



September 13, 2009

15th Sunday after Pentecost

“Who Is Jesus?”

Not so long ago a young man asked if he could meet with me and talk about Jesus. He'd been coming to church for a while and had no problem with Spirit or with God for that matter. But Jesus was another story. He didn't really believe in Jesus, he told me, and wondered how he could be a Christian without believing in him. So naturally I asked him about the Jesus he didn't believe in.

It turned out that it was the Jesus he learned about in the church of his childhood. On the one hand, his Jesus was a kind of model of good, moral behavior. He learned that he should try to live like Jesus lived. He didn't have so much of a problem with that, except that it was a bit of a bummer that he could never quite live up to that standard of behavior. He had doubts, but doubted that Jesus ever did. Sometimes he had bad thoughts, and he *knew* Jesus never did. But he could even live with that. What he couldn't live with was what he was taught about how God deals with his all-too-human slips, his doubts, and selfishness. God sent Jesus to die for his sins, because God was a just God and was required by divine decree to punish sin. But God came up with a scheme because he loved humans so much – place all that punishment and judgment upon his own blood, his very Son – so that that terrible fate could be lifted from us. So Jesus was crucified as a payment for our sin and all he had to do was believe

and we'd be saved – a reward in heaven for believing.

I listened patiently and when he was finished I told him that I didn't believe in that Jesus anymore myself. That understanding, I said, worked for some people still today, but that yes, you could be a Christian and not believe that. So what *do* you have to believe about Jesus to be a Christian?

“Who do you say that I am?” Jesus asks him disciples. They responded then as we respond today – in a myriad of ways. Some say John the Baptist reincarnated. Some say Elijah. And Peter claimed that he was the Messiah. But his idea of Messiah didn't include being crucified, or suffering of any kind, which earns him a rebuke by Jesus.

For a long time, academics in New Testament studies taught that from the get-go there was an orthodox or “authentic” way of understanding of who Jesus was, and then there were all these alternative sects that believed the “wrong” things about Jesus. Eventually, these groups were labeled heretics – which literally means “people who make choices” – the wrong choices for the ones who see themselves as the keepers of orthodoxy. But then in 1946, a shepherd in Egypt discovered some ancient texts in earthenware jars. It turned out that some

of these texts, such as the Gospel of Thomas, were at least as old and probably older than the four gospels in the Bible. But the Jesus of the Gospel of Thomas was completely different from what we now call the New Testament. This gospel is a collection of sayings by Jesus, and they are what we would now call “mystical”. It became clear that from the start there really wasn’t any single, authentic, or “right” response to the question of Jesus’ identity.

Scholars now agree that for at least the first 200 years, it was the case that different communities had vastly different understandings of Jesus. There were Marcionites, Ebionites, Gnostics, Valentinians...the list goes on and on. Some believed he was divine, others thought that he was an exceptional human being. These communities all co-existed creating a rich tapestry of varied belief about Jesus. Each community answered Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am” uniquely. As it turns out, it was a church hierarchy of bishops and priests who invented heresy – the idea that there were wrong ways to think about Jesus. And God help those who were wrong. And this, it’s now clear, had more to do with power and control than anything else.

In the not so distant past, I labored under the illusion that there was a single “correct” way to answer that question. While I knew that the days of the Spanish inquisition were over, I secretly harbored a suspicion that there existed a theological God-squad out there somewhere that gathered to read my sermons and pass judgment on me. (My narcissism knows no bounds, apparently). I was convinced that they would at some point try and

shame me by exposing to the world my faulty thinking. So, I can’t imagine what it must be like for the average person sitting in the pew week after week. I suspect that you imagine that somebody, somewhere has the correct answer to the million-dollar question, and that possibly you would be reluctant to take a stab at answering it for fear of being exposed as a heretic.

Well, I’m here to tell you this morning to relax. I’m here to invite you to wildly speculate about how you would answer that question. No tests. No essays. No judgment. But there are a few ground rules. First, your answer must reflect what you actually believe, not what you think you should believe, or what you think I think you should believe. What is your gut conviction? Second, in taking a stab at this, start with your own life experience. Ask yourself what is it about Jesus that actually inspires me. Have the stories of Jesus’ life, or indeed a direct encounter with a presence you might call Jesus, caused you to act differently or feel differently or treat others differently? The third ground rule is that you have to do original research. Read the New Testament for yourself. Take a week. Take two weeks. Jot down what inspires you, annoys you, disgusts you, or confuses you about the story of Jesus? Ask God to open your heart and your mind so that your reading is a contemplative experience – you’re looking for the sacred to come through. After doing your own research, then you may want to consult the professionals who make their living trying to answer this question.

I am not saying that all portrayals of Jesus are of equal value. Nor am I saying that there aren’t some portrayals

that more closely reflect the truth. But in an evolutionary Christian spirituality, we can only be where we are at with this, and the best that we can do at a given point in our own evolutionary journey is to notice carefully how Jesus evolves in our consciousness over time and to notice what kind of response Jesus evokes in us. You will notice that it changes over time.

The Many Faces of Christ

The truth is that how we answer Jesus' question will be determined by our stage of consciousness and the perspectives available to us. The great thing about Jesus is that his identity expands as our own consciousness expands. One way to think about his divinity is that it consists in his capacity to elude our definitions. He transcends, yet includes, all attempts to define him. He is whatever we imagine him to be at a given moment in time, but he's always more than we can grasp. Jesus' functions as a kind of alluring power, drawing us toward ever-more expansive and comprehensive understanding of what it means to be fully human and fully divine.

I write about this in my book, *The Emerging Church*, so I don't want to belabor the point this morning. But to somebody with a *mythic/literal* worldview, Jesus is who the Bible says he is – end of conversation. He is the one and only Son of God; if you believe in him you will be saved. To somebody with a *rationalist/modernist* worldview, Jesus is an example of a human being with extraordinary human potential; Jesus is what's left after you get finished demythologizing and bring historical and redaction criticism to bear on the gospel accounts: there is the Jesus of history and

the Christ of faith, and you had better distinguish the two. To somebody with a *postmodernist* worldview, Jesus is the great equalizer; he is egalitarian, pluralistic, and respectful of all portrayals of him – a sensitive Jesus, if you like. To somebody with an *integral* worldview, he is the Cosmic Christ, the spiritual impulse itself – embedded within the evolutionary unfolding of the cosmos.

A Role for Jesus in Postmodernist Congregations

Now, my strong intuition is that as a denomination the United Church has a centre of gravity somewhere between rationalist/modernist and postmodernist. We have spent 20 years affirming Jesus as fully human, full of potential, and as the poster boy for a sensitive new age guy. There is lots of upside to this portrayal, but let's not get stuck there. As Ken Wilber points out, the downside to postmodernist uber-sensitivity is that it supports a rampant narcissism. We have grown up with the message that we are OK just the way we are, and that what I think and feel is just perfect. Life is seen as a vehicle for *my* happiness, *my* success, and *my* fulfillment. "What's true for me is true for me and you have no right to challenge it".¹ In other words, the ego can become hyper-inflated in this postmodern worldview. And this is why we're more likely to cozy up to Jesus as a good friend – good friends don't correct us the way Jesus corrected Peter, for example. Friends tell us "you do your thing, and I'll do mine".

But I wonder if it's time to include this sense of Jesus as friend, but go

¹ I'm grateful to both Ken Wilber and Andrew Cohen for this insight, and particularly see EnlightenNext's September-November, 2009 issue, p.49.

beyond it to Jesus as the Beloved Other in human form – the one who is greater than us. The Eastern traditions would talk about him as guru. Gurus see where you're at and challenge you to take your next step forward. Jesus comes to us as greater than us, more spiritually evolved, an incarnation of God deserving of our devotion. This drives the ego nuts, because the narcissistic ego doesn't want to bow to anything or anybody other than itself. We want Jesus to simply affirm us where we're at – perhaps even affirm that at core he is no greater than us. The ego loves to believe that we are equal in every way. Ironically, it may be time for the mainline church to return to a devotional relationship with Jesus. Only, we do it from a more complex level of spiritual intelligence – it's not groveling, it's not believing that he's the one and only Son of God, and it's not believing that Jesus died for our sin. But it does involve humbling our egos in the presence of a divine Other who can teach us a thing or two about ultimate reality.

Who Jesus Is On the Ground

Our evangelical friends are realizing that their definitions of Jesus have been too limiting and excluding of others. They are talking about making the shift from believing, behaving, and belonging as the order of initiation to belonging, behaving, and believing. Right belief comes last. Belonging to a transformed community that defines Jesus by what they *do*, not what they believe is the key.

“Who do you say that I am”, Jesus asks? Well, I'll end by taking off my conceptual hat and tell you a story. Jesus is the kind of presence who inspired 25 people or so from this congregation to

come to a wedding last week of two women from Texas, Sarah and Glenda. These lovely women had no family or friends to be with them. Marion Allaart, our beloved wedding coordinator just knew that followers of the Jesus' tradition show hospitality to the stranger. So she issued an invitation for this congregation to show up. The 25 people who were able to attend on behalf of CMUC knew that Jesus was the kind of presence who shows up for those who are left behind or marginalized by the dominant culture, and so in his name, and by his grace, we show up. We witness the love of these two women for each other and we validate it as blessed by God. We raise a toast to their health and happiness, and in doing so, they receive Christ's blessing, because we are his body and blood and spirit for our age. We stand on the steps of the church and get a group picture with the happy couple, so that they know that Christ's love crosses the borders of fear and ignorance, and is a foretaste of an eternal banquet where we will finally all sit down with one another at the same table.

Who do we say that Christ is? Well, after we get done with all the labels and all the words – as important as these are – maybe the way Canadian Memorial responded last Wednesday afternoon is the best answer we can give to the world.