

**“Our Common Love of Jesus”**  
**Hebrews 1:1–4; 2:5–12**  
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**First Baptist Church, Raleigh**  
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I remember quite vividly a worship service in Sisit, Kenya, nine years ago. I was there with several members of our church and a few from Hayes Barton Baptist Church, partnering with Sam and Melody Harrell. Among other things, we helped build a bridge, and this day we worshiped with the new friends in Christ with whom we were working.

One thing I remember is that during the prelude Sam told me I would be expected to preach, since I was a pastor, in addition to Kristen Muse from Hayes Barton, who I knew was preaching. It was the first notice I had of that reality. I had a little more time to prepare for today.

But another thing I remember is that every person who spoke, read or sang began by saying, “I love Jesus.” When the first person said it, it seemed natural. When others repeated the simple statement, it seemed like a ritual. But over time, as I reflected on the experience, it seemed like more than a ritual. It was a profound statement of why we were together that day — a rural mountain community of people in Sub-Saharan Africa joined by a dozen or so Americans, all of European descent. We were there because of a common love for Jesus.

We came from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Some of us were privileged by Western standards while others, while rich in other ways, had very little in the way of financial resources. We spoke different languages and wore different clothing. But we had a common love for Jesus and a desire to follow him in a distinctive way of life.

It was enough to bring us together that day, and it is enough to bind the church — that is, the Global Church — together in this time of chaos and division. It is our love for Jesus and deep yearning to know and follow him that makes us one across all our differences.

The author of Hebrews would affirm this claim. He begins his letter, which is more of a sermon or theological treatise, by saying that

while God has spoken to God's people in many different ways — through creation, prophets, major events and everyday life — God has spoken most recently and quite decisively through a Son, that is, Jesus. Insightful Baptist pastor Carlyle Marney suggested we might think of Jesus as a final way God has spoken, a last word to cherish, and he added that everything since Jesus in Christian history is just embroidery, (*The Carpenter's Son*, pp. 9-10).

Everything else is embroidery because Jesus is the centerpiece of our faith. According to Hebrews 1, he is the reflection of God's glory, the imprint of God's very being. The latter phrase referred to an impression made by a seal or the minting of a coin attesting to its value. Jesus provides the clearest reflection of the character of God. Genesis 1 says we are all made in the image of God. Thus, all of us, women and men, reflect the character of God in some way. But Jesus shows us the very face of God. In his kindness and mercy, in his balance of grace and truth, in his pursuit of peace and justice, we see God.

Thus, what we see in him defines us as individual children of God and as the body of Christ. In him, see our true value as beloved. In him, we see our calling. In him, we are bound together in a way that nothing can tear apart. We have many differences, various ideas about different subjects, at times we may even differ in our understanding of Jesus. But if we long to understand him, realizing there is ever more to know, and if we seek to follow his example, we have enough to keep us together.

In the musical *Godspell* there is a simple song we used at a retreat several years ago. "Day by day, day by day, Oh Dear Lord three things I pray — to see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, follow thee more nearly, day by day." That is our goal and that is what binds us together not just here in this church but as the body of Christ around the world — the desire to see, love and follow Jesus the very best we can.

But, of course, this is ever a work-in-progress. Knowing Jesus fully is a lifelong journey which shapes our love for him and the way we follow him all along the way.

My journey began when I saw the musical "Jesus Christ Superstar" as a teenager. It was criticized by the church at the time, and the writers

did try to emphasize the humanity of Jesus over his divinity while exploring the characters around him in ways scripture does not, but there was enough of the character of Jesus to intrigue me, to launch my lifelong quest to know, understand and follow him. My understanding now is not the same as it was in the mid-1970s nor will it be the same in the future. At least, I hope it is not. There is ever more to know.

More books have been written about Jesus than would fit in most libraries, by confessional scholars like Albert Schweitzer and Marcus Borg, non-confessional scholars like Bart Ehrman, even scholars of other faiths like Amy-Jill Levine who is Jewish and Reza Aslan who is Muslim. And these are just a few recent examples. The interest in discovering who the Jesus of history was is broad and intense, and there is much to learn from all of these scholars.

But the identity of Christ, for people of faith, is larger than the historical material. Hebrews 1 envisions the Son as being present at creation, as does John 1 in the great prologue about the Word. Both texts view Christ as a kind of co-creator. Hebrews 1 also pictures the Son at the right hand of God after his earthly ministry, as do other passages in the Christian Testament. The resurrected Christ reigns with God throughout eternity. So, at least for people of faith, there is more to our understanding of Christ than there is to the historical Jesus.

Perhaps most importantly, for people of faith, there is more to knowing Jesus than learning certain details about his life and purpose. In the Hebrew canon, when a man “knew” a woman, a child was born. Our calling to *know* Jesus involves more than head knowledge. It involves intimate knowledge, personal relationship. This is the kind of knowledge that leads to the deepest love and the most faithful following.

We have to acknowledge that through the ages there have been zealous people who knew a lot about Jesus but didn't seem to know him, beginning with Crusaders who killed in Jesus' name. In July of 1099 CE, after taking Jerusalem, “Christian soldiers” ran through the streets killing everyone they saw. Then, they locked Jews inside the central synagogue and burned them (*The Crusaders in the Holy Land*, Meron Benvenisti, p. 38). Carlyle Marney said church history has been our hearing, mishearing and refusing to hear the Son. Indeed, it has.

So, a love for Jesus is what binds us together, an all-consuming love that is based on an ever-growing knowledge and understanding of him, that takes into account more than what we find in the life of the historical Jesus, that requires a personal relationship with Jesus and willingness to follow his teachings. It sounded so simple in Sisit... and the basic desire is simple and it is what matters most, but as we seek to embrace all that this journey involves, there is one thing that can help us.

We can learn from each other, and by this, I mean in this church across all our differences, with other denominations, and in the global church. We can even learn from other faith traditions. Several years ago, I was on a panel at Campbell University with a Rabbi and an Imam for a conversation about how our three faiths see Jesus. Outsiders sometimes have a perspective that can help insiders. But especially in the Church with a capital C, we can help each other because, in addition to all we have in common, each of us experiences something distinct because of our cultural and theological lenses.

From Pentecostal friends, I have learned about a more emotional and charismatic way of relating to Christ. From Catholic, Orthodox and Episcopalian colleagues, I have learned about the value of liturgy in deepening our encounter with Christ and the benefits of a structured church in doing social ministry in Jesus' name. From Rwandan and Liberian colleagues, I have learned about Christ's presence in suffering, the suffering of Civil War. From Japanese brothers and sisters, I have learned about meeting Christ in silence. From Kenyan friends, I have learned about the joy Christ brings even among those who have very little, perhaps especially among those who have very little. And in each case, I have learned that we have something to give, too. There is so much we have to learn from each other on this journey.

So, our love for Jesus binds us together, and at the same time, the fact that we are together helps inform our love. As long as we keep our focus here, nothing will be able to tear us apart — not our different views on various subjects, not our different backgrounds, nothing. “The Church's one foundation,” says the hymnwriter, “is Jesus Christ her Lord.” And as Marney said, everything else is embroidery.