

First Presbyterian Church, Spartanburg SC
Dr. David Renwick
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CHRIST THE CENTER: CSI
John 17:1-5, 10-21; Jeremiah 1:4-10

Our sermons this week and last week are connected. This is a very short two-week sermon series in which we are thinking about some popular programs on television that are based on modern science, on recent discoveries, whether it's in psychology or in genetics or computers. The two programs that I mentioned last week and will be focusing on again today are NCIS and CSI.

Now I don't know if you're a fan of these shows or not, or if you know what those initials mean –
(Naval Criminal Investigation Service, and Crime Scene Investigation/Investigator!) but these are right at the top of the charts among the most popular shows on television today and both of them focus on the importance of looking at the details in order to unravel the mysteries of life – or in their case, the mystery of some crime and in particular the mystery of some murder, the taking of a life.

What I said last week in summary was something like this:

1. That even though there can be a danger in focusing on the details (so that we become picky with the details, we can lose sight of the big picture; we can lose sight of the forest for all of the trees); even though there is a danger in this, these shows remind us that we cannot abandon the details. We have to, at times, look at the details of life if we're to understand life with all its mysteries. And what is true in this realm of investigation is true in the realm of religion – and in particular, it's true in the realm of Christian faith as well.
2. One of the details, for example, of the Christian faith that we cannot ignore or pass by has to do with the importance and the centrality of Jesus. At times, it would be easier just to say "we believe in God" and so find ourselves untied with so many other people in the world in different religions which all "believe in God." But then, that would be to change the foundation of our faith from what the first Christians believed – who thought the message of Jesus (the message about Jesus, and the message taught by Jesus) was so important that they were willing to give their lives to take it and spread it throughout the world. The importance of Jesus and the centrality of Jesus in their lives drove them on their way. So, for example, they not only held the belief that "Jesus is the Son of God," but they lived it, they acted on it. Their belief wasn't just in their heads but it was in every fabric of their being: there at the center of their lives was the belief that Jesus is the Son of God and because of that, Jesus, was also at the center of their daily attention: "They walked with him and talked to him" along life's way (as one of the beloved old hymns says). They listened to him in prayer. They read about him as the Scriptures of the New Testament began to be written and as letters and gospels began to circulate. They discussed him with others not just by themselves but with others. He was at the center of their attention and he was at the center of their attention not only because they believed that he was the Son of God, but because they believed that he revealed God in a way that nobody else had or could.

“He was,” says the Apostle Paul in Colossians (1:15), “the image of the invisible God” so that if God, the infinite God, should choose to come down to human size and to share with us what he regarded as the critical aspects of his nature and being, who he is, -- well, they believed that that had actually happened, and God was embodied in this life, in this person Jesus. So, to look at him, to study him, to talk with him, to think about him was to focus on the essential God, the God we need to know about -- not all of God but sufficient enough for us to gain the truth of God. That’s what they believed about him that he was the image of the invisible God and that he revealed God and that we would be well-advised to pay close attention to that revelation.

But not only that: as the image of the invisible God, Jesus not only revealed who God was, but revealed something about ourselves as well: who we are, who we, as human beings, were made to be. Genesis (1:27) says that when we were made as human beings “in the image of God.” The same phrase: Jesus is the image of the invisible God – clear, transparent! It’s there in us too; but in us the image is messed up, it’s blurred, marred. It’s as if we are a painting with a slash from a knife through the middle of it, or with paint thrown on it and you can’t see the image as well as you might. But in Jesus you see it perfectly.

So in Jesus, you see who God is, and you see who were meant to be. And if this is so, the earliest Christians believed, how could they not keep looking at that image?

- Our God, made comprehensible in Jesus!
- Our destination, our purpose, made visible in Jesus!

This is no small detail, no insignificant detail. Jesus, the Son of God, has to be not only affirmed as the center of our attention, but must become in reality the center of our attention.

What I suggested we do to remember this was to have a little fun with the initials NCIS, we might think of Jesus as NCIS, not the Naval Criminal Investigative Service but as a Nourishing (yes, I know it sounds rather ‘New Age-y!!’) Nourishing Cosmic Identify Source. That’s what he is. He nourishes us because he shares with us and the whole cosmos God’s identity and our identity. A Nourishing Cosmic Identify Source as no other can or has or will.

So that’s really what we looked at last week thinking about NCIS, the importance of details and playing around with those initials NCIS.

This week, we’re moving on to a different show. It’s still on the same channel I believe, but it’s in a different time slot. Instead of NCIS, we’re going to focus on CSI. Now CSI has a number of different versions and once again some of you may be familiar with this. The original version is set in Las Vegas. And then there’s a version set in New York, CSI New York. Then the one that I like best is CSI Miami (and apparently around the world, and these programs go out around the world, it’s CSI Miami which is in fact the most popular). Now -- let me come clean: I don’t watch it all the time, but I have these fits and starts where I’m going to watch it for a few weeks in a row and it sort of gets into my system, and then I move on to something else!! I like it best because I think it’s brighter than the others both literally brighter, the photography (or the computer imaging!) is brighter and it’s also spiritually brighter.

The show usually begins panning in on Miami and the sun is shining and the waterfront is glistening and the buildings are reflecting the sun and so there is this bright image to begin with.

And then there are the characters, and in particular the central character of the show. Now I don't know if any of you know the central character in CSI Miami. Any of you happen to know his name? Do you dare share it with me? His name is Horatio . . . Horatio Caine . . . and he runs the crime lab in Miami. Now, no question about it, Horatio has a vindictive streak in him, but he also has a gentle streak.

He's most famous probably for the sunglasses he likes to wear that he puts on from time to time and he takes off just as dramatically from time to time. If he were preaching here, he would be standing like this (right side facing congregation) looking like this (with head turned to the right). I don't know why he does that but then he turns around like this (left side facing congregation with head turned to the left) and he drops some one-liners. Some of his one-liners are vaguely theological. One of my favorites is this. (Facing right side to congregation) "You sleep with the devil (and he turns left side to congregation) and you wake up in hell."

So, Horatio is at the center of the show. And I thought, to begin with, that I was really the only person who had noticed that in the midst of the violence, the blood and the gore (and there is plenty of that in the show), there was also this gentle streak within his life. But I was wrong. I began my investigation. I Googled Horatio and CSI Miami and I found a fan website called CSI-Miami-fan-wiki (www.csimiamifanwiki.com) and you can look this up if you feel like it! And CSI Miami fan wiki confirmed my suspicions. This is what it says about Horatio.

Horatio identifies with abused children on a deeper level because he suffered severe abuse as a kid. (I don't know where they got this from in his background but this is his background.) Despite this, he chose to be on the right side of the law as a teen and adult. Because of this, he has no time for felons who blame their rotten childhoods for their crimes. Although Horatio can be vicious to felons, *when it comes to child- and teen-related crimes, Horatio makes it his mission to find the wrongdoer.*

When it comes to child- and teen-related crimes, he has this soft spot. *He makes it his mission to find the wrongdoer.*

So here we have this show: not NCIS this time, not any old CSI but CSI Miami. Horatio Caine is at the center. He's a Crime Scene Investigator. He is a man with a mission. He's out to destroy those who abuse their power and who are sources of evil and he is out as well, and this is the bright spot, to defend the weak and the powerless. And from time to time, that little detail keeps coming out on the show . . . *and to that extent, the show is not too different from an older version of CSI that you may not have heard about.*

This 'old show is one I call "CSI Earth!" It was set in the Middle East a long time ago and its star is a Jewish peasant whom you might be familiar with -- whose name is Jesus and he, like Horatio was also famous for theological one-liners like

"The first shall be last and the last shall be first."

Or, like "I did not come to call the righteous but to call sinners to repentance."

Or, "It's not the well who need a physician. It's those who are ill."

The one-liners fell from him one line after the other, and as we look at his life, we find that there are a number of parallels with this show which is now before us today.

Horatio has a mission. It's not just his job as it is for others in these shows. It is his mission and it is very clear that it is his mission, and so it was with Jesus. He was sent on a mission by God to check out a crime scene.

The crime scene is down here on earth and what he discovers is that it's not just a limited crime scene but it covers the whole earth. The whole place is swamped with crime and even the nicest

of people are caught up in the crimes. They become part of the gang. They've been influenced by the evil around about them. They are in fact all in active rebellion against their Maker, against the big Boss, the One who created them and owns them, the one called God.

The evidence is there all over the place and Jesus snoops around and he finds that evidence in all kinds of corners of life, not just overtly on the outside but on the inside as well. He says to the people around about him, "It's not just the murders around here which bother me. It's what's going on in your heart. It's the anger as well." And he finds lust and pride and hypocrisy and greed and hatred everywhere. No one is exempt. Everyone is caught up in this and in his investigation, he discovers this.

But, surprisingly, what we discover as the plot develops is that it becomes increasingly clear that this investigator Jesus isn't out just to get the enemy though he does that, but, like Horatio, he's out to save the weak and the defenseless and the children as well.

- Indeed, he wants to view all of us as if we are children of God/
- He goes soft on us along the way.
- He wants to take our side.
- And, the most stunning thing of all is that what he really wants to do with all of the criminals that he finds -- is to take them and turn them around so they become part of his team.

So, for example in the last episode of "CSI Earth" in season number three, the third year (apparently, the show is still being aired!), in a part which is entitled rather boringly "John Seventeen," we find Jesus in a dark part of the crime scene. He is surrounded by a small group of former rebels. It's in a small room in downtown Jerusalem and when he finishes eating with them, he prays for them. This investigator prays for them (how soft is that?!); and apparently they're going to need his prayers.

In this prayer, he tells them that his job is now over. He's leaving the scene. He is going away and they are going to take over from him. Perhaps you remember some of these words we read in the seventeenth chapter of John's gospel. They're directed to God as a prayer but they're also directed to those in the room with him. So he prays this,

"Just as you, Father, have sent me into the world, so I send them into the world." (17:18)

Now these are heavy words. 'Just as' means "in exactly the same way," or "with no difference". In other words, Jesus is praying/saying

"Just as I have come unto this crime scene, I'm sending them into the crime scene and they're going to take over where I leave off. I send them to enter the struggle, to enter the danger zone and to stay in the danger zone at ground level fighting evil in themselves and fighting evil wherever they see it, resisting those who abuse power and defending the weak and the defenseless. They are going to do that in my place."

He sends them out and he prays for them because he knows it's going to be dangerous. It's going to be hard. It's going to be risky. I don't know if you saw it, but some of Jesus' followers just this week in Afghanistan, ten medical missionaries, were killed by the Taliban. It's a horrible story which is in today's paper . . . over the years, it has been dangerous to fulfill this mission. It can be dangerous physically; but it can also be dangerous mentally – because the temptation is always to think that we're really not in a crime scene at all, or that the crime scene is not as significant as at first we may think (to think that the details are trivial, that there is nothing of great importance here). But Jesus prays/says,

“It is important and I want you, Lord, to protect them, their minds and their lives. Don’t take them out of the world, don’t let them withdraw from the world, but let them fulfill their mission successfully, knowing that I am there to protect them.” (17:11, 15).

So these friends are commissioned. They are sent. They are prayed for. And then finally in the last verse that we read, he lays on them the big one! He lays on them the enormity of the task that he has called them to do.

He tells them unless they do their job, unless they fulfill their mission
(and, remember, this is just a group of rebels gathered around about him, people who ought to be condemned, but he doesn’t want to condemn them. He thinks that they are defenseless like children but that’s all they are).

He says to them that unless they do their job, unless they fulfill their mission, future generations will never know the truth about the investigation that took place when he came to earth.

Now this is something huge to lay on them. The future of the movement is their hands and in nobody else’s hands! In this small group around the table with him, the future of the movement is in their hands, and people will not know about God’s abiding passion

to enter the world,
to reveal himself, to reveal his identity,
to reveal our identity,
not to condemn us but to set us free
and to enlist us on his team,

people will not know that, unless the ones in the room do their job after him.

So he prays for them! In his prayer, he stresses the eternal importance of this at the beginning of the prayer when he says,

“This is eternal life: that people know you, the one true God, and Jesus Christ (me!) whom you have sent.” (17:3)

And he drives it home at the end of the prayer when he adds,

“I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word that they may all be one and you, Father, are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us . . . so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”(17:20-21)

If the world doesn’t see this, they won’t believe; the message will be forgotten, lost and the world goes on its merry old way.

This was huge. The mission was in their hands. This crime scene investigator, Jesus, passes the mission on to them as he leaves the show, and the episodes that follow carry on the mission without him . . . and carry on they do!! Their fear gives way to amazement as they realize that his power and his spiritual (but real) presence remain with them, and that as a consequence, all things are possible. In those first few generations of their mission, the crime scene truly begins to be turned upside down, and the rebellion against God is stifled in significant ways and places throughout the ancient Mediterranean world. These rebels find that they are not only “Crime Scene Investigators,” but once again, to use a rather New Agey kind of phrase, they’ve been called to become Cosmically Significant Influencers: Changing the whole crime scene, the whole world around about them.

Like many shows, it all seems so far-fetched! Almost impossible to believe. You would think it

was made up. But it actually happened. And it is what this Jesus wants to happen still to this very day. *“As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us . . . so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” I will protect in this. They are to take my place in this mission and through them, there will be a cosmic impact.*

Through us as well. “It can only happen if we keep Christ at the center,” Jesus says.

If we, like those original disciples,
know him not just in our heads but in our hearts,
believe in him not just in our heads but place him at the center of our attention,
thinking about him, talking to him, reading about him, discussing his life with one another.
Only if that detail is maintained will his life flow through us to others.
But if it is maintained,

- if we are “in him” as he says, as he was in God the Father, and as the Father was in him
- if our lives are wrapped up in him, as his life was wrapped up in God’s life,

the world will be changed: it will come to know that Jesus was sent by God not to condemn the world but that the world might live through him.

NCIS. Here is one who is a Nurturing, Nourishing Source of our Cosmic Identify and of God’s. We know God through him, we know who we are and are to become.

CSI. We live on a crime scene. It’s a dangerous world but *we* have a mission here to make an impact which is not small but cosmic. Yes: Us! Not somebody else but us. And if we keep him at the center, he will use us for this very purpose.

May the next episode reveal something amazing and remarkable in which you and I become the players.