

Images of Jesus

A couple of Saturdays ago I attended an all day workshop presented by the **Center for Congregational Singing**. A professor from Wilfred Laurier University asked us to consider the variety of images and metaphors used for Jesus or God in a variety of songs. (Slide #1) Creator. Healer. Redeemer. Master. Servant. (Ask the congregation) Not all metaphors or images we find in song lyrics used for God or Jesus would be helpful or even acceptable to all congregations or even all members of any congregation!

We are taking a look at Phillip Yancey's book, **The Jesus I Never Knew**. You and I each have certain adjectives and metaphors for Jesus with which we are comfortable – kind, gentle, compassionate. Words that you might use to describe Jesus may be different from, and even upsetting to the person sitting beside you or in front of you. We all have our own interpretation and opinions and mind set.

In exploring these various adjectives and metaphors for God and Jesus and even the Holy Spirit, we discover very quickly, where our point of resistance is. For example, you are probably comfortable imagining Jesus as Servant. He said that he had come to serve, not to be served. Are you comfortable referring to Jesus as King, or Master? There are references to Jesus as both Servant and Master. Are you ok with those adjectives and metaphors? Are Servant, King and Master good descriptors for the Jesus you know? So likely no resistance there.

When it comes to imagining the physical aspects of Jesus, how would you describe the Jesus that you know? He is never referred to in Scripture as tall, slim, long hair, olive skin, somewhat athletic. But is that how you imagine him to have been? That seems to be how most artists have depicted him. I wonder if in fact he looked anything like the pictures we have of him. Do a bit of self-examination here. Are you feeling any resistance to the possibility that He might not have looked like you always imagined? Was he handsome or quite unattractive? Would you consider for a moment Jesus as short, round and bald? Do you feel yourself resisting that at all? If so, ask yourself why? What is it about Jesus actually having looked different than you imagined that bothers you? Are you willing to imagine Jesus as Asian, or

Pilipino, or Sweedish, or African? (Slide #2) Does it make you uncomfortable when you hear me make these suggestions? Do you find it offensive? When it comes to God, are you fine when you hear God referenced as father? Do you resist when you hear God referred to as mother or mother/father? Ask yourself why? How would you describe God to someone? Is it important to you to assign the male gender to God? If God is love, is love only male? Does love have a gender? We find very quickly, the limits of our comfort level and a point where we draw our line in the sand! “That is not the Jesus/God that I know!”

We each have our own point of resistance. Why? What is our particular resistance about?

Would you say that your image of Jesus is fixed or flexible? When it comes to you and Jesus, do you feel safest inscribing the image of him you currently have in stone, or are you even open to allowing your image of Jesus to be more fluid, to grow and evolve? Are you willing to allow your image and thereby your relationship with Jesus become something that it is currently not? Are you willing to let your relationship with Jesus grow? Growth requires change.

I remember the first time I met Heather. Over time we became friends. We started to learn more about each other. We had some opportunities to see each other in different circumstances – at work and at play. If someone had asked either of us to describe the other, our descriptions after having just met would have been very different than after we had begun to date. The description of each other during those years, again would be very different from how we would describe each other today. With more knowledge and experience with each other, our relationship has grown. It has changed.

The same is true of our relationship with Jesus. The more time we spend with Him, the more we learn about him, the more we see him in the lives of his people, the more we experience him, the deeper our description of him grows. The metaphors and images we use for him change.

Some of us grew up in Sunday School. As children we learned songs, and Bible stories. As children and now as adults, our imagination plays with the words, and the stories. And eventually we have a picture. From what we have read, and heard and perhaps even experienced, we have developed a picture of Jesus – a picture that is for now. It will change and evolve as our relationship grows. Does your image of Jesus include perhaps things like the sound of his voice, his manner of movement, how he thinks and feels. The more we get to know him, the more we come to know about his values and why he says and does the things he says and does.

If you had a sketch artist handy, could you describe what Jesus looks like, the settings you would see him in, his style of dress, his hair, his build? You might ask the artist to tweak the image just a bit, until they got it just right. And you would say Yes! That is exactly what he looks like! That is the Jesus I know! How determined are you to hold tight to that image? Are you resistant to the opportunity for that picture to grow and to change?

Consider this- Was Jesus ever angry? Was he ever afraid? Was he ever sad? It is odd I think that the Old Testament has considerable sexual content in it, but not so much the New Testament. Are you resistant to consider Jesus in this way?

There is a proverb that says, ‘You can know a person by the company they keep’.

Spending time reading the Gospels, it seems that the more unsavory the character, the more comfortable they felt being around Jesus. On the contrary, the more respectable types gave Jesus a wider berth.

Certainly not exclusively, but often, prostitutes, beggars, lepers, divorced women, and crooks were drawn to Jesus. Does it seem to you that the pattern of Jesus day has been reversed? Why aren’t the downtrodden and marginalized, the cheats, the prostitutes, and the scoundrels at our door trying to get close to Jesus? Perhaps surprisingly, he also kept company with religious authorities, the Pharisees and Saducees. What more might we learn about Jesus by the company he kept? He heals and eats with lepers and tax collectors who were known to be cheats. As a dinner guest, he allowed a woman to anoint him with oil.

Jesus had a way of making sinners feel welcome and worthy. He often caused the pious to feel ill at ease. Most people stick to their kind. The wealthy with the wealthy. The educated with the educated. The poor with the poor. Jesus keeps changing the norms.

The terrifying message of John the Baptist was turn or burn. It was a message of repentance, judgement and wrath. The Jews of the day operated a very black and white religious cast system. There was a defined progression through a specific series of defined steps to holiness. Some people like that. $A + B = C$

But here comes this young Nazarene upstart with a message of grace. Everyone is invited to the banquet....EVERYONE! Saint and sinner!! He is welcoming one and all. He is socializing with women, and children, Samaritans and any variety of oppressed and marginalized people. Scandalous! And he dares to call himself the Son of God? Jesus violated the mores and the customs of his day. He brought chaos to the whole Jewish way of living. Jesus proclaimed a radical gospel of grace. Unlike the laws of the Temple, according to Jesus, to get clean, a person did not have to journey to Jerusalem, offer sacrifices, and undergo purification rituals. All a person had to do was to learn from, and follow Him. Phillip Yancey claims that Jesus moved the emphasis from God's holiness to God's mercy. From law to spirit. From rules, to grace.

Consider the Jesus you know, and I invite you to be curious. Ask yourself if there is more. Is there more to him? Is he simpler or more complicated than you once knew him to be? What adjectives or images or metaphors make you uncomfortable and cause you to resist. Why?

A leper came begging to him to be healed. Jesus healed him but sternly warned him not to say anything to anyone about this. But the leper went out and told everyone. The word spread like a wild fire. Jesus could no longer go into a town openly. How would this make Jesus feel? Annoyed? Disappointed? Frustrated? Did the Jesus you know experience feelings like those? We are told that Jesus was truly human and truly Divine. Think about that.

He was in the synagogue on the Sabbath. There was a man there who had a withered hand. Jesus watched the religious authorities, wondering what they would say if he were to heal on the Sabbath. He called the man forward. Jesus turned and asked the religious authorities if it was lawful to do good/ or to do harm on the Sabbath. He asked if it was lawful to save a life or to kill on the Sabbath, knowing so well, the laws for the Sabbath. They were silent. "Stretch out your hand" Jesus healed the man. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, as to how to destroy him. Can you even begin to imagine how Jesus felt? Frightened? Arrogant? Confrontational? Did the Jesus you know feel those feelings?

Even though he said he would never, Peter deserted him. Imagine how Jesus must have felt.

Even though Peter James and John assured him they would stay awake, 3 times they fell asleep. Imagine how Jesus felt.

He rode into Jerusalem. He saw what it had become. He saw what it could have been. He wept. Imagine how Jesus felt.

We do Jesus such a disservice. We lose so much when we confine Jesus to our own, limited understanding. We need to let it grow. Learn from the words in the songs we sing. Learn from the words of Scripture which we read. Learn from acts of kindness and acts of service. Learn from receiving as well as giving. Hold what you know about Jesus up to the light. Look at it from a different angle.

If you would you prefer to hold tight to the Jesus you already know, there is absolutely nothing stopping you. But if you are willing to reflect on your points of resistance, if you are willing to discuss, and study, and if you are willing to spend more time with Jesus, it is quite possible that you will get to know the Jesus you never knew.

God bless you on your journey

Amen