“Talk about Jesus”
Colossians 1

My first year at Andover Newton Theological School I was housed in 3rd floor Farwell, with most of the Black students who were on campus, such great preachers as Cedric Harris, Kirk Jones 3rd Floor Farwell Hall. One of the phrases I remember so much as people shaved in the morning and asked, “What you going to do today?” “I’m going to talk about Jesus!”

It almost gave me a bit of PTSD from my high school Bible Club days. Back then we pass out salvation tracts at the beach. The “I’m going to talk about Jesus” spread to over to Sturdevent Hall, and it was even popular at Bangalore Theological College, in south India, where Cheryl and I spent a semester.

Colossians is a “talk about Jesus” letter. And, figuratively speaking, it was a message meant to clothe yourself in (as Paul will write later, “Clothe yourself with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience Col. 3:12). I like to think that Paul needed to “talk about Jesus” to the church in Colossae to prepare them for what he was going to write in an accompanying letter to Philemon about giving freedom to the slave, Onesimus. Though Philemon has every right in his culture and granted by the empire to punish this runaway slave, Paul appeals to higher values in Jesus.

In their book Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire Brian Walsh and Sylvia Keesmaat make the clear case that “talking about Jesus” is even deeper than property rights and civil rights and one’s constitutional rights and cultural norms. The way of life taught when Paul talks about Jesus is so differentiated from the ways of the Roman empire, that there is a clear choice in what way to live. The ancient Hebrew charge, “choose life that you may live” finds its meaning in Paul’s experience of Jesus. The alternate choice was death.

A fascinating legend about the rebuilding of Colossae following its destruction by earthquake in year 66 suggests that talking about Jesus completely reoriented Colossae. Colossae was able to rebuild completely independent of Roman support. Did the city come to know better than to trust what came out of Rome? The religious conservative pundits of the day, if they were anything like Pat
Robertson, Jerry Farwell Jr, or Franklin Graham, would have blamed the destructive earthquake on the Colossians offending God. Perhaps these were the type of heretics Paul was preaching against when he wrote to the Colossians: “We have heard of your faith in Christ and of your love for all God’s people, because what you hope for is kept safe in heaven. You first heard about this hope when you believed the true message, which is the good news.” (CEV Col. 1:4)

Three times this year, I have had the privilege and responsibility of visiting our congressional delegation and others in Washington DC to bring a message that counters the culture of our American empire politics.

In April, Bread for the World flew me out to DC, on a Republican donor’s sponsorship mind you, to ask our congressional delegation to preserve US Aid support to poverty-stricken countries that the administration proposed cutting. Both our Senators and our Representative wholeheartedly agreed with the value and need of our US Aid, especially to Central American countries like Guatemala.

In July, the National Religious Partnership for the Environment brought me into DC as part of the national fly-in to advocate that our Land and Water Conservation Fund be fully allocated as voted by congress instead of being re-appropriated by the administration. Again, this received bi-partisan support.

Last month, the Council of Conference Ministers had a fly-in to Washington DC, but this advocacy was different in one significant way. We wanted to impact our Congressional delegations as they dealt with border detention issues, such as the separation and imprisonment of children apart from their families. In some ways the message could be the same as before, if we appealed to Congress to preserve its constitutional role of allocating funding. But we were asked to wear our clergy stoles and Conference minister medallions as we walk the halls of Congress and talk about our faith values. In other words, we were asked to talk about Jesus. When some Senators and Representatives saw us in our attire, they invited us into their office for conversation, even though we had been only scheduled to meet with their staff people: Sen. Testor, Sen. Braun (IN), Sen. Baldwin (WI), Sen. Stabenow (MI), Rep. Omar (MN). It was like there was a thirst for a moral stance. As uncomfortable as I am with publicly displaying clergy paraphernalia, it was refreshing to be recognized and welcomed as people eager to talk about Jesus.

Do you know how sorely this world, this country, this state, this community, this church needs people of faith to talk about Jesus? I thank God that Red Lodge
Community UCC, our Conference Faith Formation Committee, and our Conference Board of Directors have a faithful minister in the Rev. Pam Peterson to talk about Jesus. But, for the sake of the Gospel, Rev. Peterson, and every minister here, needs your support and affirmation to preach and teach and do the Gospel with all the truth and hope that they carry in their heart, soul, and mind. There are those who are going to say it is interfering:

- Let the market talk its magic (or voodoo as George H.W. Bush called it).
- Refrain from talking politics.
- Accept the supreme court opinion that money speaks.

Do you know how sorely talk about Jesus needs to be heard in these contexts? Perhaps some of you are familiar with these words of Peter McLaren:

I will not mince my words. We live at a precarious moment in history. Relations of subjection, suffering, dispossession, and contempt for human dignity and the sanctity of life are at the center of social existence. Emotional dislocation, moral sickness and individual helplessness remain a ubiquitous feature of our time. Our much-heralded form of democracy has become, unbeknownst to many Americans, subverted by its contradictory relationship to the very object of it address; human freedom, social justice, and a tolerance and respect for difference. In the current historical juncture, discourses of democracy continue to masquerade as disinterested solicitations, and to reveal themselves as incommensurable with the struggle for social equality. The reality and promise of democracy in the United States has been invalidated by the ascendancy of new postmodern institutionalizations of brutality and the proliferation of new and sinister structures of domination. This has been followed by an ever fainter chorus of discontent as the voices of the powerless and the marginalized grow increasingly despondent or else are clubbed into oblivion by the crackling swiftness of police batons.

You may be shocked to know that this was first written in Peter McLaren’s introduction to his 1994 book, Critical Pedagogy and Predatory Culture. If this reality seems ever more real today, remember these are also the very social-cultural-political conditions into which Paul wrote to the Colossians. In fact, Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire uses this McLaren quote to illustrate
the very Colossians world in which talk about Jesus was needed, according to Paul. They say that

Love takes on political shape in justice. Justice as the political face of love is never impartial but is always biased. In the kind of biblical faith that occasions Paul’s understanding of love, justice is always suspicious of the powerful and biased toward the powerless. Justice is first and foremost directed toward the orphan, widow and stranger precisely because these people lack the economic and political power to defend themselves. p.182

The human dynamic addressed by Paul is that people need to latch onto something, and that there is only one reality that can deal with everything else the world throws at a person and community, and that is the reality of what is revealed in talk about Jesus. This reality is built of the stories of God’s love that show:

how compassion feeds the needs of those who the world has left to die, think of the woman begging for the crumbs at Jesus’ table, or the Tucson Samaritans leaving food and water in the southern border desert

how kindness rescues those left to die on the side of the roach, think of the Good Samaritan, or the Family Promise, Tumbleweed, and My Backyard shelters that receive the homeless,

how humility uplifts those who the empire would persecute, think of Jesus on the cross telling the thief nailed next to him that he would join Jesus in God’s realm, or the church opening their sanctuary as a home to refugees and immigrants,

how meekness leads to holy blessing, think of the virgin Mary wondering who was she as a lowly handmaiden to give birth to a child of God, or the teenage girl--Malala Yousafzai or Greta Thunberg—speaking a truth to power that resounds throughout the world,

how patience provides room for revealing God,
think of the stranger on the road to Damascus being patiently told all that happened in the previous week only to be seen as the risen Christ, or the vigils of those who gather in front of private prisons, immigration detention centers, and offices of government praying the stories of people who will not be forgotten because of their efforts,

how forgiveness brings back relationships considered to be dead, think of the prodigal son and father, or the abolition work of the Montana Association of Christians seeking to undo the death penalty,

how love restores all things, think of the disciples who abandoned Jesus becoming the very people to spread the Gospel to all the world, or our UCC white privilege curriculum enabling us to recognize a need for restoration that will require love beyond all understanding,

how peace mends the broken community, think of Jesus healing the centurion whose ear was cut off, or the historical Protestant churches refuting the Doctrines of Discovery and Manifest Destiny so seeking to make reparations with indigenous peoples,

how gratitude dissolves differences, think of the healed leper who happened to be a Samaritan being the one of the ten who returned to give Jesus thanks, or the appreciation across religious differences when churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques work together for the common good,

how wisdom provides an alternate orientation to what’s important in life, think of Jesus’ sermon on the mount and the beatitudes, or our faith inspired letters to the editor and messages to politicians.

The world, indeed, sorely needs such talk about Jesus. Will we be the one’s to offer it? We are called to nothing less.
Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire reminds us that we are called to “talk about Jesus” to a world that sorely needs to hear the Gospel from those who choose life:

The community is called on to allow the word of Christ to dwell in them richly because the impoverished word of the empire is pervasive.

The teaching ministry of this community, then is a matter of life and death.

Dwell in this word of Christ, so that the words of death don’t destroy you!”