

# WHICH JESUS?

A SERMON PREACHED AT SAINT JOHN'S PARISH,  
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Texts appointed for Pentecost XIV, Year A, Proper 16:

Second Lesson: Romans 11:33-36

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! "For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" "Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen.

The Gospel: Matthew 16:13-20

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

"O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!" Paul writes in his Letter to the Church in Rome. "How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways."

Well there's a scriptural argument, if there ever was one, for the popular contemporary debate over what's been summarized and dubbed "intelligent design." If by some possible chance you haven't heard of this one, it's the notion that the universe as we know it – or might ever be able to explain it – is too complex and wondrous a thing to ever be domesticated by such un-inspiring and presumably irreligious scientific theories like evolution.

Paul goes on: "For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?"

Well, apparently there are multiple offers for that job these days. Just this last week Senate majority leader, Bill Frist, aligned himself with George Bush; who'd plunged into the debate over the teaching of evolution and the notion of *intelligent design* earlier this month, saying, "both sides ought to be properly taught."

This is not a sermon specifically about all *that*. In fact, lately more and more commentators are observing the wider implications that, in many ways, the debate has evolved and transformed itself into an issue over academic freedom, rather than a confrontation between biology and religion. And my thoughts on the subject of *intelligent design* haven't really changed since preaching about it earlier this year. (*Creationism in Kansas* is available on our website!). But briefly, since this is a topic that seems to still be gaining a head of steam:

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Or, better, it shall be revealed to them; as when Peter guessed the right answer when Jesus the rabbi/teacher alarmed his students/disciples with the pop quiz, "Who am I?" When Peter answers correctly, the Jesus of Matthew's gospel confirms his favorite prodigy with faint praise: "Blessed are you, Simon ... For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven."

The whole idea behind *intelligent design* is essentially a non-starter. Or, it should be. In the hands of its proponents, however, it becomes a semi-secularized, thinly veiled disguise of acknowledging what any religious-thinking person takes for granted as foundational. There is a God; and God is behind it all and in it all. But exactly *how* God is in all things, and above all things, is something best left to the religion studies department, at best, and not the science lab.

To put it another way, science is about human knowing, the discovery of the created order around us. And, as a number of members of the scientific discipline have often expressed, the discovery of what we both know and do not know can be a profoundly humbling, religious experience.

But religion, on the other hand, is about understanding a different dimension of human experience, which includes our place in a world of unknowing; where studies in things like, faith, hope, promise, grace, redemption, love, reconciliation, are given a place of belief in their true being, as much for their absence, as their verifiable existence.

As such, I've always been a proponent of the teaching of an intelligent designer, as long as it is part of a curriculum of *religious* studies. Think about it. In a world filled with such aberrant expressions of religious fanaticism, intolerance, ignorance and misunderstanding, our failure to educate each other and ourselves about such pervasive religious matters is an educational deficiency we perpetuate at our own peril. The legitimate concern is that proponents of *intelligent design* have an agenda that is just as narrow-minded and dangerous.

Instead, why not advance the need to put religion back in the schools; but in a wholly different, appropriate and helpful way. And, as such, it would include the breadth and diversity of religious thought, from all kinds of varying traditions and expressions of what is distinctive about the human experience; and, as much a part of the human search for meaning and understanding as freshman biology.

As an example, just look at the gospel passage we read today. In our own Christian tradition, in all its variety, we may ask, "Who is Jesus?" -- just as Jesus put this same question to first followers. First he asks, "Who do others say the Son of Man is? (*Son of Man* was, essentially, a messianic title.). Then he asks, "And what about you? Who do you say I am?"

Assuming (and granted, this may be a big assumption for some believers) when we talk about a belief in the resurrection of the dead, there are those of us who are talking about something even more un-knowable than the resuscitation and re-constitution of a corpse. And as such, we would not suggest exhuming the mortal remains of Jesus of Nazareth – if we could – in the hopes of discovering the DNA of God.

When Peter confesses a mystery not of his own conjuring or discovering, “You are the Messiah (the Christ), the Son of the living God,” I take this to mean he is acknowledging simultaneously both the *reality* and *mystery* of God.

And when Jesus confirms Peter’s best guess and belief – which Peter, in the end, will be willing to bet and lose his life on – *Petrus* (lit. Rocky) is declared to be the cornerstone of just such a community of faith, the Church. But let me also suggest, when Jesus declares that’s the bedrock of revelation, he’s certainly not suggesting advanced studies in geology!

The same goes for the “keys of the kingdom.” When Matthew’s Jesus suggests this is the “key” to unlocking the mystery, it’s not about some earthly power and authority to “bind and let loose” with everything in heaven and earth. Rather, I’ve come to understand that what binds it all together is the kind of kingdom Jesus has been trying to tell us about through all his woven parables, his compassionate healings, his demonstrated teachings.

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This gospel passage asks us, *Who is Jesus?* The disciples themselves admit different folks had different ideas, even while Jesus was still trudging the back roads of Galilee with them. Some thought he was one of the prophets, come back to life. Whoever he appeared to be, he must have reminded some of them of John the Baptist. Something of what he said or did must have echoed the words and actions of Elijah, or Jeremiah, or one of the prophets ...

Then Jesus gets personal, and asks us bluntly, *Who do you say he is?* In the end, he is really asking us, *Which Jesus?*

There is the Jesus of the Church’s predominant tradition, where he is portrayed as believing and asserting his own messiahship. Combined with the literary device often referred to as the “messianic secret” (the disciples were subsequently forbidden by *this* Jesus to disclose the good news), it advanced the notion that Jesus understood himself to offer up his body as bread and his blood as wine. *Which* Jesus meant *what* by such words and subsequent actions?

And where does it stop? He is the “vine,” and we are the “branches.” He is the “good shepherd,” and we are the sheep. He is the “light of the world,” and we are the bearers of light. Which light? Is it light in the darkness of disbelief that Jesus is the one and only Son of the one, true living God? Is that it?

This image and identity attributed to Jesus is one still held by millions of Christians today. It includes unquestioned belief in the virgin birth, the physical rising from the dead, the eventual physical return of Jesus, the rapture, and final judgment day and bliss of heaven and fires of hell. This view also often emphasizes Jesus is not only the way, but also the only way to salvation; and, by extension, that Christianity is the only true religion.

In one of his books, Biblical scholar Marcus Borg contends that for some of us who also call ourselves Christian, this view of who Jesus is may no longer be persuasive; yet we still earnestly ask, *Who then is Jesus for us?*

As divine – or Son of the Divine – his recorded miracles can hardly be viewed as extraordinary, given such an identification. On the other hand, if he is only a prophet, a rabbi/teacher, a mystic, a politico/religious rabble-rouser, what distinguishes him, if anything? Which Jesus?

“Indeed one of the defining characteristics of Christianity, is that we find the revelation of God primarily in a person, an affirmation unique among the major religions of the world. For Judaism and Islam, through Moses and Muhammad are receivers of revelation, God is not revealed in them as persons, but in the words of the Torah and Qur’an. So also in Buddhism: the Buddha as a person is not the revelation of God; rather, the Buddha’s teachings disclose the path to enlightenment and compassion. ... But Christianity finds the primary revelation of God in a person. This does not make Christianity superior, but does make it different.”

Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*

Even within the Christian tradition we find differences, right from the start. Each canonical gospel, as well as the apocryphal gospels and subsequent teaching of the early Church, all began the tradition of multiple identities when it comes to the question, “Who do people say that I am?” Again, and finally, *which* Jesus? Like Marcus, here’s what I think:

“This is the central meaning of the incarnation ... Jesus is what can be seen of God, embodied in human form. He is the revelation, the incarnation, of God’s character and passion – of what God is like and of what God is most passionate about. He shows us the heart of God.”

Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*

I’ve heard of Jesus ever since I was a young boy.

I grew up in the Church, learning about *this* Jesus, and *that* Jesus.

I’ve studied the scriptures, and have spent over thirty years living with the “*living* Word,” searching for the life in it all.

These days I look around me, at all that I see; and look for the kingdom and reign of God in it all. I see much of what passes for modern Christianity, and shake my head in *dis*-belief.

But more so, I also ask where the passionate heart of God still resides. About *that* Jesus? What would *that* Jesus say about it all? What would *that* Jesus do? Better, *who am I* as one who would follow *him*? What would *this* Jesus have *me* say and do?

Amen. jb+