

THE JESUS QUESTION
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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The question before us is: *who or what is Jesus?* This morning we bring that question to a few verses from the gospel according to John.

Last Sunday we observed that the gospel according to John is more like a long, poetic essay than a biography or documentary of Jesus. None of the gospels are that, especially this one.

The essay's argument is that the heart of reality is love, namely compassion and companionship. To make that argument the essayist employs the historic Jesus as the personification of the *Word* the creates the world, or what the Greeks called the *Logos*, or what ancient Chinese called *Tao*, or what scientists call *the unifying principle*, or what we might call *the heart of reality*.

Early in the essay two would be disciples ask Jesus: *Where do you abide?* To which Jesus—the voice of the *Tao*—replies: *Come and see*. And what they saw—according to this carefully constructed essay—were seven sequential acts of compassion.

So the answer to their question: *where do you abide* turns out not to be a place but rather an experience, a relationship with others.

And that brings us to the lesson for today.

Jesus said, I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

I should note that in that time a place "Father" was a common metaphor for the ultimate source of life. We might disagree with their biology and prejudices but their intentions were right. The source of life is love.

I'll get back to the Jesus question but first a little story.

Once upon a time, a burglar broke into a house while the residents were away. The intruder started to empty drawers of valuables. The family parrot took notice and squawked: *Oh, oh. Jesus is watching. Jesus is watching. Oh, oh. Jesus is watching.*

The burglar got annoyed and told the bird to shut up. He didn't care about Jesus watching, he said, since Jesus was a long way from here, in heaven sitting at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, for cryin' out loud. And by the way, said the burglar, you're a really annoying bird. What's your name? *Moses*, said the bird.

Really?! And who gave you that stupid name? To which the parrot replied: *The same people who gave the name "Jesus" to the Rottweiler over there in the doorway.*

And just then Jesus lunged forward.

Which raises that dogged question that never goes away: *what would Jesus do?*

In the case of the dog in the house, the answer is clear and easy. In the case of the man from Nazareth, not so much.

For better or worse, in our culture, Jesus is the icon or the name for "true north" on the moral compass—even for people who claim no Christian identity. A lot of people who

have little or no respect for the Church still respect Jesus as an icon of morality and virtue.

And so we get such questions as:

What would Jesus do? What would Jesus drive? Where would Jesus shop? Who would Jesus tax? Who would Jesus bomb?

Supposedly the answer to any of those questions would give absolute legitimacy to certain behavior.

If Jesus would oppose abortion, then we should too.

If Jesus would favor same sex marriage, then we should too.

If Jesus would shop at Wal-Mart and drive a Humvee, then we should too.

If Jesus would bomb Muslims, liberals and the World Bank, then our nation should too.

See how easy that is?

Well, it may be easy but it's not so good for Jesus in this case has become our prop or puppet. It's a simplistic approach to complex matters.

All of this begs the questions: *Who is Jesus? What did Jesus stand for?*

Was Jesus a revolutionary who inspired a movement of non-violent resistance to the Roman Empire and thus to all imperial powers?

Was Jesus a mystic, a spirit-person who taught a life of communion with God to the neglect of worldly matters like economics, politics and war?

Was Jesus a sacrificial lamb whose blood washed away our sins?

Was Jesus a deluded, repent-for-the-end-is-near street corner preacher?

Was Jesus a flower child?

Who or what is Jesus?

Today we have Christians who say Jesus hates fags. And others who say Jesus loves all people and welcomes all to his table. And each side says the other side is not true Christians. And that's just one controversy among many. And so the Jesus' wars continue.

Who is Jesus? What did Jesus stand for? And who has the authority to say so?

For Catholics, it's the pope, at least in principle.

For Protestants, it's every man and woman with a Bible, unless you are part of a faith tradition like this one in which answers are sought in community by discernment, by study, by reflection upon scientific findings and life experiences and by listening to the voices of others including the witness of Scripture and Spirit.

We pride ourselves in study, scholarship and education. Be we must never allow education to go to our heads. We must be humble because so much is learned from the heart.

As it turns out, we in this community have come to a rather settled consensus on the Jesus question. We believe that Jesus revealed the heart of God, the heart of reality, to be love. And because we are born of God and one with God we too are love. Such love commands our attention, devotion and practice.

Those who abide in love abide in God. The more we practice compassion the more we are assured that this is in fact the way, the truth, and the life.

The gospel begins with an invitation: *come and see for yourself*. And when we practice compassion we see more and more of the truth.

To be sure, this doesn't answer all the tough questions of personal or social life. But it does point us in a certain, particular direction.

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees her nor knows her. You know her, because she abides with you, and she will be in you.

"I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them." (John 14:15-21)

God, as we say, is known by many names. And it's true of Jesus as well. Many of these names arise of a kind of romantic impulse. The way we might say of our lover: you are the most beautiful woman in the world. Or, you are the most handsome of men. These are not factual statements but they are true nonetheless. They are the language of love and devotion and such language is frequent in the Bible.

So those who fell in love with Jesus and his way came to call him: *Son of God, son of Man, Messiah, the light of the world, the bread of life, the resurrection, the way, the truth and the life, the vine, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, the lion of Judah the cosmic Christ, the Man for Others, Lord, Savior, Emmanuel (god with us), Blessed Redeemer, Alpha and Omega, Source, Ending, Lord of the Dance, the Lily of the Valley, the Rose of Sharon, Friend, and even my Buddy. (I want Jesus to walk with me!)*

But of all those names, the name we most honor here is the name of love—the Beloved who is the source of life and being. Love divine all love's excelling.

Breathe in—God is love.

Breathe out—I am love.

Breathe in—God is one.

Breathe out—we are one.

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HYMN

Love Divine, All Loves Excelling