

Henrietta United Church of Christ

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“Who Is This Jesus?”

Scripture: Mark 8:27-30

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" 28And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." 29He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." 30And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Sermon:

Imagine that you're one of Jesus' disciples. Jesus turns his penetrating eyes to you and says, "Who do you say that I am?" Your mind quickly reviews what you've seen and heard. Jesus reaches out and touches untouchable lepers, and they are healed. A deranged man living among the tombs who had broken all his chains and shackles regains his sanity after Jesus casts out a legion of evil spirits. A young girl who has been pronounced dead is brought back to life. Thousands of people with growling stomachs are sent away satisfied. Burdens of shame are lifted from people labeled as sinners. Powerful teachings cut through all the complexities of religious law and speak with astounding clarity and authority about what God really desires. Simple parables open your eyes to a new reality emerging, that Jesus calls the kingdom of God. And at every turn, discouraged people are being given hope, excluded people are being embraced, downtrodden people are being empowered, and people in power are being confronted with their hypocrisy.

Who *is* this Jesus? As you stand there speechless, Peter ventures the answer you haven't dared to utter—"You are the Messiah"—the long-awaited savior sent by God.

Now imagine someone asking you that question today: "Who do *you* say Jesus is?" Today we have more information about him than Peter did when he first fielded that question. We know that Jesus didn't fulfill Peter's expectations of what a Messiah should do. Instead of defeating his enemies, Jesus died at the hands of his enemies. But through his powerless innocence, he destroyed the veneer of the legitimacy of self-serving dominating power. Through his forgiveness of his persecutors, he destroyed the barrier of guilt that stands between humans and God. Through his resurrection, he even destroyed the threat of death. And as his spirit filled, empowered and guided his followers, they were transformed from lost, bereft and fearful mourners into an unstoppable new movement that created communities of love out of rich and poor, men and women, slaves and free, Jews and gentiles. They became leaven in the lump of the world around them, and began creating the first hospices for the sick, homes for orphans, and sustenance for widows. They refused to fight in Caesar's wars and died as martyrs who prayed for their executioners. Over time, Jesus' spirit inspired movements to eradicate slavery, end child labor, educate all children, give women the right to vote, secure basic human rights to many kinds of minorities, and work to extend health care to everyone.

Who *is* this Jesus? Who do *you* say that he is?

If we believe that even half of these things I have said about him are true—and the evidence is strong that they are—then we can only conclude that Jesus was some kind of Messiah—some kind of agent of divine power. But what kind of Messiah? What do his life, ministry, mission and messiahship reveal about God’s nature? And just as important to us, what do they reveal about human nature? What kind of being are *you*, and what is your purpose and potential and destiny? That might be a useful thing to know. We don’t usually realize it, but how we understand ourselves depends a lot on how we perceive who Jesus was and is.

For example, a great many Christians see Jesus as the only perfect, pure and sinless human, while the rest of us are sinners from our very conception. This understanding of Christianity has taught that ever since Adam and Eve’s disobedience, human nature has been sinful nature. We have inherited “original sin” from generation to generation. But Jesus was born of a virgin—his birth wasn’t even tainted by sex, and he lived in perfect, sinless obedience his whole life. This belief system sees God’s main traits as purity, holiness and perfection, and God expects the same from us. Because we keep sinning, God’s perfect, holy justice requires the punishment of death and eternal suffering in hell. We deserve to die the way Jesus did—suffering in agony on the cross. But because Jesus lived a pure and sinless life, and Jesus willingly offered himself in our place, God accepts him as a worthy sacrifice, and counts his suffering, blood and death as a substitute for the punishment we deserve. We will always be sinners. But if we confess our sins, believe that Jesus was the perfect Son of God, and receive the sacrifice he made for us, we will escape the punishment we deserve and live in heaven with him forever, no matter what our sins have been.

This is a compelling way of understanding Jesus—one that many of us grew up with. And it resonates with some deep spiritual truths:

We all do sin and continually fall short of the glory of God.

Justice, truth, and accountability are all part of spiritual reality, and it matters when our actions hurt others, ourselves, or the world around us.

We get back on track when we humbly and honestly admit our mistakes, ask for forgiveness, and receive God’s undeserved mercy.

But I believe this way of answering the question of who Jesus was has some serious limitations too.

It casts God as a cruel judge who would condemn us to eternal damnation for being imperfect, even though nobody is perfect and everybody has to learn from their mistakes.

It casts Jesus as so far above and beyond us in purity and perfection that the idea of trying to imitate him seems like foolish pride, even though that’s what he asked his followers to do.

If “Jesus was born to die,” and his only real mission was to remain sinless and then take our place on the cross so we could go to heaven, it awakens all the things he taught about how to live and how to help usher in God’s kingdom on earth.

And this belief system teaches us that our very nature is corrupt and shameful, and that we are incapable of anything good except continual self effacement and repentance. That totally ignores all the things Jesus taught about true righteousness and living as children of God.

There is another common way of understanding Jesus' nature and mission that has persisted from early Christianity right up to today, even though the early church pronounced it a heresy. This is the belief that Jesus only *appeared* human. He was really God appearing like a human. As God, he had infinite power at his disposal and could have done anything he wanted. And he knew all things past, present and future, including what sins you were going to commit in 2000 years as he hung on the cross. After his resurrection appearances, he physically rose up to heaven. Some day soon he will come back down, only when he comes again, he'll call all true believers to him, and they will all rise up to heaven, leaving this sin-sick world and all its heartaches and troubles. The unbelievers who are left behind will face the righteous wrath of his judgement, not so much because they were evil, but because they didn't believe in him.

Out of the flaws in this belief system is that denying Jesus' humanity misses the whole point of his incarnation, which was to demonstrate what a real human filled with God looks like, so that we, even in *our* humanness, might learn how to be filled with God.

And always watching the skies until Jesus returns and raptures us away misses the whole point of *our* incarnation, which isn't to be released from this life as quickly as possible, but to invest ourselves in it as fully as possible. That's how our spirits develop and grow, how we learn to stretch beyond our mortal selves and discover our eternal selves, and how we learn to work together to bring God's kingdom into this world, so that we don't have to leave it in such a mess when we do go into the next world.

So who *is* this Jesus? Who do you say that he is? As our understanding of the universe and of our human nature have developed in modern times, maybe we're ready for some new ways of probing that question. I didn't say *answering* that question, because I believe the answer is so high and deep and imbedded in God's mystery that human minds will never fully comprehend it. But Jesus asked his disciples to try to answer it, because the more fully we can answer it, the more fully we can appreciate who God is and who we are.

Everything we know about Jesus tells us that Jesus was open to God, filled with God, and led by God to an extraordinary degree. So Jesus' words, actions and life provide us with a revelation, a window into the nature and will of God. And what do we see through that window? We see a God who loves and forgives without conditions or distinctions. We see a God whose will is to heal what is broken, to create community where there is division, to liberate what is oppressed, to create abundance where there is scarcity. We see a God whose nature and will is to bring forth life and to help it to unfold in all it's fullness.

In Jesus we see a human being as real and human as any of us, dealing with temptations, going off by himself to pray, and sweating drops of blood when he faced an agonizing death. But we also see a human being whom God chose for a special purpose and used in a unique way. Jesus was able to be filled with God because he continually emptied himself of his own selfishness, pride, fears, and ego; he released his human will to God's will; and he gave his life to God moment by moment. And that life-giving spirit that he was filled with mysteriously lives on, touching us with liberating

love, guiding us, creating communities of faith, hope and love like this one right here, and empowering us to join him in helping bring the world closer to God's kingdom.

So what does this view of who Jesus is tell us about who *we* are? Jesus' ministry tells us that no matter how broken, alone, shameful, or rejected we feel, we are always within the reach of God's healing redeeming love. Jesus life shows us that the more we empty ourselves of ourself, the more we are filled with God, and the more we grow in compassion, generosity, forgiveness, wisdom, and wholeness. Jesus' ongoing presence shows us that God's spirit can work through us as agents of healing and hope, wisdom and truth, love and peace, liberation and transformation of the world around us.

This view sees Jesus, not as a god, but more as an older brother showing *us* how to incarnate God's nature and will. It sees Jesus' mission, not as dying in our place to save us from hell, but as showing us how to die to ourselves to save us from the hells we create. It sees Jesus' purpose, not as whisking us away to heaven, but as helping us bring more heaven into the world. This view of Jesus is radically empowering, not by inflating our human nature, but by helping us open to God's nature.

Who *is* this Jesus who knows these things, who shows us these things, and who forgives us, heals us, liberates us, guides us, calls us, and empowers us so we can embody them ourselves? He is fully human; yet he is fully God-filled. He is way more than we are; yet he is us in our highest potential.

Who do you say Jesus is? Probe this question well. Your answers may begin to reveal to you the height, the depth and the eternal mysteries of who *you* truly are.