



LESSONS for LIFE

April 6, 2008 7:00 p.m

JESUS. WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?

PART 2

Rev. Jo Bell

This is sermon number two in a three part series called *Jesus, Who do you say that I am?* We are dealing with that question. Last week we talked about the pre and post Easter Jesus. How important that we understand the separation of the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith and how if we're not careful about understanding those two different entities how we really risk losing both of them by creating a composite. We also then talked about the gospels about how they're actually quite late writings about the life of Jesus. They're shaped first by Paul's writings which came a lot earlier which Paul set about creating churches after the teachings of Jesus and then the gospels were actually constructs trying to describe the Jesus that lived 30 and 40 and 60 years ago as well as trying to shape the emerging faith called "The Way"; The Way of Christians, The Way of following the teachings of Jesus.

We also talked so that when we read the gospels we understand that Mark was probably the earliest gospel written about 30 years after Jesus had died. There's what we call Q, a theoretical text, that when you add Mark with Q you get Matthew and Luke. So Matthew and Luke, the writers of those books, actually had Mark's book in front of them, Mark's writings and teachings and so added, adjusted and continued to tell the story of Jesus.

Now, where this all comes from is along the way Jesus asked his followers – Who do you say that I am? And we get multiple answers to that question, especially if you read all four gospels you get three different answers to that question as they keep building upon and further explaining for us so we, who come along many years later, would know the answer to the question. The thing that I think is interesting is with all the answers to the question Jesus didn't clarify which one was more accurate. He just let it be said and that's all we get in the gospel. What I love about that is that with the question that He asked his followers is an endless debate begun many, many years ago continuing tonight and, I'm sure, continuing on way beyond our time together.

But who is Jesus? What is Jesus? Jacqueline Grant, a theologian, actually asks us to go underneath and look at the answers that the Disciples gave and asks each of us to say, what do those titles mean? What does it mean to say Messiah? What does it mean to say that He was one of the Prophets come back from the dead? What does it mean to say and offer these titles to Jesus? And she says, "Who do you say Jesus is?"

Now, the red pill and the blue pill. The Matrix, have you seen The Matrix? This is where Neo gets the opportunity to take the red pill and to go to unknown places, to places underneath the constructed wisdom and culture of the time and to seek the way out for humanity. If he takes the red pill, he never goes back. If he takes the blue pill, he says I have no intention of going any further; the knowledge I have is fine, my life is fine, I'm okay with that and if I take the blue pill I'm



LESSONS for LIFE

done right here. I'll never remember that I was invited into the conversation tonight about Jesus.

My point being, if you like your Jesus right now and you're all fine and good maybe you'll have some coffee and come back right before the offering same as last week. Okay? If you want to stay, you've taken the red pill, here we go because I think what is fun about this is again the pre Easter and post Easter Jesus. Why does it matter that we know about the human Jesus of Nazareth and the Christ spirit, this post Easter Jesus? If we see Jesus, the guy who walked around the planet, as God, then the miracles are nice stories. Could God walk on water? Probably. Could God heal the sick? Probably. Could God give sight to the blind? Probably. And those stories, although very nice stories, don't do much for me and they don't ask much of me. But if I spend time thinking that that man, Jesus, who walked around was in touch with the spirit of God, full of the spirit of God and still walked on water, healed the sick, touched the untouchable, gave sight to the blind and then says go you and do even more than I have done. That's different now because that calls something from me, invites me to do the same.

This morning in Brent's sermon, he said, and it was funny because I know he didn't hear my sermon last week and I'm hmm I wonder what he is going to say because he was also talking about how do we understand this Jesus. This great question that we'll all talk about until all of us goes and see Him. And Brent said there are some folks where it really is important that they understand Jesus to be fully God, a master of theology. In language, we call that a high Christology. And if you are going to be talking about Jesus it is good to know that word, Christology. Christology meaning I think he was fully God, high Christology. Other folk absolutely need to Jesus as a human and only as a human. That would be considered a low Christology. Then there's a bunch of folk in the middle and all the way down the spectrum and you call them Holy Middle People? (Inaudible response from the congregation) Holy Not Knowing. I named them Holy Middle People this afternoon. So wherever you are that's the blessing is that it really doesn't matter. What matters is that you engage the question.

And in this church what matters is the person sitting next to you can have an absolutely different answer to the question and beyond tolerating the answer you actually celebrate that that person is on the journey and landing somewhere else along that same spectrum. There's the power and I would say that over your life, certainly over mine, I have moved depending on where I sit, what's happening in my life. Sometimes I need Jesus to be human, that he calls me into the same powerful God filled humanity that he lived; a healer, a lover, a teacher and prophet, a transformational human, sometimes that what I need to call me into that same space.

Gregory Riley has a fantastic book called *One Jesus Many Christ*. He says in that just as Jesus didn't really clear up the right answer to the question that he asked when we talk about Messiah, when we talk about liberator, when we give these titles or terms to Jesus and try to explain what He did even in the term there is disagreement. You know there is confusion. We might both say Messiah and mean two very different things. So clearly there was at the core one Jesus. Yet as soon as people started following the teachings of that Jesus in that moment there began to become many Christs. Hang with me for a minute on that one.

Now the person I have really, a hero of mine, who helped me to understand why that is and how



LESSONS for LIFE

wonderfully okay that is Susan Thistlethwaite. She was a seminary professor of mine and now the President of Chicago Theological Seminary. She says, when Jesus asks that question the accent falls on the word “you”. He didn’t want an answer to the question. He didn’t offer a right answer or affirmation of a right answer. But she says the one being asked the question has a role in answering the question. The context of our lives dictates the lenses through which we see the teachings, the actions and hear the stories of the one called Jesus. Your life context changes your answer to who Jesus is. Susan is saying that it matters first who you are before you know who Jesus is. And that the skin you live on, the geographical area of the planet in which you are raised, the teachings of your church matter and they make a difference as you head toward your answer to the question.

When I work with that it seems that people tend to find or create a Christ that helps order the world in which they live. Each of us lives in some kind of contextual framework. Each of us has our own lens through which we see Jesus. Again, recognizing that is why you get to have an answer and you get to have an answer and you get to have an answer. We can all sit in this same space celebrating and not fighting over the right answer, but recognizing that it’s about us. Again it’s the relationship with this one.

Let me offer an example: There are a gang of folk called Liberation Theologians. That’s the title they see Christ with. They give him Christ the Liberator. Two of these people, Dorothee Sollee is a Liberation Theologian from Latin America and what she teaches is the Latin American peoples know the Jesus of the Nicaraguan Mass. They see Jesus as the God who sweats on the street. The God with the sun-burned face who looks and feels like we do. Christos Troubadour – Christ the worker. And Jacqueline Grant who’s an African American woman, also a Liberation Theologian, says that Jesus Christ is one of us. When we see Jesus Christ, and she puts both those words together all the time, we see both the particular Jesus of Nazareth and the universal Christ of Faith. In Jesus Christ we see an oppressed experience when we see liberation. They are one and the same. Two sides of the same coin. So, just like I say, even though they both call themselves Liberation Theologians, even though both would see Jesus as Liberator as his primary role in the world, what they mean by that and who they see are still vastly different Jesus.

Dorothee Sollee also says that none of this talk about Jesus, none of our theology, none of our Christology bounces down from heaven. Rather it comes from our life experience; each of us who dare to engage the journey and ask the question. Who are you? What are you? She says it arises out of life from below. It begins where Jesus began where He lived with the people He met not in church, but in everyday life on the street.

I told you last week that I preached this similar series in Colorado Springs about six years ago and at this point in the sermon to illustrate who some folk saw Jesus as and who I saw Jesus as I was wearing a robe and a stole and everything. That’s how we preached in Colorado. What was unusual is my parents were there that week. They often didn’t live anywhere near me so them hearing me preach was kind of unusual, but I was in the middle of a sermon, the series was already done, so there in the front row was my Mom and Dad. I start to take my robe off and my stole off and I said the Jesus of my understanding right now, the Jesus who I need to be the Jesus right now – sandals, blue jeans and a Gay Pride t-shirt. So that’s what I was wearing and



LESSONS for LIFE

that's how I finished the sermon.

My mother was nowhere near impressed. Appalled! And shared that with me for quite some time. If you talked to her today, she'd still remember that and how "My daughter, the minister, oh..." but that's because at that time in my life my son was hanging out down in the park where there was a lot of drugs going on, a lot of kids skipping school, a lot of kids running away of which he was one. So the Jesus I needed at that time wasn't all dressed up in church clothes; nice white robe, pretty stole. Sandals, blue jeans, t-shirt down there healing, touching those who others said were untouchable, who others said were trouble makers. That's where my Jesus was and needed to be.

My Mom was raised here in Canada in the Baptist Church, my father in Montreal, very different theologies, very different Jesus. Amen right? Amen. So, no matter the title we give, there are many: lover, healer, teacher, prophet, Messiah, Saviour, Liberator. As we journey and attempt to answer the question this week I ask you to hold "the you" intention. Who do you say that He is?

Amen.