

The world loves Jesus, or at least people say they do. More than once, I’ve heard people bemoan Christianity, or organized religion, only, in the next breath to say, “but Jesus, I can get behind him.” Author, theologian and activist Shane Claiborne describes where he got the term “Red letter Christians” from. He tells the story of a talk show host confessing to a friend of his that there were many things that he wrestled with as he read the Bible—things he found confusing, troubling, hard to reconcile. But then his face lit up and he said with a smile, “But I love the stuff in red.”<sup>1</sup>

Pop culture is constantly trying to interpret and re-interpret Jesus. Any character who dies and comes back to life, is automatically dubbed a Jesus figure. This character, then, “resurrected”, is mystically imbued with the ability to, in some supernatural fashion, defeat the antagonist of their story. This is a common science fiction and fantasy trope, think Neo from the Matrix, Paul Atreides from Dune, Harry Potter, Jon Snow from Game of Thrones, Aslan from the Chronicles of Narnia, or even Bryan Singer’s Superman in Superman Returns. The world likes Jesus, or at least, some part of Jesus.

I’ve often pushed back against pop culture’s tendency to name and celebrate ‘Jesus’ figures. Particularly ones which simplify their presentation of Jesus. For example, actor Will Farrell’s character Ricky Bobby in the satirical film, *Talladega Nights*, who insists on praying to “**Dear Lord Baby Jesus**” before meals, repeatedly emphasizes his preference for imagining Jesus as a “**tiny infant, 8 pounds 6 ounces, newborn infant Jesus**” in a golden fleece diaper. Satirizing a consumerized faith, it is a commentary on how spirituality can be reduced to ritual or image without depth. And yet, I think it is also quite telling. Culture is reflecting back to the church how we’ve taught Jesus; how we’ve spoken about, what we’ve emphasized, and what the church has named as important in talking about Jesus. And perhaps, I don’t like what I see.

So, I think it’s important, in our series talking about assumptions or words with baggage, that we also reflect on Jesus. Like with God and the Holy Spirit, we each have different images of Jesus. And sometimes it’s helpful just to name some of those.

The scripture I selected for today asks the question that I want to ponder this morning: Who is this Jesus? Who do you say that I am? It’s a question that, I believe, rings just as true today as it did when it was first uttered, “Who do you say that Jesus is?”

We sometimes treat it as a test (of which Peter got it correct, in naming Jesus as the Messiah), but I wonder how much of Jesus’ asking was also to challenge his disciples to reflect on their time with him. How do they see Jesus?

Like, when we discussed God and our images of God, there are many different sides to this Jesus that we love, and each one of us gravitates to one of those sides or another. And yet, even though we read the same scripture, we see different things; we are attracted to different parts of Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> Shenk, edited. n.d. Jesus Matters Good News for the 21st Century. Scottdale, Pa: Herald Press. pg 7.

An exercise I typically do with folks exploring faith is to introduce them to the Spirituality Wheel. In its simplest form it looks at four ways that we approach and engage with our faith. Broadly, we engage our faith with our heads, with our hearts (or emotions), with our actions, and with our spirits. And when looking at Jesus, as presented in scripture, we can almost always pick out stories where Jesus embodies each one of those ways of engaging faith. And while we might feel more comfortable in connecting to Jesus in one particular way over another, no one way is the best, and no one way is wrong.

The common dichotomy that is often made with Jesus is the question of whether he was human or divine, how much Jesus was a person who lived and breathed, walked and talked, and how much of Jesus was an embodiment of God. This, of course, is the classic dualistic thinking. Trying to separate Jesus the man from Jesus the Son of God.

Many folk find it easy to connect to, to imagine, to lean on the human, the historical Jesus; the Jesus who walked and talked. The Jesus who taught. This is primarily the Jesus who we meet in Scripture. This is primarily the Jesus that those who would reject Christianity, but are attracted to Jesus teachings, would gravitate towards. Jesus as a Man. Jesus lived and breathed. He walked and he talked. He ate, drank, and grew a small cohort of followers. Those followers, those disciples, became apostles and taught others.

And on the other end of the continuum is the divine Jesus. The Jesus who is more mystical, who can do the inexplicable. The Jesus who can walk on water, heal the incurable, feed the innumerable, and bring the dead to life. This is the Jesus which fantasy and science fiction like, the Jesus who is resurrected. The Jesus who will be the cosmic victor in the great battle between good and evil.

Beyond these two ways of engaging Jesus, we have others. Here are a few that come to mind for me.

Jesus was a prophet, insofar as he revealed to humanity the fullness of God's dream, God's kingdom. Jesus was an ethicist. Tied to his embodiment of God's dream for creation is Jesus' ethic for living. An ethic that places the least, the lost, the last, at the center of God's love. Jesus taught a way of life, an ethic for living, of a reconciling love for all, including creation. And so, for some that makes Jesus a teacher. He was, after all, often identified as a Rabbi, which is one name for a teacher in the Jewish tradition. For others this makes Jesus a wisdom keeper. In our First Nations translation, this is the language that the disciples use to address Jesus, and it makes good sense, for Jesus speaks as someone with deep wisdom. For some, this also makes Jesus a philosopher. One who showed a way to live that is countercultural. For others, Jesus is an activist. Jesus' continued movement towards folk on the margins; his regular crossing of cultural boundaries, and his teaching and preaching about peace emphasize the calling for Jesus' followers to be peacemakers in all dimensions of life.

This message of peace and justice is inherently political. Jesus challenges both the established religious order of the day and the established culture of the day. This puts him at odds with both the Romans and also with the leaders of the Jewish Church. So in some respects, Jesus is a politician.

In the end, this leads to his death. For some, this makes him a sacrifice, fulfilling prophecy from the Old Testament. For others, he is a rebel, defying the establishment up to the point of death. For others, yet, this makes Jesus a martyr. Jesus was willing to model his love for humankind all the way to the cross.

For many, Jesus is a healer; we even have a hymn that suggests as much, "Healer of our Every Ill." We see him healing bodies in scripture, and some believe that Jesus continues this

physical healing to this day. We also talk about Jesus as the healer of our spirits. Whether it's through Jesus' actions on the cross, the prayers we offer on people's behalf in Jesus' name, or the continued presence of God's spirit, Jesus continues his healing ministry today.

And we would be remiss to not mention Jesus' title as the Christ, or as is sometimes translated, the Anointed One, the Son of Man, the Son of God, the Messiah. Different ways to talk about Jesus' work of liberating and freeing God's people from the powers and principalities, and Jesus' connection to God. Perhaps that makes Jesus a mystic, and even a bit of a mystery.

And then we have the often quoted, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" passage. What are we to do with that? Especially from an Anabaptist Mennonite perspective? We might have heard that as the key to salvation, another word for another time.

I hear Jesus self-identifying in three aspects. The Way, The Truth, and the Life.

For me, I hear it as a pattern for living. I hear Jesus saying that his teaching is *the way* to live. Jesus doesn't just teach, he doesn't just say it, but Jesus lives what he teaches; Jesus embodies his teaching. And, as followers of Jesus, we are called to also follow Jesus' way of life.

Jesus named, embodied and lived *the truth*. This isn't a factual truth; rather, this truth is the embodiment of God's longing for humankind. Jesus lived and demonstrated God's will for how God's people are to live. He is, the truth, about God's desire for humankind.

And Jesus is *life*. Jesus shows us what true, flourishing human life looks like, grounded in humility, justice, and love. And this isn't some far-off idea, or eternal life, this is new life, now.

I hear in this passage that Jesus is the way to follow, the truth to live, and the life to embody. So again, another set of lenses to look at Jesus.

The Anabaptist-Mennonite approach of faith places Jesus at the center. We are called to follow Jesus daily. This is a trademark of our faith. We take Jesus seriously. For us, Jesus was real. We believe that Jesus meant what he said and taught. Our theology, ethics, and worship revolve around the person and example of Jesus, not just abstract beliefs about him.

And what I've suggested this morning isn't exhaustive. I'm sure there are many other faces of Jesus, and I would imagine our word cloud suggests others. The point this morning is that while Jesus was one person, there isn't one single way to look at him. He is so much more. And while each of us might follow Jesus differently, we are all, in the end, following the One and only Jesus of Nazareth. So I leave you with the question that Jesus asked, "Who do you say that this Jesus is?"

Amen