

Who Do YOU Say Jesus Is/Was? Does it Matter?

Sermon Rev. Rachel Thompson

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Bedford Presbyterian Church, Bedford, NY

Scripture Reading 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?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." And Jesus sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Here's a verbatim from a breakfast conversation at our house one day last week (for anyone who doesn't know, my husband Joe is a Presbyterian minister).

Joe: There are two older women who've started coming to South Church. One of them has been very effusive about how much she loves it. But then yesterday Kris Kliemann told me that my provocation (he calls them provocations, not sermons) last week upset one of them and that she went away, shocked, thinking that I don't believe in the divinity of Jesus.

Me: Well, she's right isn't she?

Joe: What do you mean?

Me: You DON'T believe in the divinity of Jesus.

Joe: I do so. I believe that Jesus was divine in the same way that all of us are divine.

Me: That's what I'm saying.

Joe: I believe that Jesus was A son of God, not THE Son of God.

Me: I know you think that. However, some Christian people would find that shocking.

Joe: (sarcasm) Really?

My beloved husband, a Presbyterian minister for 45 years, does not believe in the virgin birth, in any of the miracles, or in the resurrection, which he believes are all fine metaphors, but not based in fact. He believes in following the teachings and the path of Jesus.

This is not exactly orthodox Presbyterian thinking. We encountered orthodox Presbyterian thinking in the Lenten litany we read at the beginning of the service. It was taken from a document called "A Brief Statement of Faith" that was adopted by the denomination in 1983. As you read it, did you think about whether it reflects your understanding of Jesus?

What DO you think about Jesus? Does it matter?

Did you know that Thomas Jefferson created his own version of the Gospels? He took his King James Bible and cut out the pieces of the Gospels that he approved of and pasted them together in a book, which he referred to as *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*. There are no miracles in Jefferson's Bible, no healings, no Trinity and no resurrection. There are only the teachings of Jesus, which Jefferson found to be "the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man."ⁱ

Jefferson was considered a heretic by some of his fellow Christians, but, he was simply, as usual, way ahead of his time. He could not have guessed that many biblical scholars in the next century would come to similar conclusions based on modern methods of textual analysis, archeological evidence, and the discovery of other ancient texts. He would have been pleased to know that the quest for the "historical" human Jesus became a major movement in Christian scholarship.

Defining Jesus' true nature and his relationship to God has kept the Christian church busy and frequently at each other's throats for 2000 years. This question has been at the bottom of factions, schisms, and even wars. The primary purpose of the Council of Nicea in the year 325 was to settle the question of the divinity of Christ, over which the early Christians had been in almost constant dispute. Was Jesus man or God? They settled the question by deciding that he was man and God. Fully human and fully divine. The question of course didn't remain settled at all, and people have been fighting about it ever since. The great schism in the Catholic church eastern Orthodox and western Roman Catholic in the 11th century was in large part over disagreement about the nature of Jesus.

Would you be willing to be burned at the stake because of your belief or lack of belief in the divinity of Jesus? People have.

Let's fast forward to very modern times and pop culture. I was working on this sermon on Thursday when my son Cody called me and asked what I was writing about. When I told him, he said "That's sounds boring," and suggested that I talk about the movie *Talladega Nights*. He sent me a clip and I agreed with him. In the movie, Will Farrell plays a cornball racecar driver from the south named Ricky Bobby. In this scene, he's at the dining table with his wife, two young sons, grandfather and a friend. He begins a very long, southern-style grace before the meal. He starts out, "Dear baby Jesus," and goes on from there. He refers to baby Jesus several times. Finally his exasperated wife cuts him off and says "You know, honey, Jesus did grow up. You don't always have to call him baby. It's a bit odd and off-puttin to pray to a baby." Ricky Bobby responds, "Well, look, I like the Christmas Jesus best and I'm saying grace." The grandfather shouts, "He was a man! He had a beard!" Ricky Bobby's friend chimes in, "I like to picture Jesus in a tuxedo tee shirt, cause it says like, I want to be formal, but I'm here to party, too. Cause I like to party, so I like my Jesus to party." Then one of the kids pipes up and says, "I like to picture Jesus as a ninja, fighting off evil samurai." It's a perfect example of what I'm talking about. It could be the Council of Nicea, circa 2006. Maybe dumbed down, just a little.

Who is Jesus to you? Does it matter? Because you have come to this church, it would seem that you are more attracted to the ethical Jesus than the supernatural Jesus. You'll hear much more about loving God and loving your neighbor from this pulpit than you will about miracles or heaven or hell (though I did preach about heaven two weeks ago).

Do you believe in The resurrection? Do you believe Jesus was A son of God or The Son of God? Fully human or fully divine? Or both? Does it matter?

As we move through Lent, which is the church's most serious liturgical season, a time of introspection and soul searching, it's a good thing to take a step back and have a fresh look at the central character of Christianity. To think about the many ways he has been understood by others and to reflect on what we each actually believe to be true. I'm not

going to tell you what I think you should believe. Some may think that's my job, but I don't. That's your job. I will tell you, though, what I have come to believe, in hope that it could in some way be useful to you, though as I have said, we each need to find our own way.

When I first came back to church 25 years ago, after 20 unchurched years, I went to a Presbyterian church near my home. When I heard the words, "You don't have to believe in The Resurrection," I was stunned. That was NOT what I learned in the church of my youth which was about miracles, the blood of the lamb, and personal salvation. I thought, "Oh my God, I can actually be a Christian. I don't have to believe in a bunch of unbelievable things to be part of this church." I joined the church. I discovered there was such a thing as progressive Christianity, which focused on the life and teachings of Jesus, and that I fit right into it. I went to seminary, where I found other like-minded students and professors. I became a minister. I came to work here.

But there's a part II to this story, my personal story. In the meantime, I continued, as ministers should, to study, reflect, and seek out spiritual experiences. And as a result, over the last few years, my theology has changed. I still believe in Jesus as a great ethical teacher, but I have now had some experience of. . . (can I say this out loud?) Jesus Christ being present in my life now. Alive and very present. So much so that Joe refers to him as my boyfriend. His presence, when I'm in touch with it, brings me the comfort and peace of the unconditional love of God. Because of this experience and my exposure to other scholars, I now believe that Jesus was on the earth not only as an ethical teacher but as a great wisdom teacher whose goal was transformation of consciousness and whose message was in part about life beyond death. These things would have been completely unbelievable to me when I first came back to church. But they have made a difference in how I live my life.

But that's just my experience. You may have had a similar experience. Or you may find talk of a personal relationship with Jesus uncomfortable and embarrassing. There are very many ways to be a Christian and all of them which result in lives lived through a principal of love, are acceptable to God. I believe that what we believe about Jesus matters very much. I think it matters for all of us, because what we see in Jesus is, or should be, what we emulate in our own lives. Who is Jesus to you? Revolutionary,

savior, liberator, ethical teacher, early feminist, egalitarian champion of the poor, wisdom teacher, lover of God -- he was all of those things and much more. Which aspects of the multi-faceted Jesus do you follow? Which Jesus do you want to be like? I hope this is a question that matters to you. AND I want you to also know this about me: in spite of my deepening understanding of the transcendental side of Jesus, I still believe that his most important teaching was the one that he himself identified as such, and the one that is the guiding principal of this congregation: "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. And You shall love your neighbor as yourself." That's my boyfriend talking.

¹ Stephen Mitchell, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, p. 4