

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, March 16, 2008, Palm/Passion Sunday, dedicated to “Red Letter Christians” who try to live the words of Jesus in their daily walk with him and always to the glory of God!

“Who is Jesus?”

Matthew 27:11-54

**Part VI of VIII in the Lenten sermon series:
“Questions My Father Asked Me”**

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Dear Dad,

You asked me, “*Who is Jesus?*” As I began to pray and ponder this question, the words of the hymn from the church of South India came to mind: “*Christ is all to me, Jesus Christ is all to me, in this time of strife and sorrow, Christ is all to me.*”

Jesus Christ is ALL to me. That’s who Jesus is to me - ALL IN ALL. Jesus is like “air” to me. He is always with me, around me, in me. I breathe him in and rest in him. I study his words and bath in the light of his teachings. I have often said, when I die, I would like three words as my epitaph: “*He loved Jesus*” - but even that seems insufficient.

One part of me wishes to leave the answer: “ALL” - alone. “All” is enough. But the corresponding questions: “*Why is he ALL? What makes him ‘all’ to you?*” dig at my conscience. So I write on .

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Many books have been written on Jesus. In every generation in most lands of the earth, faithful Christians have attempted to write, sing and speak about who Jesus is. It is a difficult and blessed task. I commend the authors who attempt an answer. Let me join them . . .

First and foremost, Jesus was a faithful and religious Jew. He was a poor Jew born in a hostile and violent time to Mary, a young teenage girl, and her fiancé Joseph, a young carpenter and good man, who (like his son) died too young. His birth was announced by an archangel, favored by God, welcomed by a heavenly host of angels, painted across the heavens by a star, honored by humble shepherds and wise sages whose journey across mountains and deserts to his birthing barn in Bethlehem was a story in itself.

Jesus was a threat to the powerful from his earliest hours of life. We know that King Herod slaughtered innocent male babies in Bethlehem in an attempt to kill the son of God. Like Jews persecuted before and after him by powerful and hateful rulers, Jesus became a refugee in Egypt when only a few days old.

He returned to Nazareth when it was safe to do so. There he lived under the radar of Herod and Rome as he grew up in relative anonymity. He burst on the scene as a 30-year-old when his baptism by John in the Jordan River opened the heavens and caused his Father in Heaven to proclaim, *“This is my beloved Son. In him, I am well pleased.”*

Over the next three years, Jesus turned the world upside down. Literally, the world has never been the same because of this young man. So, never underestimate the power of one so beautiful and blessed in the eyes of God! The Palestinian world of first century

Jews, Gentiles, and Roman citizens were the first to know who Jesus was. He was a prophet. He was a sage. He was a man who was constantly wrapped in prayer and the presence of God. He was a leader of men and women - a leader whose pathway to glory and the good life was mostly misunderstood and misrepresented to others.

He was, in my mind, the greatest rabbi of Judaism, whose 12 apostles (minus Judas and plus Mathias), became the backbone of the Jesus Movement, which followed his death, resurrection and ascension to glory. As a rabbi, he pointed to what C.H. Dodd called "The Zero Hour." The zero hour was the coming of the Kingdom of God. "*The Kingdom of God is upon you . . . It is within you,*" he said. He called people to repent and believe. Sometimes we see Jesus as the Forgiving One. But, he continually called people to repentance. He calls us still to turn from our ways of wickedness and live in the light and love of God. He believed that without admitting our wrongs and the nature of our wrongs, our lip-service to love and belief means nothing. He was clear on this.

True, he was the embodiment of Grace. But, the grace of God in Jesus Christ is not "cheap grace." It was "costly grace" (to quote Dietrich Bonhoeffer). The Jesus way of Love and Grace expects people who said they would change, to in fact, change. Like a true rabbi, he called his followers to be different and to be whole. This harkens back to my earlier sermon on Love interwoven with Justice. (No dad, I won't preach it again today).

As a rabbi, Jesus was a great teacher. John calls him "***The Word made flesh and dwelling among us.***" How true! He was the embodiment of God's Word. His wisdom was dispensed through storytelling we call parables. These parables amounted to proverbial wisdom presented as true and realistic messages about how to live

a Godly life. He could turn a phrase and change a person's perspective. His teaching method was geared to the individual, but always spoke to the universal concerns of his time (and our time). He was a dialogical teacher. He answered challenging questions with questions and with stories - which usually ended with questions pointed toward the one who started the dialogue. Jesus knew that people truly change when they answer questions for themselves. So, dad, "Who is Jesus to you?"

Jesus was a Healer of all who came to him with hearts and wounds that were spiritually and physically open, painful and raw. He drew people to him who were sick in mind and body. His healing touch, his gentle presence, his powerful and clear winning word of love was enough for them to be transformed into whole persons. (In his last week, it is important to note that there is only one healing story. When Peter cuts off the ear of the soldier in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus heals him).

As a man of prayer, Jesus taught people to pray as well. The Lord's prayer is the most perfect prayer that humanity has ever known. It speaks of trust and obedience to God's will. It speaks of providing food for family and neighbors. It asks God for forgiveness and points us to heaven. It calls for God to lead us out of temptation and the evil that surrounds us and to recognize that God's way is powerful, it has values which are eternal and practical and points us to glory.

Jesus spoke, healed, lived, prayed, taught and ministered with power and authority that came from God. He was the calm at the center of the storm. He was the servant who suffered for those in his care. He was the good shepherd that sought and found the one

lost sheep. As such, he was a threat to those in power because he lived fully and honestly in the way of God.

Mostly I have answered “Who WAS Jesus?” In so doing, I have failed to tell you that Jesus is and has never been a “was.” Jesus has always been alive!

He **IS** the Living One! Whenever I speak of the essence of our Savior in language of past tense, I am defining (by his very essence) one who was and is and always shall be - the Living Son of God! He IS prophet. He IS teacher. He IS rabbi. He IS sage. He IS healer. He IS power of God, which threatens powers of the human rulers! He IS praying leader and suffering servant. He IS the embodiment of love and grace and justice. He Is Alive!

The first words of the Gospels declare that Jesus is “Emmanuel,” which means “God with us.” In the end of Matthew’s Gospel, the risen and now ascending Christ says, **“I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”** Jesus is not a past preacher or a past participle. He is a present reality. He is not a “has been.” He is “a here and now” reality. He is not dead. He is alive - forevermore.

When he suffered and died on the cross, as his body was breaking, as his blood was flowing down, as he was gasping for breath and crying out to his Father to the bitter end. Jesus’ story was not ending, even though life was leaving his frame. Instead, the Christ event was beginning. He was transitioning from man of God to Savior of the world.

Today, we worship and serve the Risen Messiah, Jesus Christ. We have embellished the founder of Christianity with too much gold and turned his cross of glory into glorious jewelry. In so doing, we

treat Jesus like a relic of religion, not the Savior of Our World. When we do this, we treat dear old Jesus like an icon, not a real presence for our lives.

But, He calls us each day to walk and talk with him as the Living Lord. In the garden on the first Easter, an angel says to Mary when she discovers the empty tomb, "*He is not here. He is risen. He has gone before you to Galilee.*" Jesus still goes before us every day. He is still Risen. He is still leading us if we would but follow. He is not dead. He is alive, forevermore.

All of this is a long answer dad to the question, "Who is Jesus?" In the end, I return to the beginning, "*Christ is all to me, Jesus Christ is all to me, in this time of strife and sorrow, Christ is all to me.*"

I love you, dad.

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