

Calvary United Methodist Church  
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## THE ESSENTIAL MESSAGE OF JESUS

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### Children's Message:

Mark 1:14-20

I am going to ask that our kids, we have a lot of kids here today. I'm grateful for that. Come, sit down here. I love having you guys here. Come in real close. How are you doing?

I have some things to show you here. Now, I found, as I was cleaning out a little box that I keep, I have all these pins in them and I started looking at these pins and thinking about them and they all mean something important to me and I'll share them with you here. They are about relationships that I have shared, organizations that I belong to, experience that I have had, people that I have met.

I'll begin with this. Do you have any idea what that is? (No.) (Child speaks.) It does. This goes back to my grandmother and it says, "Roosevelt" on it. Not Teddy, but Franklin. She wasn't that old. And she was a committed New Dealer Democrat and when I think of her, I mean, she just was, boy, she was as Democrat as you could get. And when my mother married a Baptist and a Republican, boy that got interesting, but... I just think about my grandmother who was a lovely person.

And I think about this: this is a United Methodist Men's pin and it says I'm a life member in the United Methodist Men and I wear that, like this one here is a cross and flame which is a symbol of United Methodist Church. This was given to me by a men's group in one of the churches and they made me a life member. That really makes me proud and makes me humble at them.

Now, this is a symbol, it's a tree, right? You all can see that. And this actually is a symbol of the seminary I went to. It's Drew University and there's a theological school there and they have a forest on the campus which is about 400 years old. They actually have some deer running around in there and this is in central New Jersey. But when I think of this I think of my experiences at seminary a long time ago. It makes me happy and proud about that.

This is the Hubble Space Telescope. Have you ever heard of the Hubble? Okay, well, I had a church member some years ago who worked on the Hubble Space Telescope with NASA and she gave me this pin about her work and it reminds me of her relationship with the church and with me and her work that she was so proud of with the Hubble Space Telescope.

This, of course, is an American flag. You can see that. And of course, this is an important symbol because this is the country we belong to and when we wear that, we can wear it as a symbol of pride, but also humility because we've a wonderful country, but we are not fully

there yet and it makes me think about that.

I really like this one. This is a symbol of an organization I belong to, you can see that there. It has a little blue flower. It is a Forget-Me-Not. And this was a symbol that people wore kind of quietly to resist the Nazis. You may have heard of the Nazis. Their government was not a very good government, right, and very harmful, but this is one of the ways they resisted by putting the Forget-Me-Not on their lapel. So when I wear this I think about that and that tradition.

I have four of these, which is from the Disciple Bible Study classes that I have been a part of and taught and when you do Disciple Bible Study you get a little pin like this to show that you have completed the course. That's kind of cool.

This one is a flag combination of Great Britain and the United States which was given to me by a good friend who was a British citizen and lived here for many years and actually he just went to heaven a couple of months ago, my friend Nevel, and it reminds me of our friendship and heritage.

This one here has a basin and a towel. What do you think that represents? Well, it represents baptism but it also represents service and they gave it to me as a pastor to remind me of that. I really value when I wear that pin. That's pretty cool.

This is a Boy Scout pin that I've had for many years and scouting was an important part of my life many many years ago and I've supported that too for the kids in the churches that I have served.

And then I have this one here. This was given to me at ordination many years ago. You can see that's a cross and flame. It's a symbol of the United Methodist Church. I really like that.

And this one here humbles me. Can you read that? That's because it's in Hebrew. And you read it not from left to right, but right to left and it says Zachor. You have to spit when you say that. Zachor. Very good. Hebrew you have to spit a lot. This was given to me by a Holocaust survivor. You may not know much about that, that does go back to the time of the Nazis and he was a Jewish boy and he was taken to a concentration camp and he survived it. He's now 92 years old and his name is Ben Lesser and this pin he gives out to people who hear his talks and lectures. You can actually go on line and look up Benlesser.com and he's out there telling his story in the most unique and humble way and he inspires me with his love and his forgiveness. But his commitment to teach, how important this is and to remember. So when I wear this pin, I think of him and I think of so many many people.

Now, this one is a CROP walk pin. Has anyone walked the CROP walk here? I've walked it for decades. And that's always fun. You do it usually around the first of October each year, the first Sunday. This is through Church World Service and we walk to raise money for peo-

ple needing food or education or clothes and about 25% stays in your local community and the rest goes all over the world.

So, which of these pins do you think is most important to me? (You didn't do this one.) Well, that the most important one, right? (It's the cross for Baby Jesus.) It's the cross. And this is why this is the one that is most important.

I like having these pins and I've got a few more at home, like the one I wear and it's nice to, you know, wear the cross and flame to remind me as a United Methodist I belong to a really wonderful church that goes the world over or to wear the English and British flag or the American flag or the Drew tree or the Forget-Me-Not. But the most important one is the cross, because that the one that came and included me, that sought me and you out. (And the cross is for Baby Jesus. He's up in heaven, right?) He is, but he's also...do you know where else he is? (And that cross is him up there.) He's in your heart too. That's the coolest part, that he's in your heart. And this one reminds me that I belong to God, you belong to God and you belong to God. And everyone here belongs to God. And there are brothers and sisters you haven't met yet, did you know that? (Our grand-sisters are the brothers and sisters for God, right?) There are people who belong to God and they are your brothers and sisters that you haven't met yet, yep. And we do lots of stuff to help them.

So, when we think about the cross, that's the central symbol of our faith. This is more important than anything else in this tray, because this reminds us that we belong to God in Christ, for this life and life eternal. And Jesus, exactly, that's right. (And heaven.) And heaven, that's right. All that and more.

Well, let's pray: Lord, thank you for the organizations we belong to or the ones that our kids will belong to, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, National Honor Society, maybe the military, maybe all kinds of stuff, but thank you. But most important is that we belong to you by the cross. Amen.

Okay, since you are such a helpful guy, would you stand and give these out to everybody, ok? Thank you!

### **Message:**

Would you please join me in a word of prayer: Gracious Lord, help us to hear from you today and I pray that you will orient us to your kingdom, that we may know what it means to follow you in this world. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Everyone knows this: that human beings learn everything we learn basically by mimicry. We see, so we do. Babies are programmed to develop this pattern quickly. It's in our brain cells. They learn what parents value, such behaviors as they do and they are rewarded for it.

How many of you help a little baby, stuck your tongue out to watch the baby stick his tongue out at you, right? We've all done that. We are essentially very good as copycats and we get rewarded for it, but this is encoded into us and goes on actually all through our lives. We grow up to imitate our parents or our older siblings or our playmates. Kids want to act like Mommy or Daddy, until they turn 13 and then they don't want to act anything like their parents at all until they are in their late 20s and 30s and they are saying things to their kids and say, "I sound just like my mother," or "I sound just like my father."

But we also learn how to imitate other people's desires. If one kid has a special toy, article of clothing, a certain game, every kid wants the same thing too, especially if you are one of the cool kids. But this often leads to conflict. You know this. Put two toddlers in a room full of toys. Select one toy at random. Give it to a child. And soon the other toddler wants it too. How many of you have seen that, right? I mean, we all have, right. And the struggle will go on between them.

Now, as older children, we continue to imitate other kid's desires. My grandson wants Minecraft because everybody in kindergarten does Minecraft, right? My granddaughter likes Frozen and likes to dress like Elsa. Someone said to her the other day, "Well, you are the one responsible for this cold weather," and didn't miss a beat. The kid's only four. "I don't mind the cold." It's a line right out of the movie.

This might be a simple thing, it might be a complex thing, it might be the desire to get the same things, to get the top grades in your class, or to get a certain article of clothing or a toy or a status. This leads to rivalries and people reach for the same objects or status or whatever. Rivalries can be pretty serious or they can be, you know, simple things. They can turn deadly. This is what finally causes injuries and violence and wars and destruction. Two powerful leaders at odds over the same thing will cause a lot of people to suffer.

And as you can see, this is the way of the world. It's the way it has always been. And we can ignore it, we can sugar coat it, we can transform it into harmless things, sports team rivalry, who gets the trophy, the Superbowl trophy, school rivalries, keeping up with the neighbors down the street. They get a new car, you might want a new car. A student, however, might go the other way and get what they want the wrong way: cheat on a test. Or a trusted treasurer in a community agency might embezzle. A researcher might falsify research to gain acclaim or grants. A nation might starve its people and use their wealth to build atomic weapons. It's all the same. It's the way of the world.

Except that it leads to an ever downward spiral of mistrust and abuse of power which leads to harm to others or discrimination or violence or ultimately the collapse of a system or a nation as is going on now in the Caribbean, or an era. And then the cycle starts all over again because it is the way of the world.

Now, if this is the way it is, as our population grows in numbers to something that has never

been seen before in this planet, as the pressure on the environment grows and the tensions between people grow who want all the same things or more power or more whatever, then along with the complex tasks of local or national, even international governments, I don't think we are headed in a promising direction. It's not looking good.

Now, into this, our human story, steps Jesus. The Bible is really clear that God did not send Jesus into the world to create a religion. Back then, as now, the world was full up with religion and the religious. And we know from our contemporary experience that religion as such often isn't that helpful or practical or even peaceful. So, Jesus comes, proclaiming the Kingdom of God has come, turn around and believe in the Gospel. What did he mean? Well, he's come to invite us to a new way of living, to a new way of being a human being, to a new way of life, in this, the Kingdom of God. It breaks into our world.

You know, Americans don't easily get kings and kingdoms because of our whole democratic structure, but what is a kingdom at its core? It's a network of relationships. Kingdoms help to organize people to understand their relationship with one another, to the land, to their narrative of their story. That's what kingdoms do. It helps people see the world and their connection to it and kings, of course, are supposed to provide good leadership, servant leadership for the benefit of their people. They don't always do that.

Now, the world in Jesus' day, just like ours, was full of kings and kingdoms and Jesus' kingdom, his homeland, was occupied by a foreign king, by Cesare of Rome and their concern was very simple: their business of Rome is business and if you had it, they wanted it and they would take it. It was pretty simple. No different from toddlers fussing over a toy that they want, it's just that the stakes were much more serious and deadly.

So, when Jesus comes up out of Galilee saying: the Kingdom of God has come to you, turn around, believe, he's not talking about religion. He's inviting us to a different way of living than this world lives, to a new way of relating to God and to one another. He's inviting us to a kingdom where God is the center and where the self and selfishness is dethroned, where the way of the world is turned around, where the values are not of this world but of something far greater. And this kingdom that God has come in through Jesus has the power to change the way that we look at all aspects of our human life.

If you can just glimpse a little bit of the kingdom that Jesus talks about, it sparks your imagination, to see the world differently, where we treat people differently, we live differently, we relate to the land and the environment differently, that we are not at center anymore and that Jesus is himself the sign of God's breaking into this world with all of its endless cycles of power and control and desire and war and violence and suffering and death, that Jesus has broken into the world that we live in. We take for granted that the world will just be this endless cycle of selfishness and power and poverty and pain and violence and death, that it will never change. But Jesus has come to change it.

Now, the problem with Jesus is if you ask him what the kingdom is he is never going to give you a straight answer and that's because if you got the straight answer you wouldn't get it. He comes in these mysterious ways that he does and that's really important to knowing anything about him. But you can see this in Mark's Gospel. There is no mass movement. There's no like instant change. I mean that would be a whole lot easier, right? But it's not the way that he works.

So, you say, "What is the kingdom about?" He says, "I have a story." It's like a guy who had two sons and one ran off to a far country and the other one stayed at home. The one that ran off to the far country blew everything he had, basically wanted his inheritance, told me to drop dead. When he came to himself, well, he came back saying, "Father I have sinned against heaven and earth and am no longer worthy to be called your son." And the father runs out and meets him and says, "Oh, be quiet. I am just glad you are home." That's the Kingdom of God. And you say, "Huh?"

Or it's about a woman who has got some flour and she hides a little leaven in it and all of sudden it leavens the whole loaf to become this wonderful bread.

Or it's about, well, he has all these stories, as you know. They ask deeper questions. You see, here's the problem with an answer. An answer can be a pay answer and it stops the whole process, but a good question, that goes to something deeper and asks deeper questions of you and leads on to better questions and deeper understands and it makes the heart hungry for more. And when you get a glimpse of God's kingdom, you can see that the world can be different. It doesn't have to be this endless cycle of climbing ladders, wanting more, being disappointed. You get to the top and there's nothing there, but instead you put God at center and you think about your neighbor and you have compassion for the poor. You have compassion for the people who don't like you. You have the desire to reconcile where there is pain and to create peace that all of a sudden this kingdom comes to us and we realize that this is the thing that would make the world exactly what God wants it to be and it breaks in to our lives and makes our hungry hearts want more.

So, you see, more than Jesus' message about love or acceptance or compassion or forgiveness or hope or that in all things God makes everything possible, that the essential message is this: that the Kingdom of God has broken into our world with the power to change it and to change us. "Turn around," Jesus says, "And believe the Good News."

Now, if you don't get this you'll never get what Jesus taught. It will just be nice aphorisms, little things you can put on a plaque and hang on your wall and all that, put it there with the thing about two people walking on the sand, the footsteps one, you know, but you won't get what Jesus is about, what he desires for you and the change that he wants to make in your life because he changes us one at a time. Frustrating isn't it? Can't you just do the whole things in one fell swoop? It's one at a time.

And if you don't get the Kingdom of God, you'll never really understand the cross. Let me offer to you a way to begin to comprehend the message of Jesus: this week you'll look around and you'll be frustrated in your driving by people who cut you off. You might be frustrated in Walmart by people who jump ahead in line or grab something before you do. You might be angry at what someone does at work or even at home or you might be frustrated at the news and you'll just think this world is just not worth it, if this is all there is. So instead, look to the Kingdom. Remember your baptism. Baptism isn't once it's done and forget it. If you remember each day that you were baptized into Christ's life and death and resurrection, that you believe in a kingdom that transcends this world, that you belong to this kingdom even though you must live now as a resident alien, but we know in our hearts we belong to something greater. So look for ways to treat people better than they deserve. Look around. You'll see others doing this too. Look for opportunities to treat people with patience and grace because it's not about yourself; it's about how we all get along in this world. Practice the presence of Jesus each day of the week by simply being aware he is with you, next to you, right there with you. And he brings with him the fullness of the kingdom, that the kingdom will come in God's time, but it's here already within you.

And the point of all of this is to know who you are and where you belong and your orientation to a kingdom that not only is greater than this world, but changes this world and you experience Jesus more deeply as you follow him and that's better than all the ladders and all the wealth and all the trinkets and all the toys you could ever amass in this world, because it is going to last beyond this world. Amen.