**St. Paul’s Lutheran Church
Wildwood, Missouri**

**Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**September 1, 2019**

**Hebrews 13: 1-8**

Now, what I am about to say is probably going to sound completely and utterly obvious and maybe even a bit stupid. But that’s OK, it won’t be the first time I have ever said something completely and utterly obvious and stupid . . . just ask my wife! Regardless, here we go: I like Jesus. I really do. And when I say, *“I like Jesus,”* what I mean is that I like the way he is. I like the way he is revealed to us in Scripture. I like his consistency, for example, in dealing with sin. For those whose hearts are hard with sin, he speaks the Law. Granted, sometimes his words seems harsh, and sometimes they apply to me. But, I know he is simply trying to get people to turn away from their sins for their own good. Actually, he is simply trying to get people to turn from their sins for their own salvation. His love for us is too great to let us continue in sin without a warning. However, for those who recognize their sinfulness, for those who repent, he speaks a word of Gospel. Jesus always freely gives his forgiveness to repentant sinners. In fact, he promises us that in 1 John *1:9, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”*  That’s a promise and what we learn from the Bible is that Jesus always keeps his promises. I like Jesus, just the way he is and just the way that Scripture presents him.

Now, that may seem self-evident for a Christian. And, the question may arise, *“Shouldn’t that be the attitude of all Christians everywhere? Should we not accept Jesus for who he is and just as he has revealed himself in Scripture?”* Well, one would assume that but apparently, though, some people don’t like Jesus, at least, not in the way the Bible presents him. Every Spring since 1998, a group of liberal Christian clergy and theologians gather in New York for what they called a *“Re-imagining Jesus Seminar.”* That’s right, *“a re-imagining Jesus seminar.”* The purpose of the seminar is to explore ways to revamp and reshape Jesus so that he fits better into the current culture of America. Let me state that again, *“they want to reshape Jesus so that he might better fit into American culture.”*

At the first conference, Delores Williams of Union Theological Seminary in New York City, created a storm with her proclamation “*I don’t think we need a theory of atonement at all. I think Jesus came for life and to show us something about life. . . . I don’t think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff.”* I guess I never thought of the atoning cross of Christ as weird stuff.

Other gatherings have generated equally, shall we say, *“interesting*” views of this new Jesus. Mary Hunt, a Roman Catholic, proposed to the Reimagining Conference that a free-love friendship be substituted as a metaphor for family. She explained her meaning: *“…imagine sex among friends as the norm, young people learning how to make friends rather than to date. Imagine valuing genital sexual interaction in terms of whether and how it fosters friendship and pleasure…. Pleasure is our birthright of which we have been robbed in religious patriarchy. It is time to claim it anew with our friends.… Responsible relational sexuality is a human right. I picture friends, not families, basking in the pleasures we deserve because our bodies are holy and our sexuality is part of creation’s available riches.”* Consequently, one theologian said that she had no trouble envisioning Jesus standing in front of a high school passing out birth control to students. Yet another commented that she pictured a Jesus who was so compassionate that he would happily take an unwed, pregnant teenager to the abortion clinic himself. Funny, in my wildest imaginations I can’t picture Jesus doing any of these things.

Yet, this group is not alone. Have you ever heard of *“The Jesus Seminar?”* I know I have mentioned this in bible class before but this is a group of some 70 bible scholars, many of whom are still teaching at universities and seminaries, who believe that Christianity as you and I know it, is a perversion of what Jesus was all about. According to them, led by a man named Robert Funk who is now *“de-funked”* having died in 2005, Jesus was the victim of a first century public relations scheme and never actually claimed to be the Savior of the world. Jesus was, in The Jesus Seminar’s opinion, nothing more than a great moral teacher. So, to correct the centuries of fraud perpetrated by the church, Funk and his companions regularly gather together to vote on what parts of the Gospels are true. They do so by, I kid you not, placing colored marbles into a bag. Red means Jesus undoubtedly said it. Pink means that he probably said it but it has been slightly corrupted. Gray means that he probably didn’t say it and black means that he definitely didn’t say it. So, what was the result of them playing with their marbles? Well, according to them, Jesus didn’t say 85% of what the Bible says he said. In particular, according to them, Jesus never claimed to be God, he never performed any miracles, he died, but not for the sins of the world, and he never rose again.

In both of these cases, we see a group of people who don’t like the Jesus of Scripture and so they just *“re-imagine”* or *“reinvent”* a Jesus who is more to their liking. The Jesus of Scripture just didn’t suit their modern and contemporary tastes. So, like a wax nose that they twisted and molded for themselves a more culturally sensitive Jesus. In our Epistle lesson for today from Hebrews 13, the author ends with a most profound statement, *“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”* For some, like those I have already mentioned, this causes a bit of spiritual heartburn. They don’t want Jesus to be the same because him being the same conflicts with what they want to believe and how they want to live. That is actually a danger for us all. As sinners, we almost always prefer to make Jesus into something that suits our own desires.

That was, in essence, the very problem the Hebrews faced in our Epistle lesson for today. Now, it is certainly clear from the letter that they were taught the truth about Jesus. Now, we don’t know who wrote the letter to the Hebrews. Some say Paul while others say Apollos. Regardless, whoever wrote it clearly understood who Jesus was and what Scripture revealed about him. Jesus is the fulfillment of all of God’s plans of salvation. Jesus didn’t bring a new religion to the Jews, he completed it. Jesus is the supreme high priest, he is the better sacrifice, he is the author and perfecter of our faith. God the Father had been planning Jesus from the beginning and with Jesus, the mercy and the grace of God would be revealed. By Jesus’ death on the cross, God would demonstrate to the world his forgiveness and love. Jesus was presented to them as God’s gracious means of salvation. He was a gift to them so that by faith in his work, and not their own, eternal life could be theirs. Salvation came to them by the grace of God.

The Hebrews, however, changed the nature of that grace by reverting back to the comfort of legalism. For whatever reason, they were rejecting the grace of God offered them for the sake of Jesus and instead wanted to return to living under the Law. That is, they wanted to return to seeking salvation based on their own efforts. They wanted to play a role in their own salvation by keeping all the traditional Jewish laws even returning to offering temple sacrifice. In doing so, however, they were reinventing Jesus. In seeking salvation by their own works, Jesus was no longer the Savior in whom they must trust. By seeking to return to temple sacrifices, Jesus was no longer the once and for all sacrifice for sin. They changed Jesus, making him a minor player in their salvation. They diminished his saving work on the cross, making him something less than the Savior of the World. The Hebrews wanted a Jesus who required that they keep the ceremonial law, so, that is the Jesus they made for themselves.

What the Hebrews did was really nothing new. As I said earlier, the tendency of mankind has always been to make God into an image that better suits our own desires. The errors of the Hebrews and what the *Re-imagining Jesus Seminar* and *The Jesus Seminar* are doing simply reflects that. Usually people like to change Jesus because the Jesus of Scripture, although completely loving and compassionate, does not tolerate the sins they want to commit. People love to think of his willingness to forgive but want to forget his calling sinners to account. So, the result is they dislike Jesus as he has chosen to reveal himself.

However, and this is really important to realize: we all have to fight the urge to mold Jesus into being someone who is, shall we say, a bit more tolerant of our sin. I have a niece who was baptized, raised in the church, confirmed and very much involved with her youth group. When she turned twenty-one, she decided to move in with her boyfriend. When her parents tried to stop her from making what is always a colossal mistake, they talked to her about how God’s Word disapproves of that sort of relationship. Her response, *“Times have changed. Jesus understands living together now.”* The times may have certainly changed, but Jesus hasn’t. And just to make sure we all understand this, Jesus no more understands living together before marriage now than he did 2000 years ago or when he created the heavens and the earth in the beginning.

Now, my niece’s sin may not be my sin or your sin, but we all have plenty of sins which we would prefer to have Jesus overlook. I call these our *“pet sins.”* You know what I mean. These are the sins that, to be perfectly honest, we don’t want to give up because we enjoy them too much or they are the sins which are sins for you but not sins for me. For example, I can gossip about you all day long and that’s OK, but, your gossiping about me crosses the line.

Regardless, we all have them. It may be gossip, it may be lying, cheating, gluttony, drinking too much, haughtiness, pride, skipping church on Sunday, you name it. It is very easy for us to *“imagine”* a Jesus who has evolved along with society, who has change his views to become more modern and contemporary, who better fits in to the world today and is a little more accepting of things because, after all, we now live in the 21st century.

But that is simply not the case. What Jesus called sin thousands of years ago is still sin today. What Jesus condemned thousands of years ago is still condemned today. We might imagine that he has changed but that is really all it is, it is our imagination. All we are doing, though, is kidding ourselves and thus placing ourselves in spiritual danger. For the Jesus of yesterday still brings to us his word of truth. And, truth always remains truth. If it was true two thousand years ago, it is still true today and forever.

My dear friends in Christ, it is imperative for us and our faith that Jesus remain the same. And when I say remain the same, I mean as he is revealed to us in Scripture. If we try to change Jesus to suit our fancies, our salvation is on very shaky ground indeed. For if Jesus is constantly changing, we have no firm foundation on which to stand. If he is a Jesus who has evolved to now look away at certain sins, than how do I know that he has not changed his mind about a certain salvation that comes to me by his cross. Once I start changing one aspect or characteristic of Jesus, then all the rest come into question. Only the Jesus as revealed in Scripture provides salvation and it is only in trusting that Jesus by faith that we can live in peace and confidence. If the Jesus who lives for us today is different than the Jesus of Scripture, how can our faith ever be sure?

But, our faith can be sure and I propose to you today, that this verse offers us some of the greatest comfort found in all of Scripture. Think about this for a moment. If Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever, that means that I can look to Jesus and know him and know that I can trust him. I can rely on Jesus and all of his promises for me and my life, now and for eternity. For when I look to the Jesus of yesterday I see our God who loved us enough not to let us die in our sins but to take on human flesh and die for our sins for us. I see our God who could heal disease and sickness and I can know that some day he will completely heal me of all my ailments. I see our God who had power over death, who raised the widow of Nain’s son, who raised Jairus daughter and called Lazarus forth from the grave and I can know that he still has power not only over my death, but the death of my loved ones and that he will raise us all some day. I know that when I see his incomprehensible love demonstrated on the cross, that his incomprehensible love extends to me two thousand years later and beyond. And I know that the same Jesus who, hanging from the cross, cried out, *“Father forgive them for they know not what they do,”* will offer me those same words of forgiveness for all the times I fail him. And I know that he will offer those words to you also and better yet, he will mean them!

All this I know because he has not changed. I can count on him and although I may let him down, he will never let me down. Given that, why in the world would I ever want to re-invent another Jesus. The one we have is just fine, thank you. In fact, he’s perfect because he is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow! In Jesus name. Amen.