

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Janine Wilson, associate minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, on the fourth Sunday of Easter, April 25, 2010; dedicated with thanksgiving to Rev. John Aeschbury, Rev. Tim Ahrens and all who find the courage to stand up for others out of their love for God and all of God's children.

“Where Do You Stand?”

John 10:22-30

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in Thy sight O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

- How good are you at following directions? Can you listen to someone on your cell phone with you are driving, telling you how to get from your house to Grady Memorial Hospital just one time, and believe you know exactly how to get there?
- If your car or van needs a new part, are you someone who can open the owner's manual and fixit yourself?
- When you first learned to sew, did you simply sit down and make new creations happen?
- Or, do you learn things better when there are fewer words and more hands on training?

If you are more an apprentice style learner, this morning you are in excellent company with many of Jesus' early followers.

From the opening words of the gospel of John, Jesus and his source of power are made perfectly clear. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (John1:1) But before the Word was in print Jesus had eye witnesses. Nathaniel and Nicodemus called Jesus “Rabbi” and “Son of God.” A little further

down the road, Jesus is called “Prophet,” “Savior of the world,” and even king.

It would seem that Jesus is known – plain and simple. But if we guess this, we are wrong. It’s about this point in the gospel, the place where so much has been said and done in the clear light of day, that instead of the neighbors inviting Jesus in for coffee and biscuits, they start a hot debate about whether he should be welcomed or chased off; believed or tossed out on his ear. Jesus seems too good to be true. People start talking about him over the produce in the market. One says Jesus is still wet behind the ears and after all he’s only the carpenter’s kid . . . for that matter what good could possibly come out of Nazareth? Still others murmur that it’s all just too sad that such a nice young man is possessed by demons.

Safe from our time-traveled distance, you and I can wonder what their problem is – what’s the issue here? Sure, it’s true that Jesus’ photograph was not on his driver’s license, but he had told them and he had showed them repeatedly who he was, but pat answers sell everyone short. As listeners today we still struggle with his identity. Knowing who someone is with head and heart can be difficult; loving, staying with, and then following, even harder.

Have you ever been in love? In the beginning your eyes may have known. Your heart may have known. Your laughter and tears may have been real and then you came to know something distinctive about deep and abiding love. As good as it may have been when the words and the feelings came together in happy ways, for many of us, it was not until our beloved stood by us when we were somewhat unlovable – for instance with the stomach flu – that we understood something different about a loving relationship. It is more than separate words and actions – suddenly words and actions were forged together and it became a different relationship.

The people at the Feast of Dedication, what we now call Hanukkah, needed more than words to help them believe. They needed more than show and tell. They needed to experience Jesus the messiah in their own lives. They needed to hear his voice in a way that called them to go forth and do likewise, even if they were unsure

it was possible. They needed courage to help them move beyond their comfort zone. They needed to experience his reassurance so they could stand tall when they were frightened and when their neighbors turned against them for believing.

It's too easy to say they missed the point. It's harder to laugh at others when we see ourselves staring back in their mirror. Telling the world what we believe is not always easy. Tell me, for instance how comfortable would you be standing out on Broad Street wearing a sandwich board that says; "Jesus is a prophet, a priest, my Lord and King? He is one with God." Wouldn't it be easier to read a book on the subject; debate the universe; or argue science and religion? All of these are helpful and important, but they are different than proclaiming directly. Wouldn't it be safer to just smile and say he was a great teacher, even though he did a few odd things with spit and mud; and in spite of the fact that he had strange friends, the kind your mother might not have wanted over for dinner?

The truth is, Jesus' identity has always been a challenge. And how we come to believe who he is and from whom he comes, is just as important to you and to me as it was to the community listening and discovering him in the flesh. In his book *The Way of Jesus Christ*, theologian and Professor Jurgen Moltman reminds us that Jesus "neither affirms nor denies the title of Christ . . . he suspends the answer giving himself and the disciples an answer of his own; the announcement of his suffering. Who he truly is, is to be manifested in his death and resurrection. The disciples will perceive who he is when they follow him to the place he is going; and when they take up their own cross." ⁱ

Some will know him today because the words are enough. Some will believe because they witness a miracle. And still others will know him when words take on flesh and grace and overwhelms sin, replacing it with transformational experience.

Jesus the Messiah is more than a hypothetical equation or being. He is the one who calls, leads and directs where we go – and where we stand to be counted at the end of the day. Jesus the Good Shepherd tells us plainly who he is and who we are to become; but words alone

are not enough. He has higher expectations for his sheep. He teaches us to demonstrate his presence in our lives. He tells his sheep that the “The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me.” (John 10.25) He leads us to the conclusion that demonstrating our words and deeds both make a difference when it comes to discipleship. The thought of this is big, but the actions can be very small. They come one at a time like building a house one brick at a time.

Late one Friday afternoon, 20 years ago, a new director of Christian education found herself still standing in front of the copier. The church was only a couple miles away from the facility where the first-strike Trident missile was being built. The educator thought she was alone in the church and was startled when the pastor walked into the office. He stood next to her, looking at the wall and very quietly asked her, “Are you planning to go to the protest tomorrow out at the Cape?”

Startled and unsure by his tone she softly replied, “Ay . . . yes I am.” And after a pause, she said, “But my husband told me if I get arrested, don’t call him. So, if I’m not here on Sunday morning, you’ll know where to find me.” Still looking down, she asked him, “Are you going to be there?” He shook his head and said, “No, the project leader sits in the fourth pew on the side of the pulpit.” An uneasy rush went through her; could her own job fall into jeopardy? The pastor didn’t make her wait to find out. He turned toward her for the first time since he’d come in; smiled, and told her, “If you get arrested, just call my house. The attorneys are all staying with us.” And he left the room.

How we choose to live our life matters. We are not always sure what to do, but following what we believe is the work of the Spirit moving within us is still important. What we believe and what we do makes a difference not only to God, but to the well-being of our planet, our life and those around us. We spend a lot of time and energy here in this beautiful place on words. We have bulletins; announcements; hymnals that are printed; hymns that proclaim. And yet, even those of us who come here every week have had moments of doubt. What then are we to expect from those who have

never been here? How will they know what it means to follow Jesus? I can tell you – they will watch and experience where we go and what we do.

What will you do this week to make our risen Lord visible? If you are not sure, then ask yourself what makes you laugh and what brings tears to your eyes. Let both of these lead you into God’s hope for you this week. Together they will let the world know where you stand.

- Did something catch you last week on Earth Day? Is there room for a tree or a backyard habitat you could plant this spring?
- Do you know someone who needs a kind word? Say it; send it; repeat it.
- And, if you believe all children deserve a safe and fruitful life, consider asking questions today about the Justice Ministry Network here at First Congregational Church. Listen to their commitment and joy that we are part of BREAD and the upcoming Nehemiah Action on May 3.

This week and throughout the year, BREAD will be shining a light on the youth at risk in Columbus. They will tell the world that “In house meetings [held in 2009 and 2010], people told about the fear of losing their kids to the street, fear of losing their neighborhoods to crime, and fear of losing family members to violence.”ⁱⁱ They will share that according to school policies, students are not to be expelled for truancy, but last year over 4,000 youth were expelled anyway, making them easy prey for gangs and drugs. And then, if you ask them, they will share some of the strategies to help make a difference.

They will tell you it is their hope to work together with the city; and these things will be said to key leaders of Columbus on May 3 and that you are invited to join the other 3,000 participants – that you are in fact, needed. But most remarkably to me, they will make it sound easy . . . and it is not. Together they are standing up to fear.

And when it happens, everyone in the room will get a glimpse of who Jesus really is and what the kingdom now and coming looks like.

Friends in Christ, whatever your challenge from God this week, we will stand with you. Our lives must give evidence of whose opinions are the most important to each one of us. The Good Shepherd calls us; I pray we hear God's voice and respond boldly. Amen.

ⁱ Jurgen Moltman, The Way of Jesus Christ. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p 138.

ⁱⁱ B.R.E.A.D, www.breadcolumbus.org, April 22, 2010.