

Jesus: Beyond Belief

Mark 4:35-41 (NRSV)

³⁵ On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, ‘Let us go across to the other side.’ ³⁶And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. ³⁷A great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. ³⁸But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, ‘Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?’ ³⁹He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, ‘Peace! Be still!’ Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. ⁴⁰He said to them, ‘Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?’ ⁴¹And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, ‘Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?’

Luke 7:18-23 (The Inclusive Bible)

John summoned two of his followers and sent them to Jesus with the question, “Are you the One who is to come, or must we wait for someone else?”

When the couriers of John came to Jesus, they said, “John the Baptizer has sent us to you to ask, ‘Are you the One who is to come, or must we wait for someone else?’”

Immediately Jesus went and healed many people of diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. Then he gave the couriers this answer: “Go and report to John what you have seen and heard. Those who are blind recover their sight, those who are crippled walk, those with leprosy are cured, those who are deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, and those who are poor have the Good News preached to them. Happy is the one who doesn’t lose faith in me.”

Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?

In our series on God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit – we turn our attention to Jesus Christ – we turn to the question of the disciples as they sat amazed in the boat, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

Jesus Christ: In this name, Jesus Christ, lies both human and divine, the personal and infinite.

“Jesus” was a common name (“Joshua” in Hebrew); “Christ” means anointed, chosen. This is the significance in much ancient art of Jesus whenever he or others are holding up two fingers – symbolizing the fullness of who he is.

Jesus, the humanity – grounded in the real life stuff of this world, with all its beauty and pain; love and chaos. And Christ, the Messiah or Anointed – the Divine – that which has been around since the beginning of time. All together in one. In Jesus Christ. We say a lot when we put those two words together and say, *Jesus Christ*. In uttering this phrase, we say that God is not separate from us. That God is not uninterested. In this phrase, we say that this is the world we have been given to love, as God has loved. In this title we say that our world contains human and divine; we say that nothing is secular, but all is sacred. This is the incarnation. All is sacred. In uttering this phrase we say that there are no ‘sacrifice zones’ or ‘dead zones’, for all life is sacred. In our oceans, as you may know, we have these places called ‘dead zones’ where nothing will grow because of the run-off of our pesticides and chemical fertilizers, they flow down rivers and where

they dump into the oceans everything dies. When we say ‘Jesus Christ’ we say that this a cannot be so, for God so loved the world. The whole world. We say all is sacred.

That is a lot for one title to hold. And so this is a bit what we mean every time we say “Jesus Christ.”

During this series on God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit – if you have been here the past couple of weeks you know that speaking broadly about God and who God is made has made me a bit nervous, but now that we have come to Jesus, I thought, “well, Jesus will be easy.” But, in fact, I think that we probably hold our views of Jesus even more tightly than our views of God. I think this is true for me, I am increasingly okay with the Mystery and unknowable nature of God, but Jesus – well, I have some strong ideas about Jesus: about who Jesus is and is not, about what Jesus came to do, and what he did not come to do. And I think it is true for most of western Christianity. Or, as I was saying to someone a few weeks ago, “I find it much easier to say that ‘we all worship the same God’ but I don’t think we all follow the same Jesus.” I don’t meant that we aren’t all trying to follow the same Jesus, only that our view of who Jesus is and what Jesus came to do – these seem fundamentally different. The results they create are fundamentally different.

Much of western Christianity, at least of the last 500 years, has been about trying to convince others about our view of Jesus – trying to argue you into accepting my view of Jesus: Trying to convince others how Jesus is the Son of God; about what Jesus came to do; how you must believe in Jesus a particular way. For Mennonites, this has often meant trying to convince

other Christians that, when Jesus said to love our enemies, he at the very least meant don't kill them.

Instead of trying to facilitate experiences with Jesus, instead of thinking about how Jesus changes this life – we have been mostly concerned about how Jesus changes the next life.

But – and here I feel myself getting a bit nervous again and starting to worry that I am on shaky ground again and feel the need to remind you to listen with appropriate skepticism – Jesus was in the transformation business, Jesus was in the new life business, he was not just in the *right belief* business. To those interested in following him, Jesus did not just say, “listen and be convinced!” He said, “Come and See” – he said, “Come and Follow me.” When John sent his disciples to ask Jesus if he was the one that had been waited for, he did not say “Tell John to believe in me, and he will have his reward in heaven.” Rather, he said, “Go and report to John what you have seen and heard.”

As we look at the results of the Christianity we have produced in our country, it seems clear to me that *Belief* has its limits. And, I do not say this lightly, as I think most of cultural Christianity has formed me to believe that my job as a preacher is to stand here and try to convince you to believe in the right things. But “right belief”, I think it has its limits. When we look over our world where about 30% of people claim Christianity, and our country where still around 70% of people claim to believe in Jesus – and we look at how we treat our neighbors and our world – it feels like “right belief” must have its limits. We have generally thought that if we believe in John 3:16, we can essentially continue to be who we have always been – if we believe that “God so loved the world that God gave his only Son,” then we can go on being angry, self-centered, fearful, hateful, and wasteful. The price of ‘right belief’ is not much – it does not cost

us much to say what we believe in. But the price for real transformation is high. It means that we have to change our loyalties from power, success, money, ego, and control.¹

As Richard Rohr says, much of Christianity, has been about trying to convince people how to see. Rather than trying to change the seer, we have simply been trying to tell people how to see. That is the limits of this act of preaching, it is mostly about proclaiming a way to see or a way to believe.²

And I have to say, and I am not sure if this is okay for a preacher to admit, I find myself pretty uninterested in theological debate – I find it boring. I have no desire in arguing right belief with people, nor do I get excited about trying to craft a sermon seeking to tell you how you should believe. There was a time when I couldn't get enough of theological argument and debate, but now I find it quite uninteresting. But for people to share with me how their beliefs are shaping and changing them, how they are changing the way they live, or if you want to share about your experiences of God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit – that I find fascinating. Or, as Shane Claiborne has said, “Most good things have been said far too many times and just need to be lived.”

With that, I will offer two basic ways that I see Jesus – a few ways that I continue to understand Jesus Christ that are impacting who I am, how I live, how I try to be in the world.

First) Jesus who teaches us to be human; Second) Jesus the lens of understanding God.

¹ Richard Rohr, Daily meditation at <http://email.cac.org/t/ViewEmail/d/C43E9FBA2B8B5E972540EF23F30FEDED/C68DCC19CFB0A81E44D0DD5392A9C75A>

² In the interview of Richard Rohr on the podcast *The Liturgists*.

Jesus who teaches us to be human.

I am going to back-up a second from Jesus to Moses and the Ten Commandments. Much of what we hear about the Ten Commandments in our time is about someone who wants to put them up in a public place, or take them down from a public place. But when we think about the Ten Commandment in terms of how they were given, we see much more. Here was a group of former slaves who were now free for the first time in any of their lives – before this, they had only known their lives in light of Pharaoh – who they were based on Pharaoh; their value based on what they could produce; their daily lives, revolved around the instructions of their slave-masters. And now, they have crossed the Red Sea and they have no Pharaoh and no slave-masters. They have a leader Moses and they have God. And so God gives them these Ten Commandments, these instructions on how they are to live together.³

In the giving of these commandments, we might say that they are being given instructions for being human again. As slaves, their task-masters were seeking to take their humanity away from them, and now the God of Liberation has returned it to them, but they need help in knowing who they are as human-beings. As one author says, “God is giving them instructions for how to be human-beings, not humans-doing.”

This is one way that I also think about Jesus, God telling us and showing us what it means to be fully human. That in the person of Jesus, it is being revealed for us how to be more fully human. That over the thousands of years since those commandments were given: thousands of years of people killing and exploiting and taking vengeance; thousands of years of deciding who their

³ Rob Bell makes this assertion when he is interviewed on the podcast *The Liturgists*.

neighbor was based on ethnicity and blood line; thousands of years of taking an eye-for-an-eye – thousands of years of being malformed by systems, both religious and political. Jesus was once again trying to show us and tell us how we are to live as humans – what it meant for us to be human beings – how we were to live in-line with the ways God has created and ordered the world. That Jesus did not just come to tell us how to live eternally in the next world, but he came to show us how to be fully human in this world. Now.

Jesus is the lens by which we most fully understand God.

This may be the most obvious thing ever said in a sermon, but I think it must be repeated, that Jesus teaches us who God is. *Not Tradition. Not Dogma. Not our Culture. Not song lyrics. Not John Milton's Paradise Lost.*

It was amazing how often a professor answer the statement or question of a student with the simple assertion, “Jesus tells us who God is.” Now, I think that most Christians probably believe that this is what they do, that they look to Jesus Christ to help them understand who God is. But, the more we examine how we live or what we say we believe, we uncover more and more that is not defined by Jesus. This is difficult because our experiences of Jesus are all shaped and colored by these other things – by our culture, our race, our education, our country of origin, our relationship to our families, our economic position, our tradition, what we have been taught about Jesus and about God. How we see God is shaded/colored by all these factors. We cannot just lay down all our theological baggage. Despite this, we have to look again and again back to Jesus Christ, to tell us who God is – to show us who God is.

Again, I am going to repeat myself from 5 years ago. But, here is a reminder of some of the ways that we have historically and theologically said, “it is not Jesus who tells us who God is, or how we are to live.” These are all theological structures we have built to say that we look to other things to tell us how to live besides Jesus Christ.⁴

1. **Radical Personal ethic: Old Testament is for society and nations; New Testament is for personal lives (people should love their enemies and forgive – nations and societies should not).**

This is probably the most common way of rationalizing some of Jesus’ more difficult teachings, particularly in Western cultures like our own. This separates out our individual personal lives from our corporate lives (our business life, our lives as residents of Boise, or as Americans. This way of thinking says that the New Testament was just meant to be personal, but in the Old Testament God was creating a nation or people, therefore the OT should guide our corporate decision-making and morals.

2. **Dispensational: we will use Jesus’ life and words in the perfect future. Jesus’ message is not for our time, but for the future when Jesus returns.**

This way of thinking was became popular in the early 20th century and has given rise to such works as the “Left Behind” series. This view separates out human history into six or seven different dispensations (periods of time). Then, a different era of the Bible applies to each of these periods of time – the teachings of Jesus will apply after Jesus returns and we are all living in perfect peace. They do not apply currently.

3. **Impossible Ideal: Jesus’ teachings did not function to tell us how to live, but instead were impossible ideals meant to bow us to our knees; he was keeping us humble, so we would always be striving to change**

This way of thinking is particularly popular in certain evangelical circles. It says that Jesus’ teachings are clearly so difficult that they were never intended to be followed fully, but they were to make us see that we are not perfect and that we can never be good/justified on our own. Jesus’ teachings function to bring us to our knees before God, seeking continual forgiveness and grace from God. Jesus’ teaching, thus, are not meant to be followed literally but to bring us to God in repentance.

4. **Flat Bible: Jesus’ words are true, but not any truer than the rest of the Bible. All the teachings of the Bible are equally true and important, therefore, we should not follow Jesus’ teachings anymore than the rest of the Bible.**

This way of thinking would be popular in certain fundamentalist traditions.

5. **Interim Ethic: Jesus called for a radical discipleship because he thought he would only be around for a short time; he believed that the world would only be around for a short time. IF, he would have known we were going to still be here 2,000 years later, he would have preached a different (easier) message.**

This way of thinking plays off of the times in the Bible when Jesus says that the world will end soon, that the present generation will see the end before they die. He only taught such a

⁴ These largely come from the beginning of John Howard Yoder’s *The Politics of Jesus*.

difficult message because he thought it would only have to be followed for a short time, he never would have believed that people should live out this difficult way of life for thousands of years.

6. **Disenfranchised minority: Jesus' teaching only apply if you are a minority group (they do not work for a people in power, a nation, etc.) Jesus taught to a minority group of Jews who were living in an occupied territory.**

This way of thinking is particularly popular for Christians in positions of power, or in nations where Christianity is the dominant religion. This line of thinking says that Jesus' message was only intended for a minority group – he didn't try to convert Pilate or Cesar, but largely taught to Jewish audiences. Therefore, his ethical and political message is not intended for groups in power, but only for minority groups.

7. **Spiritual Reality: Jesus was talking only about spiritual things, not physical or material things. God cares about our souls, not about the material world. God wants to save souls and that is all that Jesus' message applies to (spiritual life, not physical/daily life).**

This concept is similar to the 'Radical Personal Ethic' but goes even a step further, fragmenting life into different realms: spiritual, personal, material, societal. We often think of the spiritual/soul realm as separate from the physical/earthly realm (we say things like, "the spirit is willing but the body is weak").

As Anabaptist-Mennonites (and others as well) we say that it is through the lens of Jesus that we understand who God is. And who we are. It is by the lens of Jesus Christ that we make the decisions about how we are to live as people of God: Who does Jesus tell us God is? How does Jesus show us who God is? Who God loves? How God loves?

We call this a

1. **Christocentric approach: Jesus' teaching apply to our whole life, to all our spheres of influence. We should not fragment our lives into different pieces. Whenever the Bible might appear to disagree with itself, we look through the lens of Christ. We recognize this might not always be the most effective approach, but we believe it is a faithful approach.**
This approach says that we do not fragment our lives, believing that Jesus' teaching apply to our whole life (personal, business, state, national).

Thus, we would say that the way of Jesus was **both personal and political**. Jesus was about personal transformation. And Jesus Christ was political, living a path of [nonviolent] resistance to the systems of exploitation and domination, and advocating an alternative vision of life together under God – what Jesus calls, "the Kingdom of God."

And this is all we have time for today...

May we, in the hearing of these words, remember the One who did not just say, “listen and believe”, but “come and see.” The one who wants so much more than our right belief – the Christ who is not satisfied with just our words or our mind – this God wants our whole selves, wants to transform us, to bring us to be more one with the God of the Universe: to see as God sees, to hear as God hears, to love as God loves, to weep as God weeps, to rejoice as God rejoices.

Let us not be satisfied with having a good system of belief.

Let us not be satisfied with being smug about our good belief

Let us be a people who give ourselves in transformation.

Amen.