

Who IS Jesus Anyway?

United Congregational Church, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

August 13, 2023 – Sunday Morning Worship

3rd Sermon in the Series: *Why church...*

Text: Matthew 14:22-33

Who is Jesus? That is the foundational question for all of Christianity. You would think knowing who Jesus was – and is – would be an easy thing for Christians to agree on but, exactly the opposite is the reality for people claiming to follow Jesus all around the world. I personally believe this lack of anything remotely resembling consensus on Jesus is one reason, perhaps the primary reason, churches everywhere are hemorrhaging members. If there is no agreement on who Jesus was, how can there be agreement on what he expects of us, his followers 2000 years after his life on earth? If there is no agreement but in fact strenuous disagreement on who Jesus was – and is – how can we expect our own people to remain in the faith, never mind attract new folks into our faith communities? That at least is simple to answer – we can't. Too often we who are in the progressive wing of the mainline Protestant churches find ourselves particularly unaware of who Jesus is – who our own churches think he is. It's one of those topics that seems so obvious it's not worth our deeper consideration and reflection. But, dear ones, there is no more vital nor important theological issue for us to be considering these days than who Jesus is to us in this, our beloved church, UCC Westerly.

The most obvious place to begin our quest to understand who we, as members of this church, believe Jesus to be is our own Statement of Faith. Interestingly, there are several versions of this and following is what's known as the Robert V. Moss version:

We believe in God, the Eternal Spirit, who is made known to us in Jesus our brother, and to whose deeds we testify:

God calls the worlds into being, creates humankind in the divine image, and sets before us the ways of life and death.

God seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.

God judges all humanity and all nations by that will of righteousness declared through prophets and apostles.

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Lord, God has come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the whole creation to its Creator.

God bestows upon us the Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races.

God calls us into the church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be servants in the service of the whole human family, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory.

God promises to all who trust in the gospel forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, the presence of the Holy Spirit in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in that kingdom which has no end.

Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto God.

Amen.¹

This familiar Statement identifies Jesus as “our brother,” and as “the man of Nazareth, our crucified and Risen Lord...” Jesus the Christ is also the one whose baptism we share in and whose table we are invited to “to join him in his passion and victory.” What we seldom realize, though, is that we are not a “confessing creed” church. There is no requirement that one accept the entirety of the Statement of Faith, in any of its forms, as a standard for membership. The only such requirement for membership is this from the Constitution and By-Laws of the United Church of Christ as amended in 2018:

In accordance with the custom and usage of a Local Church, persons become members by (a) baptism and either confirmation or profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior; (b) reaffirmation or re-profession of faith; or (c) letter of transfer or certification from other Christian churches.²

Thus, all that is required of us as members of this church is that we are willing to, and have, professed our faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Missing, though, is any definitive description of who this

¹ <https://www.ucc.org/what-we-believe/worship/statement-of-faith/#Robert-V.-Moss-Version>

² <https://www.ucc.org/who-we-are/constitution-and-bylaws/>

Jesus we are professing is. This is the topic I am inviting us to reflect on together today.

So, why am I doing this. It's not like there's more than one Jesus! Well, actually, that is precisely the problem. There IS more than one Jesus – at least more than one understanding of who Jesus was, never mind who Jesus is today. This particular conundrum is exactly why a group of biblical and early Christianity scholars joined together to form what became known as “the Jesus Seminar” and its quest for the historical Jesus. In other words, these scholars wanted to know who Jesus the person was. That he existed is not really question. Who he was and what he taught while he lived is an entirely different matter. The Jesus Seminar was active from the 1980's through the early 2000's and was composed of 50 scholars and 100 laypeople. Their purpose was “to decide their collective view of the historicity of the deeds and sayings of Jesus of Nazareth.”³ Their work was published in three reports: *The Five Gospels*, *The Acts of Jesus* and *The Gospel of Jesus*. Ultimately, they concluded that the historical Jesus was “an itinerant Hellenistic Jewish sage and faith-healer who preached a gospel of liberation from injustice in startling parables and aphorisms.”⁴ They further described Jesus as someone who “broke with established Jewish theological dogmas and social conventions both in his teachings and in his behavior, often by turning common-sense ideas upside down.”⁵ It almost goes without saying that conservative Christians found their work to be heretical to begin with but one of their conclusions just went beyond the pale for many. This is their stated conclusion that

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesus_Seminar

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

“Jesus was a mortal man born of two human parents, who did not perform nature miracles nor die as a substitute for sinners nor rise bodily from the dead. Sightings of a risen Jesus represented the visionary experience of some of his disciples rather than physical encounters.”⁶

Well, heck. That first part was easy to see but this? It’s easy to see why some Christians, especially conservative evangelicals and traditional Catholics, went off the deep end on this one.

So where does all this leave us? Still trying to figure out who Jesus was! That’s why this seems like an excellent opportunity to consider Jesus by looking at how he is depicted by different artists. For the most part, I propose we do this by looking at the representations of Jesus which show up on social media, since they are clearly the ones with the most far reaching impact in how they influence everyone’s perceptions of Jesus. But, before we do that, I want us to take just a moment to look at these presentations of Jesus I have displayed on the altar. They are: two action figure Jesus dolls; one large stuffed Jesus doll; one drawing of laughing Jesus; one drawing of how a paleontologist imagines Jesus of 1st century Palestine probably looked, and two traditional renderings of Jesus you could find in almost any Christian church. What do you notice about these? What do they have in common? Is there one in particular you like? Why? Is there one you strongly dislike? Why? So, would you agree that these depictions of Jesus influence how you understand Jesus? Connect with him, or not? What you think about him?

So, let’s move on to these other images of Jesus which I found on the internet. *Packets of images to share*. In particular, I want you to consider how these images have been created to convince you of something about HOW you should see Jesus:

#1 – “Rifle Jesus”

⁶ Ibid.

Tongue in cheek? Maybe but maybe not. There are fundamentalist churches which emphasize “end times” and encourage their members to be preppers, including having plenty of guns and ammunition to hold off the hordes of non-believers seeking to escape Armageddon. Remember David Koresh and the Branch Davidians? They are still around, and so are other similar groups.

#2 – “Super Jesus”

This Rambo-style Jesus breaks free of the cross, literally breaking it in pieces. “Where is your Satan now?” it asks. This is the Jesus some of us learned in our Lenten Book Study this past spring on the book *Jesus and John Wayne*. Rambo Jesus, Super Jesus is a real thing. But how is this Jesus anything like the Jesus of the Gospels? He isn’t.

#3 – Black Jesus

This one initially comes off as a positive depiction of Jesus, encouraging folks to encounter Jesus as one of them, specifically as a Black man. But is that what’s really going on here? Look at the caption: “Because he is our Father and still hasn’t come back yet.” A subtle slam at Black men who obviously abandon their families. Just as obviously, Jesus can’t be black and you dare not think he could be.

#4 – Stupid Questions Jesus

This is one is a progressive attempt at Jesus humor which also slams conservative Christians at the same time. Love everyone, even if they ask stupid questions. Message: Jesus loves you even if you are a jerk but he’d love you more if you weren’t. Co-opting Jesus is no more appropriate when it’s done by the progressives than by conservative evangelicals.

#5 – Lazy Deadbeats Jesus

A tricky one because on the surface it would like you to believe that Jesus was someone who thought poor people deserved to be shamed. Maybe. But it’s really a slam at conservative Christians who claim

Jesus believes everyone should take care of themselves – the pull yourself up by your bootstraps mentality. A clue about the progressive orientation of this meme is how Jesus looks – this is a traditional painting of a white Jesus giving the Sermon on the Mount in which he is advocating that the poor be cared for. Easy to see how both sides of the Jesus debate could see this one as their own!

#6 – Figs Jesus

Again, this one assumes you have some knowledge of the Bible since it is a reference to one of the minor parables where Jesus curses a fig tree for not having figs when he was hungry. Notice the OMFG social media tag which could be interpreted two ways – as “Oh My Father God” OR as “Oh Mother F***** God.” It also presupposes you could do the quick translation of “figs” into “fags.” Yikes!

Okay. So where does this leave us. How are we to think about who Jesus is to us, for us, with us? We turn to the only place we can rely on for such vital information. The Scriptures. Specifically, this morning we are looking at the well known parable of Jesus walking on the water from the Gospel of Matthew. A slightly different version of this story also appears in the Gospels of Mark and John, but in those versions, there is no recounting of Peter’s attempt to walk on the water to Jesus. Instead, Jesus just walks across the water to the disciples in the boat, scaring the heck out of them. He tells them not to be afraid, gets into the boat, and they all row ashore. But in Matthew we find this extra little bit about Peter. Why would Matthew choose to include this little side story? If it’s not in the other two versions, did that mean it didn’t happen? Who knows? Not the point anyway. The point is that this little added paragraph to a story which was most likely already well known to the folks eager to learn everything about Jesus they could, serves a two-fold purpose. It highlights the unique relationship Peter had with Jesus, certainly.

Peter, whom Jesus later names as his “rock upon which he would build his church” is clearly lifted up in this story, separated out from the other disciples. But he is not put on the same level with Jesus because he sank. He did not have enough faith in himself or in God, and he sank.

And that’s the second, and more important, reason why this little Peter anecdote was included. It opens a door for anyone – even you and me – to work at, strive for, believe it is possible – to have faith enough in God as Jesus revealed God to be – that all miracles are possible. If your belief in the Jesus knew and preached God is strong enough, you can do anything! You can even walk on water and not sink. If your faith in Jesus, and God and the Holy Spirit is strong enough – powerful enough – courageous enough – you can truly be the person God the Three in One is inviting you to be. And what else do any of us really need to know about Jesus?

Jesus, the great teacher and healer, Jesus the Savior of all who come to God through him – Jesus is whom we follow. Jesus is whom we strive to emulate. Jesus is who saves from the abyss of not knowing, not appreciating, not understanding that we are already transformed by this knowledge of God’s abiding love, this comforting presence of Jesus and his humanity, along with the Holy Spirit’s spark of emboldening power. Our challenge, therefore, is to guard against Peter’s mistake of losing sight of Jesus and who he is at precisely the wrong moment. Dear ones, we have to know Jesus well enough to know when the Jesus we hold in our hearts and our thoughts has strayed too far from the Jesus of the Gospels. That is all too easy to do, as we have seen this morning. But do it we can because we must. It’s also important to remember that when you get confused about this whole “who is Jesus” question, there’s always a place to come figure it

out, surrounded by others doing the same thing. Right here, with us.
Amen.