

Sermon “**Christ at the Center**”
from Colossians 1:15–20
Preached at Plymouth Presbyterian Church
St. Helens, Oregon
By Rev. Peter Blank
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There was an Old Testament professor at Duke Divinity School named Elbert Russell.

Every Christmas, he and his wife visited their daughter’s family in Greensboro. One Christmas morning, after opening presents and sitting down to a sumptuous breakfast, his eight-year-old grandson Rusty made a proud declaration: “Grandpa, I have made a discovery.”

“What’s that?” asked the professor.

“I have found out all about Santa Claus—the myth of Christmas.”

An awkward silence followed. Then Rusty added, “And that’s not all. When I get a little older, I’m going to look into this Jesus business.”

The old professor looked his grandson straight in the eyes and said, “I hope you do. And if you look into this Jesus business seriously, he’ll get you—just like he got me.”

Today, I want us to do the same—to look into this Jesus business seriously. This is a core belief of the Christian faith, Christ at the center.

There is only one thing that makes the Christian faith utterly distinctive: Jesus Christ. No other faith claims that God became human, died for us, and rose again. That’s the heart of the gospel. Jesus isn’t an add-on. Jesus Christ is the message.

When John Wesley sent his first preachers to America, he gave them a simple charge: “Offer them Christ.” And Albert Outler, the foremost Wesleyan scholar of the 20th century, echoed that at the end of his life: “Hold fast to Christ—and as for the rest, hang loose.” Presbyterians say it like this, “Jesus is Head of the Church and Lord of the conscience.”

Colossians was written to a church facing challenges not unlike ours. In Apostle Paul’s day, Gnostic teachers claimed secret knowledge and were spreading ideas that distorted the gospel. They saw Jesus as a helpful figure, but not unique—one of many intermediaries between humanity and the divine. That same distortion is alive today. Some argue that Jesus is just one religious figure among many. One scholar put it this way: “Jesus is simply an elder brother, a trailblazer among many siblings.”

But that’s not the gospel.

Presbyterians are known for welcoming theological diversity—and that’s a strength. But diversity without a center, collapses into confusion. If we agree on nothing else, let us agree on this: Jesus Christ is Lord.

There’s a saying: “If you have everything but don’t have Jesus, you have nothing. If you have nothing but have Jesus, you have everything.”

So, who is this Jesus? Paul answers with three affirmations:

1. In Christ, We See the Fullness of God

“He is the image of the invisible God... in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.” (vv.15, 19)

Jesus is not just a moral teacher or spiritual guide. He is God made visible. If you ask, “What is God like?” The answer is: look to Jesus.

I'm reminded of the Southern aunt who insisted to her nieces and nephews that everything good comes from the South. One of them asked, "Do you think Jesus was a Southerner?" She replied, "Well, he was good enough to be a Southerner."

But scripture won't let us settle for sentimental Jesus. C.S. Lewis put it bluntly: Jesus was either liar, Lord, or a lunatic. No middle ground.

The claim that got Jesus crucified was this: "I am the Son of the uncreated God, and you will see me at the right hand of Power."

He also said, "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father." And, "Before Abraham was, I am." That's the name of God gave Moses from the burning bush.

Only Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

These are bold claims—it's our claim. Because the Bible declares it, and history confirms it. If we believe Jesus shows us who God is, then Christ must be at the center of our lives, our theology, and our church. In Christ, We See the Fullness of God.

2. Christ Is Creator, Sustainer, and the Completion of All Creation

"For in him all things in heaven and on earth were created... and in him all things hold together." (vv.16–17)

Before Bethlehem, Christ was already present. Christ is the agent through whom the universe came to be, and he holds it together still.

That means Christ is not just the answer to your spiritual questions. Jesus is the key to all things—science, nature, family, government, justice.

Every newborn carries the fingerprint of Christ. Every honest law, every dependable formula, every act of mercy, every discovery of science about the nature of things—all reflect Christ's sustaining work. It's no wonder that the Psalmist says in Psalm 52, "I will proclaim God's steadfast love."

History is not random. It's headed toward the day when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. (Philippians 2:10-11)

3. Christ Is the Head of the Church

"He is the head of the body, the church." (v.18)

Plymouth PC, we are not a social club. We are the body of Christ, animated by Christ's living Spirit. And when Christ is at the center, the church has power nothing can overcome.

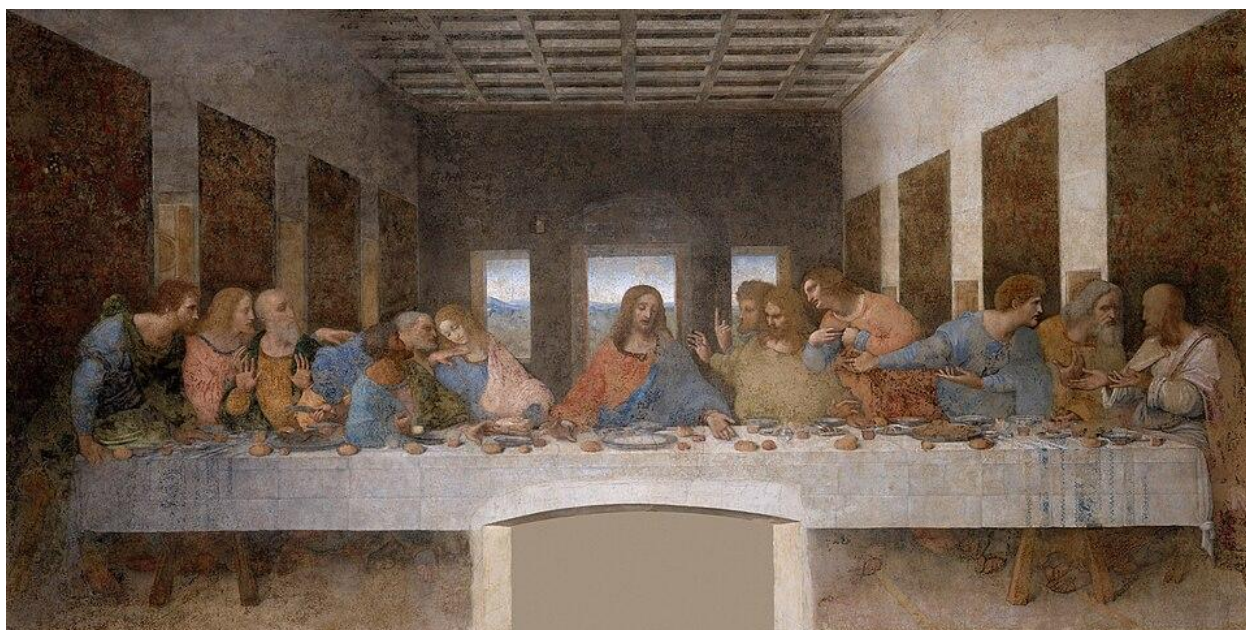
People say the church is full of hypocrites—and they're right. I usually say, "Come join us—there's always room for one more." The church isn't for perfect people; it's for people being transformed.

The world has tried to crush the church—Presidents, emperors, dictators, ideologies—but the church still stands. Why? Because Christ is the head of the church.

I know a woman who grew up in a home full of abuse. No one took her to church—except a neighbor. And there, she met Christ. She found love, hope, healing. The church, centered on Christ, saved her life.

If the Presbyterian Church ever forgets that Christ is the center, God may cast us aside like empty husks. But if we remain focused on him, we can be renewed.

In 1495 the Florentine artist Leonardo DaVinci began to paint his immortal vision of the Last Supper. Working slowly and with great care for detail, he spent three years completing the painting. When he had finally finished, he called a trusted friend to see it. "Give me your honest opinion," said DaVinci. "It's wonderful!" said his friend. "In fact, that cup is so real I cannot keep my eyes off it."



Immediately, DaVinci took a brush and drew it across the sparkling cup, removing it. He said, "If it affects you that way, it must not remain."

"But why," asked his friend. "The cup was beautiful."

"Because," said the great artist, "Nothing whatsoever shall distract attention from the figure of Christ."

[My apologies to Dan Brown' DaVinci Code fans. Here is the reason for no cup in DaVinci's Last Supper painting. So much for the controversy of the DaVinci Code!]

When you are asked to explain the dynamism of Christ Church, point to Jesus Christ.

- If there is any glory for anything we do, give it to Jesus.
- If someone wants to know how we survive heartbreak and tragedy, point them to Jesus.
- If they ask why we don't despair in the face of poverty and racism and drugs, tell them that nothing is impossible with Jesus.
- If someone wants to know how we remain confident even when the world is mired in deportation, war and hatred, tell them the victory belongs to Jesus.
- And if they wonder why even death cannot intimidate us, tell them that we know someone who conquered death, and his name is Jesus.

Look into this Jesus business. Here is what you'll find: Jesus Christ is the center.