

## The Inexhaustible Riches of Christ<sup>1</sup>

When our daughter, Kristen, came back from Africa she told me that she had enjoyed singing hymns like the one we just sang. "What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus." Why don't American Presbyterians—this was her question—why don't we sing the "blood hymns," hymns that focus on the similarity of Jesus death on the cross to the primitive rites of sacrificing animals to God?

Here is how I'd explain that. Presbyterians might want to interpret Jesus' death with a number of different explanations. Jesus' death pays a ransom to set us free. Jesus' death is God's necessary suffering as the wronged party in a conflict with us. Jesus' death provides full satisfaction of God's righteous legal demands. Each of these explanations or metaphors opens a window into the meaning of the cross. And let's be honest. Presbyterians might also be a bit blood-squeamish and happy to let other Christians emphasize the blood atonement.

Now, here's where I'm going with this. This isn't a sermon about the blood hymns. It's a sermon about the greatness and majesty of Jesus Christ. If you take, say, the death, the crucifixion of Jesus, it is so wonderful and mysterious, that no one explanation exhausts its meaning. People have written

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<sup>1</sup>Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on September 6, 2009 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, GA.

dozens of hymns, thousands of sermons have been preached, and millions of lives have been turned around and history has changed because of the "blood of Jesus." And...here's the punch line...and that is but one among many ways of looking at one event in Jesus life.

The Jewish rabbi Abraham Heschel once said, "Beauty we appreciate, grandeur we can't understand."

Now, here's where this gets exciting for me. If you move three days beyond Jesus' crucifixion you have his resurrection. Earlier this summer we had several sermons on, basically, the resurrection of Jesus. What we said was that for Jesus to come back from the grave is of staggering significance. With the resurrection, suddenly death is not so big a deal. With the resurrection there opens up this glorious vista that God intends to do for the whole world what he did for Jesus—to give new life.

Think about this! Jesus' crucifixion is so momentous, so life-changing that no explanation can fully do it justice. Now we're saying that the resurrection is the same way. It's pretty clear that the first disciples had no idea of the gravity of the events that they were participants in and eye witnesses to. It was bigger than they were ready to take in as it was happening. It took generation after generation of Christian believers

before the collective IQ got high enough to really get clear on just how huge the Christ event was.

This inexhaustibility of Jesus Christ goes on and on. Take the teaching of Jesus. I'm pretty sure I'm correct in saying that the most important teaching of Jesus was about the Kingdom of God. We've just said that the crucifixion is grandeur beyond our full comprehension. We've said that the resurrection is grandeur beyond our full comprehension. Now we're saying that what Jesus himself really emphasized—the Kingdom—is also beyond our full comprehension.

Every time I mention the Kingdom of God, a hand goes up: "Doug would you define the kingdom for us? Could you just for once make this simple? What is the Kingdom?"

My response. Okay, one sentence. "The Kingdom is when God is fully in charge."

Now, Jesus isn't nearly as straightforward. What Jesus does is to tell a bunch of little stories—parables—with quirky endings. These stories give hints as to what the Kingdom is like. The Parable of the Great Banquet is one example. It suggests that the kingdom of God is like a bunch of bums eating at a banquet that the rich folks missed. The bums are invited so the food doesn't go to waste." Stuff like that.

Think of this. Isn't Jesus teaching us just about the same thing that I'm trying to say in this sermon? The Kingdom of God, like the resurrection of Jesus, is so grand that no single explanation does it justice.

Can you see where I'm headed with all of this? The cross is bigger than we could ever take in. The resurrection is inexhaustibly grand. The Kingdom of God is huge. And I haven't even mentioned the Christian life of discipleship—walking and talking with Jesus. Being an apprentice to him. I haven't mentioned the Holy Spirit. Haven't mentioned the Old Testament. The Old Testament supported a whole religion—Judaism—for centuries.

In C.S. Lewis' Narnia stories—now in motion picture form—he depicts Jesus Christ as a lion. Good image. Noble, beautiful, ferocious in wonderful ways. As the stories progress, the children begin to notice that the lion has gotten bigger. He's wonderful. And big! Getting bigger.

For me, our lion, our Lord is becoming simply magnificent. Suddenly such phrases as the "unfathomable riches of Christ" used by the Apostle Paul in this morning's lesson make a whole lot of sense. You and I are tied into something of inexhaustible depth and beauty.

A theologian once observed that God never does a lesser work after a greater one. He's always outdoing himself. I might do something less impressive after a big effort. It would be typical of me to think, "I'm glad that's over. That project is about all I'm interested in tackling. If I'd known how hard it was going to be, I'd never have got myself into it. Next time I'm going to wind it way back."

God doesn't work that way. God does something wonderful. Then God does something more wonderful. First of all, God created everything. Think! The Heavens and the Earth. Later, with the need for the redemption the restoration of God's creation, God wasn't thinking, "Whew, I'll never get into a project like the Creation again. I really bit off a lot there. There are meteors out there that no one will ever even notice. And I created every last one. But never again. The next project is going to be much more manageable."

God didn't do that. The next project—the Christ event—was greater. Could that be? Could it be that the coming, the teaching, the suffering, the death, the resurrection, and the ascension of Jesus Christ rivals the Creation of the Universe. Yes!

Listen again to the remark John the gospel writer makes in his very last verse. "There were so many things which Jesus

did; were every one of them to be written, the world couldn't contain the books that would be written." For the first time, I'm thinking that that might not be an exaggeration. Maybe the riches of the redemption that comes through Jesus just might—if written up—overwhelm the creation. Fill up the whole world with books about Jesus!

What are we to do with all of this? Live in the grandeur and the mystery of it all. Learn to receive the massive treasure that God wants to give you. If you think that you've exhausted the Bible, heard it all in church, gone to the limits of prayer, forget it. You haven't. You and I have been brought into a conversation and friendship with the second person of the Trinity, the principle behind all creation. We were created and called to see more, know more, do more, than we could ever desire or invent for ourselves. Leave here today in the immensity of that thought! Know yourself to be one gifted with a treasure beyond all imagining.