

“Jesus of Nazareth – Who Is He?”

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

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Texts: Mark 4:35-41

Luke 9:18-20

“He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered,
‘The Messiah of God.’”

- Luke 9:20

Prayer

Holy God,

We open our hearts and minds to your Word

Within this sacred time and place.

Still our restless spirits,

Slow down our racing thoughts,

And prepare us for our Lenten journey with Jesus. Amen.

During my first year of college, I went through a turbulent crisis of faith. For four years, I had been actively and enthusiastically involved in the life of the Presbyterian Church in the town where I grew up. My parents, who were not particularly religious at the time, were taken by surprise when I announced with the passion of a new convert that I had accepted Jesus into my heart. I was 14 then and the sermon I heard in the vespers service I attended with a few other friends that Sunday evening changed my life. I had sat through other sermons before that night but perhaps because of the unusual sight of a woman in the pulpit – in those days a female preacher was a rare sight in the Church – I listened more attentively to her message. To be honest, I do not recall the name of the guest female preacher or the biblical passage she used, but I still remember how her disarmingly simple words awakened in me an unabating curiosity about Jesus. When the preacher asked if anyone wanted to make a commitment to journey with Christ, I tentatively raised my hand and, before I had time to even think about what I was doing, I had already joined a few other teens and adults in front of the whole congregation. The preacher prayed over us and told us that those few steps from the pews to the front of the church were just the first on a lifelong journey of faith. A year later, I was baptized, joined the Church and made a public promise that I would be a faithful follower of Jesus Christ.

I jumped head first into my baptismal promise. The preacher had made it unequivocally clear that discipleship, this journeying with Christ, is not a matter of assent only but it is more importantly a matter of intent. At 14, I had decided to take a leap of faith into the life, teachings and faith of Jesus of Nazareth and I was determined to stick with Jesus come hell or high water. In its splendid simplicity, the old African American spiritual captures the longing that has animated my faith since my baptism,

“Lord, I want to be a Christian in my heart.” That was and still is my intent; I wanted then as I still want now to be a Christian, a disciple of Jesus, a person committed to following Christ in my heart. Oddly, the more involved I got with my church though, I felt less and not more connected to Jesus.

Tripp Fuller, an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ who is currently a postdoctoral research Fellow in Theology and Science at the University of Edinburgh, says that at the heart of the Christian faith is the story of God’s self-revelation in Jesus.ⁱ What this means for anyone who wants to be a Christian in their heart, Tripp puts it quite bluntly, is that in our tradition no one can experience God’s love by gawking at the stars or hiking up to the top of a mountain to admire the sunset.ⁱⁱ Our faith is grounded in and energized by Jesus. As Christians, we cannot talk about God without telling the story of Jesus of Nazareth. In the Church, we cannot begin to describe the essence of God’s grace, the depth of God’s love, the broadness of God’s forgiveness, the height of God’s goodness and the wideness of God’s compassion without talking about the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. To be a Christian is to walk with Jesus. To be a disciple of Jesus is to believe in him. And here it may be helpful to point out that “believing” in the Gospels is not the same as giving mental allegiance to dogmas and doctrines about Christ but to give your heart, your self at the deepest level, to Jesus whom we believe is the human face of God turned toward us and the revelation of God’s own heart to humankind.ⁱⁱⁱ

The main purpose for the Church to exist is, of course, to keep alive the story of what God did in and through Christ – the story that still enlivens our faith this morning. We gather on Sundays and read these ancient passages from the Bible not just to remember what happened a long time ago, but to ask ourselves how we are going to witness to the presence of the Living Christ in our hearts today. The late religious scholar Marcus Borg said very wisely, **“journeying with Jesus... means being on the road with him... listening to his teaching – sometimes understanding it, sometimes not quite getting it... [To journey with Jesus] means eating at his table and experiencing his [inclusive] banquet... It means to be nourished by him and fed by him... Journeying with Jesus also means to be in a community, to become part of the alternative community of Jesus. Discipleship is not an individual path, but a journey in a company of disciples. It is the road less traveled, yet discipleship involves being in a community that remembers and celebrates Jesus.”**^{iv} This church is here to give proof that the Gospel can be lived now, today, this week, this month, this year. We come together weekly to remind each other that the world still needs Christians who can show the reality of the incarnation and the hope of the resurrection not only in the way we worship, but especially in the way we live outside the walls of this sanctuary.

My crisis of faith began to take hold of my soul slowly when I began to realize that I had settled for the belief that if I attended the worship services religiously, read the Bible daily, and affirmed all the acceptable teachings about Jesus enshrined in church doctrines and creeds, I could sit in worship contentedly, confessing my sins every

Sunday, assured of God's forgiveness, protected from the sinful world and certain of my salvation. My faith had become purely transactional: as long as I believed all the right things, God would be pleased and save a place for me in heaven. My intent to follow Christ devolved into a feeling of spiritual satisfaction for Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross. He had died to make me feel forgiven and saved. All I had to do now was to stay on the narrow path and all would be well with my eternal soul. The Gospels had become a manual of instructions on how to believe the right things about Jesus rather than a collection of sacred stories that inspire people to meet Jesus again and again until we see ourselves implicated in his journey of faith.

I began to drift away from the church, but I couldn't walk away from Jesus.

Joseph Sittler, the renowned Lutheran theologian that taught at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, spoke often of "***the haunting allure of the figure of Jesus***."^v Sittler believed that it is Jesus' refusal to shrink the dimension of his calling, his faith, his ministry and his life to our very human expectations that holds our interest, fascination and allurements for this young itinerant preacher and teacher from Nazareth. I imagine, I hope, that you are here this morning because you too want to be a Christian in your heart or, at the very least, because you can't shake off the allure of this wild, weird, provocative, controversial, and improbable Jesus of the Gospels.

I can tell you that I am here today, I am still part of the company of disciples, because I fell in love with Jesus when I was 14 years-old and, as the retired United Methodist preacher William Willimon wrote in his book "*Why Jesus?*," since that Sunday when I stood in front of the church and promised that I'd be a faithful follower of Christ, Jesus has managed "***to be unfathomable, deep, ungraspable and yet oddly close, intimate, talkative and relentlessly relational***."^{vi} I only wish that when Jesus asked his disciples that pivotal question we read in the Gospel of Luke this morning "***Who do you say that I am?***" that Jesus would have also set the record straight for those of us who would be drawn to him centuries after Peter answered, "***You are the Messiah of God.***" Journeying with Jesus would have been so much easier if he had clarified Peter's confession of faith. But Jesus gives no hint whatsoever that he thinks of himself as "***God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, one in being with the Father***" as the Nicene Creed declares. He does not speak of himself as the Second Person of the Trinity or as God in human form. When the disciples tell him that the crowds don't really know for sure who he is – that some think that he is John the Baptist walking around with his head re-attached; and others believe that he is Elijah back from heaven; while a few say that he is one of the ancient prophets returned from the dead, Jesus makes no effort to define his identity as the Logos, the Eternal Word and Wisdom of God or the founder of a new religion. Jesus chooses to remain very close to his friends but uncontrolled, unexplained and undomesticated by his followers. In fact, Jesus appears as though he wants his disciples to keep trying to answer that same question again and again, "***Who is this man?***" "***Who is this rabbi who teaches with such authority?***" "***Who is this person who feeds more than***

5,000 people with only five loaves of bread and two fish? “Who is this that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

When I was unsure about whether the church could still connect me with this fascinating and enigmatic Jesus of the Gospels, one of my friends in the youth group invited me out for ice cream and said that if I gave up on the community that gathers in Jesus’ name, I would also be passing up on the opportunity to help the Church wrestle with this question at the core of our faith, ***“Who is this Jesus who holds such allure?”*** ***“Who is this first century Palestinian Jew that makes 2.4 billion people around the globe want to be Christians in their hearts?”*** It is still our responsibility – the responsibility of the Church Universal as well as of the church here in Acton Center – to grapple with this question and have the theological integrity to say that we do not have Jesus all figured out.

Over the last two millennia, theologians, Biblical scholars, priests and preachers have devoted an immense amount of time, energy and ink to answer this question about Jesus’ identity with a degree of theological certainty and Christological fidelity. Peter’s bold answer ***“You are the Messiah of God”*** was never completely satisfying for the Church. By the fourth century, Jesus was fully God. In the fifth century, he had two natures being declared fully human and fully divine at the Council of Chalcedon. Nowadays, there are many who say that Jesus is a social prophet or a spiritual sage or an outstanding moral teacher or even ***“a proto-feminist-Marxist-hippie-anarchist.”***^{vii} As it was during his lifetime, Jesus continues to fascinate and to be misunderstood today. His teaching, his mission, his life, his death and his resurrection are routinely pulled out of context, twisted, and distorted by many of his admirers who are keen to claim that Jesus supports only their theology, their interpretation of Scriptures, their church, their religious cause and their view of the world. What most people seem to ignore is that Jesus does not ask us to define who he is in creeds or theological treatises because making a commitment to walk with him is a matter of the heart rather than a matter of the mind only. The four Gospels do not always agree on the details of Jesus’ three-year ministry, but their distinct and sometimes dissonant voices converge on the nature of discipleship. The Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John affirm that Jesus was more interested in our decision to give our hearts to him and follow than on whether we have all our theology and Christology neatly packaged and nailed down. I have a hunch that Jesus knew that understanding who he is comes while we are following.

Several years ago, an eighth grader who was in the confirmation class asked if we could meet up at the local coffee shop. He was having second thoughts about confirming his faith and joining the church. He said, ***“Listen, Paulo! I can’t bring myself to believe in the virgin birth, the resurrection or in the doctrine of the Trinity. I don’t think I can be part of the church.”*** The only thing I could say to him was that Jesus never asked his first disciples to believe certain things about him. In fact, right up to the end, the first disciples were not exactly sure what to believe about Jesus. When Jesus called the 12, he simply said, ***“Follow me.”*** That was enough to transform

the hearts and minds of his disciples. In the following, while they were serving, loving, feeding, clothing, and healing each other, while they were following instead of thinking about who Jesus was, that was the moment when the disciples began to catch a glimpse of God every time they looked to Jesus. In the man of Nazareth, the disciples saw a forgiving and compassionate God who was reaching out to humanity through Jesus. I also reminded the eighth grader that most adults in the pews have lots of questions and doubts, they just do not voice them out loud. We keep coming to church not because we understand the mystery of the resurrection or have a satisfactory theory of the atonement; we come because we want to be a Christian in our hearts. We come because we want to keep being surprised and inspired and transformed by the Living Christ.

But who do we say that he is? Who is Jesus to us? These are important questions that are at the heart of our faith and, during the season of Lent, we will explore them together. For the next five Sundays, we are going to journey with Jesus very intentionally. We are going to look at familiar Gospel stories with fresh eyes and pray for new revelations. We are going to remember the stories that hold our church together in a world that seems to be coming apart. I hope these Lenten sermons will be more than an invitation for reflections about Jesus. I hope that each week, you, all of you, will open your hearts to Christ and will remember when you made a commitment to journey with Jesus and why you are still following him today.

Rev. William H. Willimon says in his book, ***“Most of us find it impossible to follow Jesus without staying close to Jesus’ body, the church, because Jesus is too demanding and difficult to go it alone. We need help from our friends who know how rough the ride can be when you are journeying with Jesus. Church is not only where Jesus becomes embodied but also where our faith in Jesus gets fleshed out too. Church is where ordinary people are not only enabled to hear the invitation, ‘Follow me,’ but also where we are able to obey the command, ‘Follow me.’*** Then Rev. Willimon concluded, ***“The truth of Jesus is not proven by admiring him, but rather by following him, by offering our lives to him in his service, by having the guts to journey, to step forward at his invitation, ‘Follow me.’”***^{viii}

This morning, I invite you to step forward on our journey with Jesus through Lent. I encourage you to take some intentional time during the week to reflect on Jesus’ question, ***“Who do you say that I am?”*** If you have the time to put your reflections into words, I would welcome the opportunity to read them. Email me your reflections. Give me a call. Let’s be the church that is animated, excited, invigorated, renewed and fortified by our commitment to give our hearts to Jesus. Let’s be the church that connects people with Jesus, where ordinary people are enabled to know who Jesus is in their hearts.

May it be so. Amen.

ⁱ Tripp Fuller in The Homebrewed Christianity Guide to Jesus: Lord, Liar, Lunatic... or Awesome?, p. 22 [Kindle Edition].

ⁱⁱ Ibid., pp. 114-115.

ⁱⁱⁱ Marcus Borg in Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time, p. 137.

^{iv} Ibid., pp. 135-136.

^v Edited by James M. Childs Jr. and Richard Lischer in The Eloquence of Grace, p. 300.

^{vi} William H. Willimon in Why Jesus?, p. ix.

^{vii} Tripp Fuller in The Homebrewed Christianity Guide to Jesus: Lord, Liar, Lunatic... or Awesome?, p. 22 [Kindle Edition].

^{viii} William H. Willimon in Why Jesus?, p. 135.