

“I Am Not He”

**Pastor Dave Carlson
First Presbyterian Church
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**New Testament Lesson: John 1:19-34
Old Testament lesson: Psalm 147:12-20**

Morris West, in his novel “The Clowns of God,” portrays Christ, upon his return, as holding a child with Down’s syndrome. He is serving her the bread and wine of Communion, saying: “I gave this mite a gift I denied to all of you – eternal innocence. She will never offend me, as all of you have done. She will never pervert or destroy the works of my Father’s hands. She is necessary to you. She will evoke the kindness that will keep you human. She will remind you every day that ‘I AM WHO I AM.’”¹ That is a vivid picture of who Christ is and who we are. And that’s what we’re going to be looking at during our sermon time today and for the next three Sundays, in our sermon series titled, “Who Is This Jesus?” Who is this Jesus who whose birth we celebrated just a few weeks back? Who is the one born of Mary and Joseph more than 2,000 years ago, and what does he have to do with us, today?

Standing in the shoes of John the Baptizer – of course he wore sandals – but looking at it from his perspective, we start to get a picture of who Jesus is. The first thing we learn about knowing Jesus from John’s perspective is that “we are not him.” “Who are you?” That’s what the priest and Levites ask John when they hear about him baptizing in the wilderness. And John says, “I am not the Messiah.” Pushed on the issue, he says, “I am not...,” and then finally, “No.” What I am, says John, is “... the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’ ‘... I came ... that he might be revealed....’” At that moment in history, when John uttered those words prior to Jesus’ being revealed to us prior to Jesus’ earthly ministry, at that time, John was the closest thing to meeting Jesus as people could possibly get.

Don’t we say that about Christians today – that we might be the only “Jesus” people ever meet? What we mean is that our words and actions ought to reflect who Jesus is in our lives, and in the lives of others. Given the question “Who is this Jesus, whom we worship, follow and serve” the best way we can answer is by allowing Jesus to shine through our lives.

But, of course, even the best Christian imaginable is a very limited expression of who Jesus really is. So let’s delve a little deeper, shall we, as we look at what John says about who Jesus is.

¹ As quoted by Diane M. Komp, “Hearts Untroubled,” *Theology Today*, 45 1988, 273-279.

“Among you stands one whom you do not know...., “says John”, “I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” You see, no matter what we think we know about who Jesus is, and what Jesus wants of us, and what he wants for the world, it cannot be fully known by us, his ways are not our ways, his truth is not our truth, and his judgment and wisdom are beyond our comprehension. From where we stand, on this side of the cross, Jesus is one **who cannot be fully** known and compared to Jesus we are not worthy to even untie the thong of his sandal.

That really takes the wind out of our sails when it comes to passing judgment upon others, thinking we know what’s best, or getting all high and mighty about what’s right and what’s wrong. We are just not that special.

To help you picture just how special Jesus is compared to how ordinary we are, listen to what the poet Dannie Abse says about the paperback publication of his autobiography titled “A Poet in the Family.” “On the cover is a photograph of myself and beneath it the inevitable boasting quote, (which says), ‘A magnificently conceived word on the author’s life’ – attributed to the Guardian newspaper. “However,” says Abse, “I have a secret to disclose. When the publisher sent to me for my approval the rough (draft) of the cover, the quote beneath my photograph was somewhat briefer. It read, ‘Magnificently conceived.’ Abse notes that his parents ... “might have ... smiled at that, or at least raised their eyebrows (their son magnificently conceived). But the point is, says Abse, that we do tend to think a little too highly of ourselves and our opinions.²

If we think we have the final word on who Jesus is – or even a solid handle on that for ourselves – then that’s an example of us overstepping our limited understanding when it comes to the fullness of who Jesus is. I mean how can we even begin to wrap our minds around the fact that Jesus is, as John says, “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” We can’t.

And the danger of not understanding something like that – not understanding how God could possibly send Jesus as an innocent little baby to grow up as the only human being ever to live a sinless and pure life, to then be brutally tortured and killed in atonement for our sins – well it’s unimaginable.

And the danger of not being able to imagine something so huge is that we try to make it small, small enough to fit into our limited and often misguided view of things.

As one theologian observed, when King Herod set out to kill every child under age 2, it was actually an attempt to prevent Jesus from growing up.

² Dannie Abse, *Intermittent Journals* (Brigend, Wales: Seren, 1994), 95.

Herod wanted to drive Jesus out of the culture of his day, because if Jesus grows up in and moves through the culture, he transforms the culture; our culture, today.

Herod's attempt to keep Jesus from growing up was an aggressive act against the fullness of life itself. And in some ways, we do the same thing.

We try to keep Jesus small and contained because he's just too big to fit into life as we know it. And rather than expand our concept of the fullness of life in Jesus Christ, we end up limiting who Jesus is in our lives. "It's OK to talk about Jesus at church, but when out with our friends, well, maybe they wouldn't understand."

You better know they wouldn't understand! They don't understand why we come to church, Sunday after Sunday, why we give of ourselves through the church. But that's no reason to not let Jesus shine through anyway – and to name him, as the light that is shining in your life!

"I myself did not know him," says John. "But the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I myself have seen and have testified," says John, "that this is the Son of God." John the Baptizer was not all that different from you and me. God sent John out into the world to look for signs of Jesus Christ, and to point to those signs so that others might come and see that Jesus is alive and active in the world, and in our lives.

We don't have to fully understand who Jesus is or how he works in the world today. We only have to look for signs that he does, and then point to those signs so that others might come and see. ("Come and See" is the title of the next sermon in our four-part series, when we step into the sandals of Simon Peter, his brother Andrew, and Philip and Nathanael – the first disciples to follow Jesus.)

But before we look at Jesus' interaction with these early followers, it's enough today for us to consider Jesus' interaction with us, and how we respond. There is a lot we don't know about who this Jesus of Nazareth is? There's even more we can never understand or imagine, for instance, how and why God chose to send Jesus into our lives, for our sake, for our salvation, and for the salvation of all creation.

But quite frankly, it's enough just to know that he did – that God did and does love us that much. When we come to know and embrace the extent of God's love for us, our challenge is to let the mystery of that love live within us and flow freely through us. Our challenge is to refrain from trying to fit God's love into our limited ways of knowing and being.

I mean it's natural to look at the majesty and greatness of God's love, of God incarnate, and then try to contain it in one set of thoughts or one way of thinking.

But it's better to allow such a love as that to have free reign in our life, to grow and mature at it's own pace, slowly and steadily, as it works its way into our hearts and our minds.

It's better to allow Jesus in in whatever way he might come, at any given moment – maybe as the babe born in Bethlehem worthy of love and adoration; or as a guide and teacher traveling along side us – someone we can follow and learn from; or as the ruler of our lives and the highest authority over the choices and decisions we make; or as our Savior Jesus Christ, the only possible way we can stand before God, thanks to the mercy and grace of the Lord.

This is not the time to make Jesus small, just because we can't take it all in. No, this is the time to magnify the Lord, to let the greatness of incarnate love shake us up and stir our souls.

When we magnify the Christ child, we no longer coo and cluck over baby Jesus "meek and mild." No, instead, our eyes and our hearts open wide to the enormity of God's gift to us, and what that gift means in how we treat one another.

Our knees tremble at the thought of the tremendous love and sacrifice born in Bethlehem some 2,000 years ago, a love and a sacrifice so great as to change our hearts and minds, even yet today, if we let it.

That's who this Jesus is – Jesus is the one who ***changes who it is that we are.*** When we give him room enough in our lives to move and to work; when we give him room enough to witness through out lives, Jesus is, as he always is, love incarnate.

So in the face of a love such as this, embodied by, the risen Lord, the real question becomes, who are we? Are we, also, you & me, an expression of love incarnate? And if not, shouldn't we be; couldn't we be an expression of divine love for one another? Amen.

Pastoral prayer

Gracious God, we thank you for the high calling in Christ Jesus to be your people. We praise you for the privilege of embodying your life of love, forgiveness, and justice to the world.

We gladly receive the responsibility to be the hands and feet and heart of Jesus, knowing that we will often fail, but thankful nonetheless for the opportunity to respond in your mercy amid a world of hurt.

We pray for all those who do not feel the light your Son warming the darkness of their lives, because they are afraid or are in too much pain – physically, spiritually or emotionally.

May the power of your light search for cracks to shine on through. May all people know the healing power of your Word and grace.

And may we be awakened to life in Jesus Christ, responding with joy in service to you and others, extending compassion to the friendless and downcast, and having empathy for the plight of the abused, exploited and stigmatized, so much so that we no longer remain silent, uninvolved, and resolved to life as usual.

Convict us in our comfort, and inspire us to a new vision of what it means to bear witness to your kingdom and to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ throughout world.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ, and using the words that he taught us to pray, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.