

Reflection

July 28th 2024

Stump the Preacher Sunday (Who is the Jesus I follow and how do I follow him?)

Psalms 139: 7-14

1 Corinthians 2; 9-12

Matthew 13: 10, 13-17

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Title: Right of Way

Prayer: Loving and Holy God. Help our hearts and minds and spirits grow in such a way that we see everyone – all creation – every human being as your beloved; as coming from you and loved by you. Amen.

Okay, this reflection is in three parts.

Part One:

Thinking back to the threshold moment and all the consternation, let's look at how we got here ...here being Christians believing different things, feeling in such opposition to each other sometimes, and willing to get into longstanding arguments about who and what is right.

I'll be referencing Canadian-American Philosopher Jamie Smith throughout this reflection. He was on Nahlah Ayed's CBC Ideas program speaking about the current culture wars – specifically in the States, and looking at "who gets to be included as a Christian in America today." This is not our topic, but some of what he said lends beautifully to what we are exploring.

For example, he said "we become a people who think what makes us who we are is what we know, what we believe, the truths we proclaim." And what helps cement those beliefs is the act of proclaiming – often loudly – that what the other side knows is wrong, a conspiracy or a lie. Both sides believe in their heart of hearts that they have the facts and that the other side is lying.

We witness this today – it's a little of what we explored last week about how we live in a world of two sides, either/or, right or wrong. And, one of our jobs as Christians is to

learn how to see into a third way, a deeper way, a faithful path of deep spirituality, bold discipleship and daring justice.

By what do you identify yourself when you're thinking about who you are? Do you identify by your:

- Beliefs?
- Faith?
- Looks?
- Losses or accomplishments?
- Wealth or status?
- Your shortcomings?
- Sins?

And, are you cemented in that identity or do you hold it lightly?

Irish/British Professor Johnjoe McFadden wrote an article exploring faith and politics. He quoted a study done in which folks on either side of the political aisle could concede that their own views were not always identical to those of Jesus. The researchers divided issues into fellowship (like wealth distribution and immigration) and morality (like gay rights and abortion). Both sides could see that Jesus would have advocated for issues on the other side as well. But both sides also felt that Jesus would have prioritized their issues over the other group's.

In this example we can see how we tend to create God in our own image. And funnily enough that image fits quite nicely into everything we believe and all the choices we make.

It's human nature to make Jesus into our own image because it's all we can handle.

Are you familiar with the style of worship music that turns Jesus into our buddy and pal? Or even the voices united hymn "What a friend we have in Jesus?"

Well – I don't want to be friends with Jesus! It would be exhausting!! We'd be on the go all the time feeding people, fighting for justice, healing the sick, advocating for people's rights, building houses, being away from family, fighting with politicians and

religious leaders, walking; and walking, and walking some more. I'd be worn out and grumpy.

We think about and believe in a Jesus that is comfortable for us because we are very human. We are lazy, we are prideful, we are greedy, we are apathetic. Not all the time, but sometimes. And, so we can only think so far into the expansiveness of Jesus before our brains short circuit.

And, we hate to admit it, but often that Jesus who is comfortable for us is a Jesus that serves us. Serves us well. Because we don't have to change. We have created an image of Jesus that fits quite nicely into exactly how we are living out our lives.

Little do we know, our job as disciples is to work at uncovering the Jesus who we can serve.

So, now we have a firm idea of who Jesus is – someone we can understand and who will never ask us to change; but what happens when we encounter someone else who knows a different Jesus? Who's right? And, who's wrong?

When I chose the Matthew passage I thought we'd be talking about the complexity of parables and how they help us sink into the heart knowledge of God and not the head knowledge. But, not so.

Matthew says "for this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes."

Matthew is suggesting here that the disciples and those who believe Jesus is the Messiah have access to private information – information from the Spirit – that others don't have. Like the people of Israel. The "us and them" paradigm. Matthew seems to be doing what we find ourselves doing in our world of faith today ... "we have the right info and you don't. We are with God and you are not."

Jamie Smith suggests that it's not about what we know or what we believe; but more about "what we are afraid of."

We are afraid of being alone, being unlovable, not belonging, not being seen.

These fears create defensiveness and a need to find a group of people who believe what we believe so we can feel like we are seen. The danger here is that as beliefs

morph and change we either have to go along for the ride even if we start to disagree, or we have to step away from the group where we thought we found such a sense of belonging and face the fear of being alone, unloved, and not seen once more.

Part Two:

Is it even possible to have a relationship with Jesus then? If we are all sort of wrong anyway? Or, if there is no ONE right way?

All throughout the gospels Jesus is a disturber to the status quo. When was the last time your status quo was disturbed?

Yes. Of course it's possible to have a relationship with Jesus – we just have to get out of our own way. We have to be willing to be challenged by this fully human, fully divine dynamo, Messiah, Saviour, Redeemer.

We have to be willing to be uncomfortable. When was the last time reading one of the gospel stories made you feel uncomfortable?

St. Theresa of Avilla says that “prayer and comfortable living are incompatible.” Ouch. There's that exhausting piece of following Jesus again.

James Petticrew is a Scottish pastor who says that “to be in Christ's image is to LET the Holy Spirit work within us so that our character, attitude and values increasingly reflect Christ.” We have to be willing to be recreated for God's purpose – not our own – again and again and again.

Here is where the passage from Psalm 139 comes in handy. “Where can I flee from your presence?” If we are THIS known by God then there should be NO FEAR in being challenged or uncomfortable. Because God has got us!

We can feel safe exploring the questions: who is the Jesus I follow and how do I follow him?

In the Theological Banquet Janet Gear talks about how the United Church is a big tent. We are not devoid of beliefs, we have just found a way to host them together. There is a freedom in this but it is a freedom that forces us to do the work to figure out what we believe and where our convictions lie.

I can't stand here and tell you who Jesus is for you and how you should follow him. But, I can reference a passage from the gospel of John (13:34) where Jesus says "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

Friends, that is the work of a lifetime.

A Jesus who can say that is a Jesus beyond our comprehension. It is a Jesus who challenges us and makes us uncomfortable. Thanks be to God for that because this is precisely what will shake us from creating a Jesus we can handle to following a Jesus that will lead us into the kingdom of heaven on earth.

Part Three:

Where do we go from here?

At the start I asked us to ponder by what we identify ourselves – our looks, accomplishments, sins etc.

To identify ourselves by our faith, means we have handed ourselves over to God. We have chosen to be molded by the One who loves us more than we can know.

In the Corinthians passage Paul says "now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God."

But, God can only move in us, re-create us in her image IF we let go and let God do so ... and God might make decisions we don't like. We might become a person we couldn't have foreseen.

This is uncomfortable, isn't it? Challenging even.

Part of discipleship is to allow ourselves to be transformed by Christ, NOT make Christ like us. The point is: we don't know / can't know the full image; and so we pray, we bow to God's will, we let ourselves be led by the Spirit ... we strive, plead and yearn to be shaped a tiny bit each day into Christ's image.

And we confess.

We confess our limited knowledge, our blind spots; we confess our inability to trust beyond what we know.

And in making these confessions we humble ourselves, we realize we don't know everything and we begin to see that God's perspective is so much greater than our own.

Then we begin to let go of our need to control. We begin to see the commonalities between us all – the passion, the caring for the world, the love of family, the desire for safety. And deeper still – the desire to be seen, to belong, to be beloved.

One of Reen's questions was why do we focus more on Jesus than God or the Holy Spirit?

You believe what you want. Here is my answer: because we are an Easter people. Because we believe in the power of the resurrection story. Because if we can be forgiven, then we can forgive. Because this story of Hope is never over. God's love is SO deep that we are redeemed, saved, blessed, and made new over and over and over again throughout our whole lives.

If that's the path we want to hop on then we say yes to being challenged by the One who came before us and who told us to "love one another, just as I have loved you."

That's an unconditional love that is FOR each other, not against each other.

It's not easy ... It's worth it.

Amen.