Unexpected Jesus Week 1 Sunday October 18th 2026

John 6:35; 8:12; 10:7; 10:11; 11:25; 15:1

On days like today, when we celebrate the Anniversary of the building of this church, we can't help but look back into the past can we? All week, I have been wondering about what the Christians who gathered here for the first worship in their new building, 135 years ago, might think if they could see us now! Would they be proud of us and the ways we have lived out our faith? Would they agree that our open hearts and open doors and welcome are in keeping with what Jesus was all about? Would they applaud our Little Food Cupboard and the ways we reach out into our Community and our World through the M&S Fund? Would they agree with all the ways we seek to follow the great commandment to love God with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love our neighbour as ourselves? Would they still call us Christians?

Because, and I hope I'm not the first one to tell you this, the reality is, not all Christians do consider The United Church of Canada, "Christian". In June, when we voted to become an Affirming Congregation, someone commented on Facebook that if "this church is agreeing to accept same sex then it's not a church of God". And several other "Christians" responded with quotes from the bible about God's disapproval and judgement. And, sometimes, truth be told, I wonder if I even want to claim the name of Christian… when, as one final commenter said "Ahhh, and these comments continue to prove that there ain't no hate like Christian love."

What does it even mean to follow Jesus these days? Given the rise of Christian Nationalism and all the evil done in Jesus' name, how do we keep being the church our ancestors believed in and committed to so long ago, building this beautiful sanctuary?

Who is Jesus for us, here and now? Is he the same as he was for the people who built this place and have cared for it over the years up until now? Is he the same as he was even before that—for long ago first followers who dropped their nets to follow him and first Christians, who martyred themselves rather than deny him? Are we still following him and being guided by the God who promised to go before Moses and the people of Israel?

These very issues and questions are the ones that Sarah Bessey, one of my favourite Canadian theological thinkers and writers, (and who you can read a little more about on one of the inserts in our bulletin today) has struggled with. And her reflections on them have inspired this sermon series we are starting today on "The Unexpected Jesus" which I believe calls us back to faithfulness as Christians on this Anniversary Sunday.

On days like today, we can surely agree with Sarah who writes: "Many aspects of how I understand and try to follow Jesus have changed over the decades,"

and at the same time, on days like today, I believe we want to proclaim with her that "it turns out that I still really love Jesus even if that looks different than it once did."

So, for the next few weeks we're going to spend some time exploring what we believe about Jesus—even though sometimes it's easier to pin down what we *don't* believe him and what we know Jesus is *not*. At least it is for me.

I know that he is *not* a good luck charm. I know he is *not* a political mascot. Though he's often used as both these things. I know he's *not* a fairy godmother, the granter of wishes. I also know he's *not* a metaphor. There was an historical man named Jesus… or probably Joshua (Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua). And I know that this name has survived for thousands of years and *that* must mean something.

I also think it's so incredibly cool that for every culture that claims Jesus as "their own" he ends up looking like them. So, we have the blonde-haired blue-eyed Jesus holding lambs and knocking on doors that most of us likely grew up with (but that, I also trust we have come

to understand, wasn't likely. Jesus was a middle eastern man. He would have had dark hair and dark eyes and dark skin). But I have a feeling that he would have liked how there's also an African Jesus, and a Japanese Jesus, an Indigenous Jesus, there's a Mexican Jesus, a Thai Jesus, and so on. There is even a female Jesus standing outside of Emmanuel College where I went to Theological School in the sculpture called "The Crucified Woman". This all makes me think that what he actually *looked* like isn't that important anymore ...or maybe it's that what he's now supposed to look like is "home" and that will be different for each of us and that's ok.

Of course, Jesus famously never directly said "I am the Messiah!" but he did lay out a number of *ideas* of who and what he was and we find them in the verses from the Gospel According to John that were read for us today from different voices all over the sanctuary.

Collectively known as the "I Am" statements, these were the result of the people of time asking Jesus who he was. Some of them genuinely wanted to know, others seemed eager to manipulate more miracles out of him. And some seemed to be using more of "*who* do you *think* you are? You're nothing special…we know your parents!" kind of tone.

Now for John, Jesus' Divinity (his relationship to God), was of utmost importance but in these I am Statements we have Jesus saying "I am bread, and light, I am a shepherd, and, a vine" and each one of these highlights his Christology in light of his relationship to humanity and make space for the idea that Jesus is this incredible source of connection, a bridge so to speak, showing us how close and connected God really is to Creation, showing us how we can allow this connection to shift how we choose to live and move in the world around us.

The Jesus we will discover over the course of this sermon series may confirm what we already hold to be true, or maybe our understanding of him will shift a little, as it likely has over the course of our lives. Maybe what we will stumble upon will be an unexpected Jesus. And maybe that's just what this wounded world of ours needs right now more than anything. An Unexpected Jesus…a Jesus who shows up in unexpected places, loves in unexpected ways, uses unexpected words, and invites us into an unexpected relationship with God.

After eight years in ministry with you, I know, we gather here this Sunday, as we have for years gone by, because, like Bessey,

> … for better or worse, [our] attempts at following Jesus are still the centre of [our] own faith experience and understanding … [we] still believe following Jesus matters deeply for our current moment in time. It impacts how we show up for our neighbours, how we move through our lives, how we heal the world, and how we see one another and even how we experience God.

And, like Bessey, we still believe, even after 135 years (well let's go back even further—even after 2000 years) "that the name "Christian" holds within it the most extraordinary promise: the very hope of the Gospel that God loves us, calls us friends and beloved children, restoring us all to goodness and grace. That is the vision that [we] choose to follow. Or try to, anyway. It feels like a promise and an invitation all at the same time."

May we continue to discover, as Bessey has, that "The power of unbounded mercy, of what we call The Gospel, cannot be destroyed by corruption and toothy TV preachers [clobber verses, or Facebook trolls]. **Because in the end, there is still Jesus."**

One last, little tidbit—back to the post on facebook in June about us becoming an affirming ministry—I want to share one final comment from that thread that read:

> "Congratulations! My ancestors, who were the original settlers of Nottawasaga Township, would be quietly proud of your love and acceptance."

On this, the 135th Anniversary of Centennial United Church, May it be so. Amen.