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Jesus Supersized

Luke 10:38-42
Colossians 1:15-29

In 2006, Will Ferrell starred in a movie called, *Talladega Nights*, in which Ferrell played a NASCAR driver named Ricky Bobby. If you haven't ever watched the movie, I don't want you to think that I am recommending it to you. It is an irreverent, but funny movie in which an aging, egotistical NASCAR driver is challenged by a French Formula One driver. Ricky Bobby believes that he is the center of the racing universe and his simple-minded, self-aggrandizing is like a terrible accident – hard to watch and hard to ignore. But, as I read the assigned Scriptures for today, I was reminded of a scene from *Talladega Nights* where the whole Bobby family is gathered around the dinner table – which is full of Domino's Pizza, Kentucky Fried Chicken and Taco Bell – and Ricky Bobby begins to say “grace”. He begins his prayer with the words, “Dear Lord Baby Jesus”, and throughout his prayer he refers to Jesus as “tiny little infant Jesus”, and “8 lb, 6 oz newborn Jesus.” About half way through, Ricky Bobby's wife, Carly, interrupts him and says, “Sweetie, Jesus did grow up. You don't always have to call him ‘baby’. It's a bit odd and off-putting for you to pray to a baby.” To which Ricky Bobby replies, “Look! I like the Christmas Jesus best. When you say grace you can say grace to grown-up Jesus or teenaged Jesus or bearded Jesus or whomever you want.” And so he continues his blessing with, “Dear tiny Jesus . . .” The conversation around the table goes downhill from there, but I couldn't help but think of this scene because of the vastly different images of Jesus that the assigned Scriptures for today give us.

On one hand we have the very human (yet grown-up) Jesus, sitting in Mary and Martha's living room and teaching those who will listen. This Jesus is so human, so approachable that Martha feels free to complain to him that her sister Mary is not pulling her weight and to ask Jesus to referee a sister disagreement and to tell Mary to stop listening and to start helping to get lunch ready.

And on the other hand we have this lofty, gigantic picture of Jesus as “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” from Paul's letter to the Colossian Church. In this ancient hymn, the Apostle Paul tells us that by/in Jesus all things were created, and that Jesus is the hub of all reality (in him all things hold together). Jesus is the head of the body of Christ, the Church, and in Jesus the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. Through Christ God reconciled all things (earth and heaven) to God's own self, and that Jesus Christ is our only hope for

reconciliation with God. So, concludes Paul, we must hold without wavering to the good news we have in Christ.

Paul then goes on to say that telling the good news of this Jesus is what God called him to do and that that telling the whole world about Jesus Christ is what he is privileged to do – happy to suffer for this purpose so that all who know Jesus may be changed into mature believers in Christ.

What Paul gives us is an absolute claim for the uniqueness of Christ. In theological terms what Colossians give us is a very high Christology – a lofty theology of who Jesus is. For Paul, Jesus is inextricably linked to the pre-existent and cosmic Christ – there is no distance between God the Son and God the Father in this passage. And so Jesus Christ is truly unique and worthy of our very lives.

The reason that we have perhaps heard the Mary and Martha story much more often than we have heard this Colossians passage is that we can more easily identify with a Jesus who sits in a living room than we can with this abstract, cosmic, Jesus in Colossians. But these two Scriptures, taken together, give us the opportunity to think about our own images and claims about Jesus. Who is Jesus to us?

Many of us picture Jesus in way that I would call the good-old, conservative revival Jesus. When our beliefs about Jesus were formed by a call to repentance and to walk down the center aisle to confess Christ as Lord and Savior, then our beliefs about Jesus tend to have a tinge of fear and judgment as well as gratitude. We were destined to hell because of our Sin, but just as God was about to give us what we deserved, Jesus stepped in and took our punishment so that we could be saved. There is support for this understanding of Jesus in Scripture, and I believe that this understanding of Jesus is true – partly.

Others of us picture Jesus as a social justice, iconoclast. Jesus always stands with the poor, the dispossessed and the voiceless, and his purpose is to upend all the structures that keep people poor, oppressed and victimized. Again, I can find lots of support for this Jesus in Scripture, and I believe that this understanding of Jesus is true – partly.

Still others picture Jesus as our friend and co-pilot, always accessible and intimately acquainted with our lives and needs. This Jesus is a buddy and a comfort and is not someone to be afraid of. If we need something, we can call on this Jesus anytime – even when we want our sister to help us with the dishes! Again – I can find lots of support for this Jesus in Scripture, and I believe that this understanding of Jesus is true – partly.

I don't think that Ricky Bobby is alone in picturing Jesus as a tiny, infant, newborn. This Jesus only shows up once a year and is mostly about sentimental lighting and angels singing. This Jesus is a miracle and unique, but doesn't require much of us, other than adoration – about once a year. Jesus was indeed born into this world as a vulnerable newborn human being, so we must say that even this understanding of Jesus is true – partly.

I could go on, but you get my drift – right? By now, you know what I am going to say right? All of these images of Jesus are partially correct. But, because we are human we often like to settle for one or two understandings, rather than holding our understanding open to include all that Scripture has to say. But, when we settle on only one view of Jesus then our ability to know Jesus or to understand and live the Good News of the Gospel is going to be truncated and true – but only partly. To hold to only one (or two) of these views of Jesus requires that we shrink Jesus to a size that suits us or that allows us to feel secure, supported or superior to those who hold a different view of Jesus.

Today Scripture challenges us to remember that all of our images of and beliefs about Jesus are partial. And we are challenged to recognize and to resist our temptation to shrink Jesus to fit our purposes. Jesus is both sitting in Mary and Martha's house, AND is the force by and through which everything in heaven and earth are created and reconciled. Scripture is uncompromising in its absolute claim that Jesus is the unique manifestation in history of the eternal God. In the person of Jesus both human nature and all of God's nature co-existed, in a way that we cannot fully comprehend or explain. But the consequences of this truth changed human history and changes our lives – when we make the time to reach for and struggle to comprehend the Gospel. In Jesus Christ, the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. So, Jesus was not only a historical figure, Jesus is also the eternal and cosmic Christ through whom and by whom all things are created and to whom all things are reconciled. It is enough to blow the electrical circuits in our minds. So, it makes sense for us to pick one or two understandings of Jesus. We are more comfortable that way. But, we get ourselves into trouble when we refuse to remember all of the understandings of Jesus. So, before we shrink our understandings of Jesus down to a manageable size, I'd like to argue for an expansive, supersized understanding of Jesus that remains open to the entire witness of Scripture. And I'd like to point out some common consequences of believing in a Jesus that is too small.

The first consequence of believing in a too small Jesus is that we begin to use Jesus as a weapon to exclude others or to congratulate or to secure ourselves. The claim of Jesus as Lord and Savior is weaponized, when our understanding is too small, to prove that those who do not believe as we do are destined to hell. We know that this is a too-small Jesus, because this view assumes that Jesus belongs to us, plays only for our team, blesses only our nation, party, or race.

Scripture refutes this too-small Jesus by reminding us that Jesus does not belong to us. Instead, we belong to Jesus. It is not we who judge. It is Christ Jesus who is the judge. It is not we who decide who and what can be used or reconciled for God's purpose, but it is Jesus Christ who reconciles and who includes us! A more Scripturally sized Jesus is one to whom we belong, and by whom we are reconciled and forgiven. In a supersized understanding of Jesus there is not room for pride or exclusion of others, because we understand that it is God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – who is primary and to whom we belong, to whom we are subject. Jesus did not come to earth so that we – who could not save ourselves but who have been rescued from the power of darkness and transferred into the Kingdom (Eph 1:13-14) – could use our partial

knowledge of God (our kingdom citizenship card) to exclude others from God's Kingdom. I could go on and on here, but I am about out of time. So, let me briefly describe what I believe is the second consequence of believing in a too small Jesus.

The second consequence of believing in a too small Jesus is that we often stop talking about Jesus at all. This might be because a small Jesus does not require much of us and so we are not changed and there just isn't much to talk about. We know more about movies and sports and politics than we do about a too-small Jesus. Sometimes we don't talk about Jesus because our too small Jesus isn't really worth much of our time, energy or money, and hasn't really made much of a difference in how we view ourselves, the world or ultimate reality. And then, sometimes, we stop talking about our too small Jesus because we are afraid of offending others or of falling into the trap of weaponizing Jesus and excluding others (see consequence #1).

I want to be personal with you for a moment. My belief that Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God – a historical human being in which the fullness of God was pleased to dwell – a unique and authoritative manifestation of the eternal and everlasting God – does not mean that my friend Rabbi Case or my friend Imam Shaheed are going to hell. I think that that sort of thinking is the faulty conclusion of belief in a Jesus that is just too small.

- Our challenge is to remember that Jesus does not belong to us, but we belong to Jesus.
- Our challenge is to remember that Jesus is both accessible and human, and also cosmic and fully God. No one understanding of Jesus can exhaust who Jesus Christ is.
- Our challenge is to refrain from believing that the understanding of Jesus that we most prefer is exhaustive or enough.
- Our challenge is to remember that Christ came into the world not to make us safe or to prove us right, but to save the world – a world that cannot save itself – from darkness, alienation, sin and death and to reconcile it ALL for God's purposes – not ours, not the purposes of our political party, not the purposes of any one nation, not anyone's purposes except God's purposes.

And when we can remember that, when we continually seek the purposes of God's Kingdom rather than our own security and certainty, then the Church of Jesus Christ will be able to experience the fullness of Christ as the image of the invisible God. When our Jesus is God-sized, rather than too-small, then we will be willing to suffer so that the world can know the love and plan of this Supersized Jesus. When our Jesus is God sized, we will never stop being willing to change and grow in the knowledge and grace of God. When our Jesus is God-sized, we will be ready to struggle on towards maturity – pointing always to God as we have come to know God in the person of Jesus Christ. When our Jesus is God sized, we will always remember that the Church does not exist for us – for our safety, our power, our comfort, or our fellowship. Instead we will know that the Church exists for one purpose only – to serve the purposes of Christ – in whom God has made clear God's purpose for us and for the world. That is very good news.