

What Is It About Jesus?
Colossians 1:15-20 and John 19:25-27
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If you want to see the muscles of progressive persons like most of us tighten up, just say, “I’m going to share my faith with you.” For many of us, that usually seems more like a threat than a promise; an “oh-oh, here it comes” statement which has us looking to see if there’s a quick way to make an escape. If you want to hear those same progressives breath a collective sigh of relief and visibly relax those same muscles, promise that you are not going to get all “Jesus-y” on them. Sisters and brothers, as I thought about today’s sermon, I thought about the fact that next week will be my last sermon from this pulpit. Since next week’s sermon will be a wrap up for us, I wondered what there was that I wanted to speak with you about one more time. What should you and I consider together? Discipleship? Mission? Social justice? War, peace, stewardship, SIN, grace? The more I thought the more I kept coming back to Jesus. What is it about Jesus? What is it about Jesus that is so hard for progressive Christians? Among Christians to the left of center, beliefs about Jesus vary. Some believe that he was God in the flesh; some have their doubts. Some believe in the resurrection; others aren’t at all sure – a few are sure it did not happen. Some think he really did those miracles; others are skeptics. But it is not belief in Jesus per se which I think is the question. What is it about talking about Jesus that is so very hard for many of us for that really is the issue. This question came up briefly in the conversations that the Session had a little over a year ago about the direction of the church. One of our elders at the time, Terri Mascherin, quipped that we were almost a ‘Jewish Church’ in our language – we stick to the word “God,” which is heard far, far more often than the name Jesus. Why is it hard for us to openly name and enthusiastically embrace Jesus?

We have two sermon texts this morning. The first reading from the opening chapter of Paul’s letter to the Colossians, speaks of the divine nature of Jesus, the Christ. In his letter Paul describes Jesus in terms of what is called the transcendent nature of God. The God we worship is both transcendent and imminent. When we say that God is transcendent, we are speaking of God as above all. Scripture tells us that God is Creator, which means that God is separate from or outside of the creation – a creation which includes us. Scripture tells us that God’s thoughts are not our thoughts; that, in fact, God’s thoughts are higher than our thoughts and that we can never fully understand God. Paul applies those descriptions to Jesus, the Christ, “for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” Jesus as transcendent God.

When theologians say that God is “imminent,” they speak of the many ways that God draws near to human beings, caring for us intimately. At the very beginning, in the Genesis creation story, God is described as making clothes for Adam and Eve when they were naked; in the desert of Sinai God provided God’s people with food to eat (Manna from heaven) and water from a rock to drink. God’s most intimate act with humanity is, of course, the sending of Jesus to

be one of us. Our second reading is a tender scene from the gospel of John. Certainly many gospel stories provide us with a picture of the humanity of Jesus. This moment when Jesus sees his mother and cares for her for one last time as a human son by commending her to the care of his beloved friend beautifully expresses his humanity. Jesus as imminent God, God with us.

Jesus. Jesus. Jesus – there’s something about that name. So goes a praise hymn much cherished by many conservatives - maybe not so cherished by those of us here. So, what is the issue – why do we need to be assured that someone won’t go all Jesus-y on us? One reason, I think, is that when it comes to faith many of us are head folks while the more conservative folks are often more heart folks. Now, that is risky to say. I am not saying that there are no feeling people here nor am I saying that there are no thinkers in those right wing churches – there are, in fact, many fine conservative theologians. What I am saying is that many of us, in the expression of our faith tend to lean to the staid and the intellectual. We love to discuss a good theological point. We can talk about the miracles, the incarnation, or the resurrection and debate the doctrine and what we believe. Coming from that direction, many of us are less than comfortable with a more heart-based approached person who gushes about how much she just loves Jesus. Such talk may be off-putting or it may be that we just cannot relate to it. Either way, it’s not terribly comfortable. If we are extremely intellectual in our faith, talk about loving Jesus may even seem questionable – something to which we want to say, “Oh, come on.” Not wanting to seem like one of those “I just love Jesus” people and not wanting to have other folks see us that way, we refrain from Jesus speak. In our more judgmental selves we may even look down on the “I just love Jesus” folks as less thoughtful and less sophisticated than we are.

Another reason that we may find Jesus language difficult is the way that Jesus has been portrayed. Obviously there are no photographs of the real Jesus, so many of our mental images of Jesus are drawn from European painting, especially Renaissance work. While images vary, distressingly many of them are pictures of a feminized Jesus with long, shiny, flowing hair. The images are theological in that they picture Jesus in pure white robes meant to symbolize his innocence and his divinity. The pure white robes on the sort-of male with the beautiful long hair makes Jesus seem less like a real person and more like a gender ambiguous creature from another world. Often surrounded by lilies or holding a lamb, Jesus seems far from the true human male he actually was. The pictures fit the verbal description of Jesus as meek, mild, loving, compassionate, and gentle. While we all need to know that Jesus was indeed loving and compassionate, it is hard to take such a one completely seriously. We need new images of who Jesus was, images which paint a full picture of his nature as well as his physical being. Although he likely did have long hair, Jesus of Nazareth certainly did not have hair that might shine forth in a Breck shampoo commercial; although he likely did wear a long flowing robe (such robes are still worn in that part of the world) we can bet that all that walking on dusty, unpaved roads left that robe far from clean. When preparing for a Confirmation class last fall, I searched the web for

images of God and gods (of various religions) and pictures of Jesus. I actually came across one of Jesus holding a rifle – but he still had the Breck-hair and the pure white robe. While an NRA Jesus is not what we need, a guy with a tool belt – he was a carpenter – might be a good start.

This image of Jesus that the art world has presented is too perfect. Because artists try to depict both the humanity and the divinity of Jesus, he appears far less like one of us than we would like – too perfect to be truly human. Yet, we make the claim that Jesus was fully human. We need to re-orient our thinking to make Jesus real in a way that we can both really see him as a brother and speak of him comfortably as our brother, friend, and Lord without making the rest of us cringe.

Despite artistic depictions, Jesus was the total package. He was a blue-collar guy. Though we often emphasize his lower class status, Jesus was not the poorest of the poor; he had a skill. Many scholars believe that he likely worked in construction in the city of Zippori, which was near to Nazareth and growing at the time. While Jesus of Nazareth was indeed good and kind, we have good evidence that he also got angry – at least once to the point of violence tipping over the table of the money changers in the temple. Jesus expressed indignation about the plight of the poor and oppressed; when his friend Lazarus died he openly grieved. Jesus was smart, clever, and a good storyteller. He was goal oriented never letting himself get sidetracked for long. Jesus was challenging as he engaged his supporters and opponents in a way that invited them to learn and to grow; he was a teacher. Jesus' love was not always soft and squishy. In fact, more often than not, Jesus' love was tough love; he did not mince words, but told the hard, cold truth and expected his followers to step up or step away. When he saw suffering, Jesus offered compassion, but even then he sometimes challenged the one before him to grow and change. Jesus had courage. Despite our Christian tendency to read Jesus into the so-called “suffering servant” texts in the prophet Isaiah, Jesus was not, as the words of Isaiah describe the suffering servant, “led like a lamb to the slaughter.” Jesus confronted the forces of evil purposefully at every turn. When he entered Jerusalem on a donkey, he entered the power center of those who would kill him. He, in essence, said to them, “Here I am. Come and get me.” In case we are too dense to get the point that Jesus purposefully went to his own death, he himself said, “No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again (Jn 10:18). This courageous man, this Jesus, went with purpose and intention to a horrible, excruciating death out of love for each of you – and for me. Yet, we have trouble talking about him by name?

Let me be clear what I mean when I say that Jesus died out of love for each of us. My personal belief is that Jesus was crucified not to satisfy some angry God, but because his mission was to show humanity how God wants us to live; to teach humanity – us – about God's calls for justice, equality, human dignity and respect. Jesus insisted upon completing that mission, getting God's message out, knowing full well that in the end it would get him killed because the world

could not yet stand his message. That's love, but love delivered in courage, determination, and single-minded focus. That is the Jesus we really have, sisters and brothers – not the pretty guy in the pictures. A human being all of us would respect and look up to as a human being – a real person; a man, but a man who lived his life with many qualities that both men and women can imitate – love, compassion, persistence, appropriate anger and indignation; patience; focus; good friends he visited and laughed with and good friends he grieved. He had the courage to fulfill his life's calling despite the price to himself. Jesus.

When we speak of Jesus as a regular guy, we might also think about sexuality. Surely regular guys (and gals) have a sexual nature. Was Jesus sexual? Did he have a wife? Those questions are not silly because they get to that question about his true humanity. We do him and ourselves a disservice when we claim that he was fully human, but then start to deny to Jesus characteristics the rest of humanity has as some have done. As a human being, Jesus had a sexual side – working sex organs, which means that he was able to have the same kinds of arousal any of us experience. That, of course, raises the often ballyhooed question of whether he had a wife. Here's what I think. Some dismiss the fact that there is no Biblical reference to a wife, but that is not insignificant. If Mary Magdalene was his wife, it would be natural for the gospel authors to reference that at some point. Beyond that though, we have to consider Jesus' role and mission in life. I believe the Jesus almost certainly remained celibate. First, a sexually active Jesus would add a dimension to who he was which would greatly complicate how both men and women relate to him. Second, all are called to love Jesus as a brother. A sexualized dimension to his being would make that difficult for many. Third, Jesus would not have made a good husband. Oh, sure, he was loving etc., but he also necessarily had to focus on the needs of all people; he was itinerant; and he was purposefully headed for his own death. The greatest reason that I believe that Jesus did not have a wife is that all people, even all the women he befriended, need to know him as Lord and Savior. To marry one woman would be to leave her among all humanity as the one person without a Lord and Savior. Do we really think that Jesus could do that to one he loved deeply for the sake of his own gratification?

What is it about Jesus? Sisters and brothers, Jesus is the best thing we have. As Jesus of Nazareth, he was the full revelation of God – that's full revelation, not just the lovey-dovey parts, but the full sometimes impatient with us, sometimes sad or angry, always goal-oriented and determined, courageous God in the flesh. Jesus was one of us – the very best of what humanity is called to be – but still one of us. Develop your own picture of him with stringy, not always pristine hair, dusty robes, and dark Middle Eastern skin. Gutsy, tough as nails, but with a heart that was often soft, even though the love it expressed was tough love. Jesus, Jesus, Jesus – there's something about that name. Do not cede it to the squishy heart folks – I am happy that they love Jesus in the way that they do – but let's have the courage to speak openly and enthusiastically in our own way of Jesus who headed for the cross out of love for us.

