

Sermon “Who is Jesus-Conclusion” Sunday, Sept 20, 2009, Rev. Dr. Thomas L. Hall, Salem United Church of Christ, Denver, CO Scriptures: Mark 9: 30-37

When I provided the title for today’s sermon, I failed to take note of the various ways of understanding the last word, “Conclusion.” Actually I meant Part 2, but it came out as conclusion. Now when one looks at the title, one could easily understand that you will hear the conclusive and final word on “Who is Jesus?” In fact, this is just the opposite.

As we heard last week, Marcus Borg in his book “Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time” outlines three major themes in the Bible. They are the Exodus theme, the Exile Theme and the Priestly Theme.

The Exodus theme is seen in the story of the Hebrews. It is seen in our lives as we come to understand what it is that we are in bondage to—our ideas, culture, experiences, ways of doing things, and desire freedom from those ideas, events, experiences that keep us captive.

The Exile theme is also seen in the story of the Hebrews, when they were taken into captivity to Babylonia and yearned for the return to home. Exile is a separation from all that is familiar and dear; it involves being powerless, victimized, oppressed. It has psychological as well as cultural and political dimensions. It involves feelings of separation, of a longing for home. Remember the movie E.T. where the words “Call home” were often used. Hymns often speak of this longing: Come home, come home, ye who are weary, come home.”

The Priestly theme is also seen in the Hebrews story. The temple, priesthood and sacrifice are seen in the one who makes us right with God by offering sacrifice on our behalf. This story is about sin, guilt, sacrifice and forgiveness. We are people who have broken God’s laws and who stand guilty. In this story, the religious life is not one of a journey, but a story of sin, guilt and forgiveness. Jesus, a Jew, used all of these images and themes in his teaching.

Today, we continue to look at Jesus. All of us are on a journey to know and understand this God who Jesus kept pointing and referring to, and going to in prayer.

So, who is this Jesus?

Well, he is a child of God, just as you and I are.

He is a man, who had physical and emotional needs.

He is a man who had strong connection with his Source, God, and was able to heal and do many things.

He is a teacher of wisdom.

He taught that about God, and the gifts of God to us and what it is that God desires of us—wholeness, compassion, caring.

He is a social prophet, challenging the traditional understanding of leadership, servanthood, and what God desires and focusing on God’s kingdom that comes first.

He is a friend to all.

In the scripture read today from Mark, Jesus identifies himself as the “Son of Man.” He then continues to talk about what will happen to him and the future. Then the scene shifts to a home and he teaches his disciples about who his first in God’s reign.

The answer is a little child. What Jesus is doing is bringing to the front those who are suppose to be silent, to be seen and not heard, who are vulnerable and at times disenfranchised. He then says: “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

This spirit person, this teacher of wisdom, this prophet, this Son of Man, reveals that God's wisdom embodies kindness, generosity and dignity.

So, who is this person, Jesus? Am I not to believe that he is my Lord and Savior? What does this mean? Believing means "to give one's heart to." It does not refer to a set of doctrines about him. It is about having a relationship with this man.

As I shared last week, in regards to the Tuesday discussions, Lillian Martin said that Jesus is my friend. He is someone I can go to and pray and he listens. Pat Freiburghaus shared that "Jesus is the personification of God's plan for the world.

We have been so condition to understand Jesus in the Priestly way, as one who takes away the sins of the world, and thus takes away the powers that hold us in bondage, including sin, death and the devil. So I ask myself, as Marcus Borg does, why does Jesus have to be portrayed as one who triumphs over the powers of evil or as a sacrifice for sin? Why is it that we have to focus on Jesus accomplishing something?

Instead, could we not see Jesus as revealing something that is true: What God is like; that God desires relationship? The book, The Shack by William Young has made a great impact on people because of the focus on relationship, and not on the afterlife.

As your pastor, teacher and spiritual leader, I see Jesus as one who conveys the wholeness that God desires each one of us to have; I look at Jesus as a balance between our human and sacred dimensions, and the letting go of whatever we're holding onto that holds us back to be a child of God.

**As a disciple of Jesus, I am on a journey to know this Power, Force, Energy, Mystery that Jesus points to and calls, Abba. Journeying with Jesus means that I must be inclusive as Jesus was inclusive. Journeying with Jesus means that I am to be in a community, not alone, that remembers and celebrates Jesus and who encourages and supports and teaches me on this journey;
Journeying with Jesus means becoming caring and compassionate as God is caring and compassionate. Compassion is the fruit of the spirit.**

This past week, I had the fortunate opportunity as your pastor and teacher, to share that compassion of God as experienced here in Salem. The first was when a young man, Ivan, came and gave \$1 to the church simply because the church was here. He takes care of his two brothers, 18 and 20 who have autism. He asked for a bible, and one was given to him. The second was when a man came here who was a commodities broker and was down. He received a food card to help him and his children. He also wants to attend the Motivational seminar. The third was a man from Bosnia who came and wanted us to help send a care package of clothes to his gay brother in Bosnia who is afraid for his life, and has no job. He too received affirmation and help. The faith here at Salem is not couched in the doctrines of the early church. The faith here is shared in our compassion to others, to each other, and in welcoming each other, as God welcomes us.

Jesus is not some mysterious person who lifts my sins, but one who shows me that God is the one who graciously welcomes me. Amen and Amen.