

“TRANSFORMATIONAL TRAINING”

Imagine Meeting Christ #9

Romans 14:1-23, Mark 7:14-23

June 5 & 6, 2021

Over the last couple of months, we’ve been looking at getting to know Jesus. I asked the question, “What would it mean to you to meet Jesus?” We studied how Jesus interacts with us in a variety of ways, allowing us to get to know Him so that we might become acquainted with Him and find His great love for us. However, Jesus does not want us to remain in the “acquainted with Him” phase, but to grow deeper in our faith in Him so that He begins to lead us in our everyday lives. And that challenges us as we find Him walking with us and even crying for us. So let’s go a little deeper in meeting Christ Jesus our Lord. Let’s look at how we can become trained by Jesus.

The disciples had 3 ½ years of attending Jesus Christ University, walking with Jesus day after day and spending time with Him night after night, hearing Him teach marvelous things about God’s love for us, watching Him interact with the folks around Him in astounding ways, and being trained by Jesus in how God desires us to live for Him.

Jesus taught them to think differently than those around them, taking the message of the Scriptures deeper into their lives, and then looking at life differently, and feeling differently about others. Jesus challenged them to think beyond the standard laws and regulations, so that they might conduct themselves very differently with regard to everyone around them, taking God’s Word deeper into their hearts so that they might see as God sees and understand as God understands.

Yet, Jesus’ training runs counter to our traditions, and forces us to look deeper into the Law than just the lines on a page. He wanted those lines on the page to come alive in His disciples to the point of them making a difference in the community in which they lived, or in at that moment. Opening up the eyes of His followers, Jesus trained them to go beyond the blind obedience to the commands so that they might share the love of God with everyone, inviting them to experience and then share that love, too. That meant exposing flaws and weaknesses within His followers so that they might grow stronger in those areas and become competent, fully abled teachers themselves of the ways of God.

But that meant that everything was open for Jesus to step in and remold and change. Everything was re-evaluated and scrutinized so that God's true meaning of the commands were revealed. Since God's ways are so different than our own ways, Jesus sought to train His disciples to think in the way that God thinks, to look at others as God sees them, and to work in righteousness as God works in the world, even today. Jesus continues the training of His followers so that we might be truly renewed and recreated people in the image of God.

However, that training demands humility. To stand before Jesus and demand that He conforms to our way of living and thinking completely defeats any transformational training that He could give to us. We must conform to His will and His ways if we are to be His disciples. There is no such thing as a hybrid Christian – we can't claim to be a follower of Jesus and then demand to have things done our own way. Jesus told us that we are either for Him or against Him (Matthew 12:30), so that means we must humble ourselves and accept His teaching as our own, and then live according to them if we are to be His followers.

Now that's a hard thing to do, because it means that we have to let go of our preconceived notions and our own understanding of how everything should work and give ourselves up to following Jesus' will and way. When we submit to Jesus' standards and training regimen, our own pride must be disassembled and surrendered to Him so that we are completely committed to His training.

So completely must we give ourselves to become fully trained by Jesus that when we look in the mirror of our life, the only reflection we see is that of Jesus. We see in that mirror, Jesus' passion for obedience to God the Father; we see His unbelievable love for those who are lost; and we see His great fervency in calling all people to Himself so that they might find eternal life. That's His desire, to make us like Him in every way. And only in that way can we become true Christians – little Christs – demonstrating to the world what it means to be His people in all our ways.

The Apostle Paul humbled himself to become fully trained by Jesus, and he was completely transformed by that training. Paul had the training of the Scribes and the Pharisees already developed in

his life, he had the passion to make disciples of the faith, but when Jesus got a hold of him and completed the training of God in his life, Paul was a new man, even changing his name from Saul to Paul. And God used him in a mighty way to teach us so much about how we are to treat one another and how we are to show God's great love everywhere we go.

And we see that in Romans 14 today. So counter-cultural is the training of Jesus that we begin to look at those guidelines and restrictions laid out for us in the Old Testament in new ways that change our whole outlook on how we treat one another. We begin to see that it's not about the rules and regulations put forth toward us that are important, but the way that we treat others, even if they disagree with us. It's not blatantly demanding conformity to the law, but offering a relationship with the One who established the law so that we might find eternal life through Him. And then, once we have a relationship with God, our desire comes to obey Him in all His ways.

So the Word of God given to us through the Apostle Paul guides us toward seeing others as brothers and sisters, treating them as we would also want to be treated. God tells us, "*Be under obligation to no one – the only obligation you have is to love one another. Whoever does this has obeyed the Law...all these, and any others besides, are summed up in the one command, 'Love your neighbor as you love yourself.'* If you love someone, you will never do (them) wrong; to love, then, is to obey the whole Law" (Romans 13:8-10).

But Paul takes this deeper so that we might understand what it really means to "love our neighbor as we love our self." He begins by instructing us to "*Welcome the person who is weak in faith, but do not argue with him about his personal opinions*" (14:1). Arguing does no good and only brings division between believers. The weak in faith are to be **encouraged by the strong in faith**, not belittled or demeaned into submission.

And to flesh this out, Paul uses food as an example – eating meat vs. not eating meat. "*One person's faith allows him to eat anything, but the person who is weak in the faith eats only vegetables. The person who will eat anything is not to despise the one who doesn't; while the one who eats only*

vegetables is not to pass judgment on the one who will eat anything; for God has accepted him" (14:2-3). It seems so trivial to fight over food, but if the faith of one person differs from the faith of another in the trivial matters of life, we are not to allow that to divide us as followers of Jesus Christ.

In fact, we are told that this issue of eating meat or not eating meat became such a hot topic at that time that it was indeed bringing division and criticism toward one another. So the question is rightly asked, *"Who are you to judge the servant of someone else?"* (14:4a). Because one is faithful to their belief that eating meat was bad, they are being true to their faith. Because the one is faithful to their belief that they could eat anything, they are being true to their faith. *"It is his own Master who will decide whether he succeeds or fails. And he will succeed, because the Lord is able to make him succeed"* (14:4b). So we are accountable to God based upon our faith in our belief of meat being eaten or not. But we are not to demand that the other one conform to our way of thinking. *"Every one of us, then, will have to give an account of himself to God"* (14:12).

Then Paul uses the example of special days - some days are special to some while they are not to others. These are people within the body of Christ who hold that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, the Savior of the world, yet they have different opinions of what is good and what is not. We are to be united in the essentials of our faith, but we can then also be diverse in the non-essentials of life.

In our world today, we can use the wearing of masks or the receiving of the Covid19 vaccine as relevant examples. To some, the wearing of masks gives them confidence in protection from the coronavirus. To others, wearing masks is a waste of time and has no protection at all. Is wearing a mask or not wearing a mask essential to our salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ? NO! Yet we are seeing the very same division today within this church as Paul did in the matter of eating meat or not eating meat in his day. We can argue until we are blue in the face, and it will not change anyone's minds.

The Administrative Board of this church decided that we should continue the practice that we've been doing since we opened in May of 2020, that of wearing masks while we are moving around in the church, and then feeling free to take them off while sitting in the pews socially distanced from one

another. That's taking into account those who have conditions that make it difficult for them to wear masks. It's what we've been doing all along during this pandemic. Yet since the CDC has relaxed their guidelines, some are now demanding that we no longer accommodate for the faith of those who feel better wearing masks, and want to disband the practice of wearing masks all together. And it's bringing division within the life of this congregation. Those who **want to** wear masks are passing judgment on those who do not want to wear masks, and those who **do not want to** wear masks are despising those who want to wear masks. HOW ABSURD! Has not God protected us all this time?

The same thing is true about the vaccination of people. To some, getting the vaccine for Covid19 is important to help them feel protected from the coronavirus. To others getting the vaccine is a terrible thing, so they don't get the shots. We're seeing criticism from both sides as to who is right or wrong. The arguments can go on forever about the safety of either opinion, and it is bringing division within the body of Christ. HOW ABSURD! Cannot God protect us either way? Can't we respect each other and show love to each other either way?

We then hear powerful words of God, *"So then, let us stop judging one another. Instead, you should decide never to do anything that would make your brother (or sister) stumble or fall into sin"* (14:13). You see, we are to go deeper, beyond our own personal opinions, and love one another enough to encourage them in their faith, not getting sidetracked by what we eat, or what day is important, or what we wear on our face, or if we get a vaccination. It goes beyond the decision of the Administrative Board of this church to continue the same practice as we've been doing since we began worshipping live, in person, again. It goes back to loving one another deeply enough to respect them in their belief WITHIN THE BODY OF CHRIST. Can we support each other and show love to one another in order to help each other grow deeper in their faith?

Paul says it clearly, *"If you hurt your brother (or sister) because of something you (do), then you are no longer acting from love. Do not let (the things you do) ruin the person for whom Christ died! Do not let what you regard as good get a bad name"* (14:15-16). *"So then, we must always aim at those*

things that bring peace and that help strengthen one another. Do not...destroy what God has done...it is wrong to (do) anything that will cause someone else to fall into sin. The right thing to do is to keep from...doing anything else that will make your brother or sister fall” (14:19-21).

I have to tell you that I hate wearing masks, anywhere, anytime. But if my wearing a mask will encourage others to feel better about coming to church and benefitting in being a part of the body of Christ here in this church, then I will wear a mask! I am willing to show love to each of you, and will do what is best to increase your faith, and I ask you to do the same thing for a little while longer. Other congregations here in Sheboygan have jumped to quickly disband their safety practices only to find an outbreak of Covid19 WITHIN THEIR CHURCHES. I don't want that to happen to us, so I ask for your patience AND LOVE for one another to grow deeper in our faith TOGETHER.

Jesus desires the same thing for us, that we grow deeper in our faith as we love one another. He confronted a similar situation with the leaders of the church as there was condemnation being given because they were eating with ritually unclean hands. In Mark 7, we read *“Some of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus. They noticed that some of His disciples were eating their food with hands that were ritually unclean – that is, they had not washed them in the way the Pharisees said people should. (For the Pharisees, as well as the rest of the Jews, follow the teaching they received from their ancestors: they do not eat unless they wash their hands in the proper way; nor do they eat anything that comes from the market unless they wash it first. And they follow many other rules which they have received, such as the proper way to wash cups, pots, copper bowls, and beds)” (Mark 7:1-4).*

The Pharisees were complaining about the disciples of Jesus eating with ritually unwashed hands. They were looking for anything to criticize Jesus so that they could prove that He was not the Messiah. Instead of listening to what Jesus had to say, they used the situation as an opportunity to condemn Jesus' ministry. HOW ABSURD! They were so used to being the ones to make the rules and demand that the people follow those rules, that they missed learning from the Son of God, and they

missed finding the deeper truth in God's love for us. Their pride brought judgment.

Yet, Jesus' training is so much more than the mere compliance with rules and regulations in the details of life. Listen to how Jesus sought to train those around Him to go deeper in their faith. This is Mark 7:14-23. (READ Mark 7:14-23)

It's what comes out of a person that defiles them, not what goes into them. It is what comes out of the heart of a person that demonstrates the true condition of that person's heart. The way that we treat one another shows exactly where we are in our relationship with Jesus Christ. We may claim to have great knowledge and great wisdom about God and His Word, yet if we treat one another with contempt and disrespect, we only deceive ourselves. The training of Jesus calls us to be transformed from our own prideful selves, into unconditionally loving people who will risk giving up their own way of doing things to follow Jesus' way of doing things.

When Jesus proclaimed all foods clean, He went against all of the teaching of the church saying that pork was forbidden (and shellfish, and anything that had a cloven hoof). The guidelines for the people of the Old Testament were preventative measures trying to keep everyone healthy. But they were not essential for the salvation of their souls. Jesus was that person, so He was pushing the envelope in saying that all food could be eaten. That's not what caused them to sin. The focus is not on eating or drinking (or wearing masks or getting the Covid19 vaccine). What matters to Jesus is righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

In this example of food, what Jesus is saying is, "There's nothing about food or drink that's inherently sinful. Enjoy them in the true spirit of My kingdom. But as you do, remember that you're not alone in this world. Others have different opinions about food and drink. You need to be aware of that." "But how do we know when and where to partake or refrain?" "In everything, be guided by love."¹

Using this example, Jesus offers us three principles to show us how love should guide us. 1) The

¹ (Robert Rasmussen, *Imagine Meeting Him*, [Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 1998], pg. 112)

first is the **principle of freedom**. “You are free in your relationship with [Jesus] to enjoy whatever food or drink you want to. There is no sin in the thing itself. Don’t criticize a brother [or sister] who makes a decision different than yours, and no one should criticize you for your choices either.”

“The 2) second **principle** is that **of responsibility**. If a brother [or sister] sees you doing something which your freedom has permitted you to do, and [they] are genuinely offended by it, then you’re responsible for loving [them] by curbing your own freedom. Either stop partaking, or find times and ways of enjoying your freedom that do not violate the love of the brethren.”

The 3) third principle is “the **principle of personal faith**. At times you will not be completely sure of what to do. You’ll wonder what others would think or say if they knew how you felt. In those situations you can only hold up your decision before the Father. Ask Him honestly to show you the way to go. If your conscience is clear before Him, then seize by faith your freedom in the context of your personal relationship with Him, not forgetting the principle of responsibility, of course.”²

Living by these principles forces us to think and depend upon Jesus. He’s giving us the freedom and the responsibility to decide for ourselves so that we might encourage one another to grow deeper in our faith in Him, and then live in a way that demonstrates to the world how that looks in real life. Jesus is training us to go beyond our own selfish desires to enable people of weaker faith to see in us greater faith so that together, we might build up the body of Christ. We’re not to flaunt our greater faith, belittling the faith of others, but to use that greater faith to grow faith in the lives of people around us.

Let’s pray. Father God, thank You for the training of Jesus that takes us beyond ourselves into following You. “Help us accept each other as Christ accepted us. Teach us to embrace each other as brother and sister. Be present among us, Lord, and bring us to believe we are ourselves accepted and meant to love and live. Teach us Your lessons, O Lord, for we struggle to be human, searching for hope and faith. Teach us to care for people, for all, not just for some, to love them as we find them, or as they may become (as Your servants.) Lord, for today’s encounters with all who are in need, who hunger for acceptance, for righteousness and bread, we need new eyes for seeing, new hands for holding on; renew us with Your Spirit; Lord, free us, and make us one.”³ This we pray in Jesus’ precious and holy Name. Amen

COMMUNION SERVICE

² (Robert Rasmussen, *Imagine Meeting Him*, pg. 112-113)

³ (Fred Kaan, *Help Us Accept Each Other*, 1974, UMC Hymnal, 1989 version, pg. 560, vs. 1,2,4)