

Edina Morningside Community Church  
United Church of Christ  
Wednesday, July 29, 2015  
Rev. Howard K. Bell  
*Who Is This Jesus?*

Last week I spoke about being on the Jesus Path. Tonight, I suggest that we ponder, that we meditate on, that we consider the question “Who is this Jesus?” Who is this Jesus we seek to follow? What stories do we recall most powerfully? What aspects of Jesus’ teachings do we incorporate into our lives? We say in our Vision Statement, “...we joyously rise to the challenge of living Jesus Christ’s example.” How do we imagine living Christ’s example in our individual lives and in our life as a faith community? It is our intention during this interim ministry time to invite each of us to define for ourselves what specific actions, what goals, what ministries and programs are required in order for us to say that we are living Christ’s example? I also believe that the attitude we bring to living Christ’s example is just as important as the specific actions. Do we have an attitude that incorporates God’s abundance as taught to us by Jesus or do we live out of an attitude of scarcity?

Tonight as we ponder, “Who is this Jesus?” many questions arise for me about the life that Jesus lived. Here are a few of them. Was Jesus fully divine and fully human? Or was he a divine being who only took human form but was not fully human as we are? Did Jesus experience human frustration when his disciples continually seemed to misunderstand him? Did Jesus grow weary? Was Jesus ever afraid? Was Jesus angry more often than the just the one time that he overturned the tables in the temple?

These are all questions, and there are many more, that have occupied my mind throughout my life. Many of them are still unanswered today after my theological education and my lifetime practice of Christianity. I especially like to identify with Jesus’ human nature. I feel more drawn to him when I believe that his experience of events in his life can be similar to the experiences that we all share in life. I feel more drawn to him when I imagine him experiencing emotions of frustration, anger, and fear along with feelings of love, acceptance and joy. However, it is Jesus’ divine nature that separates him from all others who have lived. It is Jesus’ divine nature that allows us to simply believe in the miracles he performed. It is Jesus’ divine nature that fulfills his mission of bringing us into a deeper relationship with God. I accept the divine part of Jesus’ nature by faith. I am comfortable living in the mystery.

How does tonight’s text help us to answer our question of “Who is this Jesus?” It is important to note that John’s gospel tells us the stories of the life and ministry of Jesus, but with a clear purpose of identifying the divine nature of Jesus. In tonight’s text, the author of the Gospel of John provides a unique interpretation of Jesus and his words and actions. After asking Phillip, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” (John 6: 5) the author provides us these words of interpretation: “He said this to test him, for he himself already knew what he was going to do.” (John 6:6)

This understanding of Jesus having foreknowledge of what would occur and of testing Phillip is only found in John's gospel. I believe it is important for us to understand the differing perspectives that are offered as we seek to determine answers to our own questions and as we seek to "...joyously rise to the challenge of living Jesus Christ's example."

You were invited to hear tonight's text from the perspective of one of the characters in the story. With which character did you most identify? Could you enter into the mind of Jesus? As I tried to enter into the mind of Jesus in John's gospel, there seemed to be no anxiety or concern about the dilemma of finding food for such a huge crowd. As I have just said, Jesus asked the question, but already had knowledge that he could transform the five barley loaves and two fish into an abundance of food for all with twelve baskets left over. Jesus also wanted nothing to do with fulfilling the desire of the multitude to anoint him as earthly king. He had a clear vision of his mission and that mission was to demonstrate God's nature through his actions and to bring all people into deeper relationship with God.

And what about the mind of Phillip? Phillip was a realist and clearly anxious about the circumstances before Jesus and the disciples. Whatever miracles he had already observed Jesus performing in the past, did not give him any confidence that a miracle could be in the making. In his anxiety, he states, "Six month's wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." (John 6:7) Phillip, like many of us, was living from a perspective of scarcity rather than from abundance.

Andrew at least was the disciple who was sufficiently faithful and hopeful, to bring to Jesus the little boy who had five barley loaves and two fish. He still gave expression to his doubt by saying, "But what are they among so many people" (John 6: 9) At least he took action. He was not paralyzed by fear even though he was not confident of the ability of Jesus to perform yet another miracle. He was the practical one trying to make do with limited resources.

And what about the mind of the members of the crowd and the boy with the 5 barley loaves and two fish? I imagine them so completely enamored with the experience of Jesus as a miracle worker, healer and teacher, that they were willing to endure journeys up and down mountains and even across the sea. The boy offered up all that he had brought without question. In their downtrodden and oppressed lives, they saw, in Jesus, hope for their immediate circumstances.

Biblical Commentator Kathryn Matthews Huey helps us to better understand the mind of the crowd with these words: *"Ironically, the longing of the people for freedom from the empire that oppresses them, leads them, alas, to set their sights too short. It's certainly understandable, and only human, that they would see Jesus as a miracle-worker and even as a potential king. Like their ancestors before them, they hold onto the promise...of a prophet like Moses who will be raised up by God to lead them. Is it any wonder then that they see a good candidate for king in this man of power? Even the desire for a king, however, is too small a dream and falls far short of*

*God's dream for the people.”<sup>1</sup>*

Another commentator, Karen Marie Yust, helps us to consider, in a light-hearted manner, another way to enter into the minds of all the characters in tonight's story. She says, *“Imagine that Jesus has posed his test – “How are we to pay for this? - in a contemporary congregation. One might expect the trustees to echo Philip's money-management concern, pointing out that the congregation does not take in enough revenue to support such a project. The outreach committee might reinforce Andrew's position, stating that the congregation has earmarked only a small percentage of its income for mission giving and the proposed project's needs far exceed the allocated amount. The groups responsible for discipleship and worship may not even offer an opinion, as they are busy preparing for a fast-approaching religious festival. The building and grounds committee may assist with seating everyone on the lawn, although some members might worry about the effects of this event on the property's landscaping. It is likely that none of the congregation's boards or committees would expect to participate in a miracle, as that is not what they signed on for. They serve out of a sense of duty, or because they enjoy the work, or to contribute to a cause larger than themselves. They identify a few reasonable goals, set some workable plans in motion, and carry out their endeavors with the resources at hand. Their work together is not viewed as a venue for God's glory and mercy to break forth in the world, but as a means to facilitate the congregation's survival as an organization. Their expectations and activities have lost their prophetic edge.”<sup>2</sup>*

May this faith community re-discover or more fully explore our prophetic edge. May we see God's dream for our lives and for this community. May we expect miracles. May we not set our sights too short. May we live out Jesus Christ's example from God's abundance rather than from our fear of scarcity. May it be so.

---

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.ucc.org/weekly\\_seeds\\_gods\\_abundant\\_presence](http://www.ucc.org/weekly_seeds_gods_abundant_presence)

<sup>2</sup> Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16).