I borrow the vocabulary of that Estonian woman this evening for the purpose of shedding further light on this evening's scripture. What does Scripture mean when it tells us that Jesus is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being who sustains all things by his powerful word? It means that Jesus, in a very important sense, was God, putting himself under human skin, thereby incarnating himself, thereby making himself flesh for a humankind who would never be able to reach God on its own.

My question to you is this: What is your relationship like with this Jesus, who is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being? What is your relationship like with this God who puts himself under our skin in the person of Jesus?

(A soloist sings "He Is Lord")

The final proclamation that this evening's Scripture offers is that Jesus, before he sat down at the right hand of Majesty, made purification for our sins. It is an interesting proclamation to ponder, isn't it? Jesus made purification for our sins.

It is not a biblical teaching that I can explain in full detail. And beware of anyone who claims to be able to explain in full detail, since they are probably saying more about the issue than the Bible permits them to say. But the general biblical point is clear: Jesus is the only one who purifies or cleanses us from our sin. Somehow—and that is the only word to use—*somehow*, when Jesus suffered and died on the cross, as his blood was spilling out all over the Jerusalem countryside, God was at work in that suffering, transforming it into an occasion of reconciliation between a perfect God and a fallen humankind. *Somehow*, because Jesus was who he was, he was able receive into himself on the cross everything sinful about humankind, past, present, and future, thereby liberating us from the weight of our sin and thereby making the purification for sin that we ourselves were not able to render.

Did last week's horrific tragedy in the Amish schoolhouse break your heart as much as it broke mine? I assume that it did. I have tried to make sense of it in my own mind, but there is really no sense to be made of it, is there?

On Tuesday afternoon of last week, Rev. Dwight Lefever, pastor of the Living Faith Church in Lancaster sat in the kitchen of the killer's family, the Roberts family. Rev. Lefever said that he was simply endeavoring to provide at least a modicum of pastoral support to a family that was dealing with its own grief and confusion. As he sat with the family, an Amish neighbor came by. The neighbor walked into the kitchen, wrapped his arms around the killer's father, held him as the father wept, and whispered into his ear, "We forgive your son. We don't understand what he did, and maybe he didn't either. But we forgive your son."

The father pulled away from the embrace. "How," he asked the Amish neighbor. "How can you forgive my son when I'm not even sure that I can forgive him?" The response of the Amish neighbor was this: "We forgive him because of what Jesus did on the cross. We forgive him because the blood of Jesus covers the blood that was shed in the schoolhouse."

In last week's horrific tragedy, it is the Amish people who, with their passion for peace and their passion to forgive, are teaching the world something significant about the cleansing and purifying power of Jesus Christ. They are teaching the world that the cleansing blood of Christ is powerful enough to cover even the blood spilled in a murderous act. Because, through his blood, Jesus received into himself on the cross everything sinful about humankind—even our senseless murders—thereby liberating us from the weight of our sin and thereby making the purification for sin that we ourselves were not able to render. Don't wait to understand that truth before you accept it.

My question to you is this: What is your relationship like with this Jesus who makes purification for our sin? Is it a relationship of faithful discipleship? I pray that it is. Because, for a disciple, life is all about Jesus. And that's a good thing.

