

Luke 14:25-30
John 10:22-33

MORE THAN A MAN?

Who was Jesus of Nazareth? I am neither worthy nor competent to answer such a question. On the other hand, nobody else is either. In a few minutes, I will tell you why we need to talk about such things despite our unworthiness and incompetence. Some scholars think they know this subject, but they are talking about the number of books they have read and the number of degrees they have earned – not about living the LIFE. Some preachers think they have it figured out and know the right formulas, but if so, they are thinking about what they are *supposed* to say or about what will meet with approval. Or they are still too young and naive to know how big the question really is.

Who was Jesus of Nazareth? To catch even a glimmer of it changes our lives forever. However, many think they have dealt with this question thoroughly and conscientiously, yet it has not impacted them in any significant way whatsoever. Enigma. For many people on earth, this is the most important question there is and Jesus lived the most significant life ever lived. For millions of others, this is a matter of indifference, superstition, or contrivance. This very gap between perspectives causes endless strife and mayhem. There are more Christian martyrs every year in our time than there were in the entire New Testament period. That does not count all the “little strife” inside the Christian camp itself, which splits churches and denominations and has Christians angry with each other and slinging furious barbs at one another. It’s a really slow week if some Christian does not tell me I am going to Hell – either because I do astrology, or because I don’t believe in the Virgin Birth, or because of the way I talk about the Second Coming, or because I baptized somebody wrong or wrongly, or because I don’t talk about salvation or atonement their way ... and on and on. And the sad truth is, my opinion of them is no kinder or more congenial than theirs is toward me.

And then there is the even “smaller strife” going on in our own church, and in every living congregation across the land, over how important Jesus really is and what exactly we should and should not be doing about it.

Who was this Jesus of Nazareth, to be causing all this trouble for so many generations and clearly still today? Would it not bring more “peace on earth” if we could all just forget about Him? Many say so.

But it is not a helpful comment. We cannot just forget about Him. At least not enough of us to make any dent in the turmoil.

I hope none of you go away today thinking this was a “good sermon.” It is not even intended to be. It’s just me, talking to you, about Jesus. And most of the time, whether you have noticed or not, I do not come from a very high Christological plane. That is, I do not stress the divinity of Christ very much. Many of you dub that in automatically. But I normally come more from the humanity side of Jesus, hoping that will have the same impact on you that it has on me.

We do not all come at things in the same manner, of course. But I have to tell you what matters to me, in the sheer realization that I cannot be very enthusiastic about what does *not* matter to me. And I do not get to the divinity of Jesus – to His being Messiah, or Son of God, or Savior – by reciting creeds, by being told what I am supposed to believe, by being told what others believed, or by being threatened with dire consequences if I do not believe it. I don’t think this is just a matter of stubbornness. I *have* been told that I am stubborn; on the other hand, I have met few humans who do not boast of being stubborn, and even fewer who do not display stubbornness in one guise or another. Most of us wouldn’t survive for long or accomplish very much if we were not. My problem is that I do not easily rank one human being as categorically and dimensionally higher than all other human beings. I cannot just believe this because somebody tells me to. Pretending does not help, and in fact it ends up betraying us.

So I tell you what impacts me. I keep trying to look at Jesus as a man, and I plain, flat-out cannot figure Him out. He does not fit in any category I recognize as “merely a man.” I keep looking at the accounts and stories about Him from as human a level as I possibly can, but it always ends up blowing me out of the water. I believe Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Savior, the Son of God – because of the crossfire between the accounts we have of Him in the New Testament and the confirmation of these principles and truths in my own prayer life.

This is totally subjective. Unlike some of you, I have no faith in objective approaches. In fact, believing in Jesus has me believing that I am a subject, not an object. Objects do not give allegiance to anything. Objects never live by faith. I am *persuaded*, and incredibly grateful for the persuasion. While I am still capable of seeing how others might *not* be persuaded, that does not reduce any of it for me. Life is short; we have

precious few years here to live out our allegiance, our gratitude, our response to anything we care about. Once we become subjects, we no longer want to stay aloof and uninvolved, like objects. Some objects seem pretty unhappy and unfulfilled though, and out of compassion it seems only right to invite them into a whole new realm – if we know of one. And through no real fault of our own, we do.

Let me reiterate and illustrate. For me, the divinity of Jesus is not separate from the humanity of Jesus. It simply goes way beyond it. The divinity “shines through” the humanity. I suspect that is not far from what some of our forebears meant by “incarnation.” But it is not a single declaration or single incident that overcomes my reticence to believe that Jesus was more than a normal man. It is the accumulative impact of watching Jesus: encounters, parables, miracles, approaches, teachings, purposes, strategy, how He reacts under duress – all of it. Of course, I have an advantage over some of you. I always compare His behavior, wisdom, responses, attitudes, faith, and love to my own. In my case, the contrast is enormous. Some of you may not have such a clear and staggering contrast to help you see the difference.

When the woman anoints Jesus’ feet with oil (Luke 7) and dries them with her hair, I am dumbfounded by Jesus’ response. There is the whole Board of Deacons (so to speak) watching – not ours, but the one in my first church. They all sit there knowing what kind of woman she is, and looking at me askance. Would I have loved that woman in that setting? I would have been totally embarrassed. I would have been trying desperately to get her to go away. I would have been falling all over myself trying to make explanations, trying to make sure nobody got the wrong idea, trying every way I could to disassociate myself from her and keep in the good graces of the Deacons.

Jesus is calm as you please, completely comfortable with and appreciative of the woman’s outlandish adoration. He is not embarrassed, and offers no excuses or explanations. He knows He has healed her. Jesus knows who He is and what His truth is. And Jesus doesn’t really care whether Simon likes it or not. Simon has his own sickness; he is full of pride and arrogance and the inevitable judgments that go with them. Yet Jesus tries to help Simon too. He talks to him about gratitude and forgiveness. And He ends up revealing a principle I would not have come up with in a million years: “*He who is forgiven little, loves little.*” Love is connected with forgiveness? I never knew that before!

Maybe you can walk away from that story unscathed. I cannot. I cannot shake loose from it. I have a lot of wonderful friends, but none of them have that kind of compassion, poise, clarity, or unearthly wisdom. I have been in study groups for over forty years and they all pass over or ignore Jesus' teaching at first, and then flat-out disbelieve it. "*He who is forgiven little, loves little.*" Really? You mean if I am not forgiven, I am not loving? They say it with scorn, at first, and often with great irritation. If I want more love in my life, I must first learn to accept and receive more forgiveness? Ludicrous!

But there is an uncanny consistency in the truth Jesus reveals. Why do we make such a big deal out of the Cross? Do you know anybody who loves God a lot who has not experienced the forgiveness of the Cross? No, you do not. "*He who is forgiven little, loves little.*"

There is endless debate over whether Jesus knew Himself to be the Christ. "Jesus Christ, superstar, do you think you're who they say you are?" The music reached the teenagers, so a lot of folk swallowed the storyline along with it. But Jesus was never a confused or drugged-up flower child, no matter how much you like rock music or teenagers. Jesus was cagey enough to not get Himself arrested before He was ready, but through all the accounts we have, Jesus declared His true identity in endless subtle ways – waiting for any who were willing to draw their own conclusions.

For example, Jesus healed a paralytic, telling the man that his sins were forgiven. (Luke 5:21) The Pharisees complained at His audacity, saying, "*Who can forgive sins but God alone?*" Jesus said: "You are absolutely right, but which is easier: to say 'Rise and walk' or to say 'Your sins are forgiven'? Now watch this." And He said to the man, "Rise, take up your bed, and go home." And the man did.

What did Jesus just do? He did two things: He revealed a principle between healing and forgiveness that we still only partially comprehend. And He declared Himself the Son of God, for any who wanted to hear Him. Only God can forgive sins, but Jesus just did it! Oops! Guess what? If *He* just did it, WHO IS HE?

I have no time in twenty minutes to reveal the true impact of the accumulative effect. But it is everywhere in the New Testament story, if we are awake and aware enough to notice. What of the Scripture reading this morning? Do you know any normal humans who would come up

to you and tell you to your face that they were more important to you than your father or mother, your wife or children, your brothers or sisters – even more important to you than your own life? Jesus said this to people who did not yet know the outcome of His ministry on earth. He said it to people who did not have two thousand years to contemplate His meaning and purpose here. How would they have taken His comments? What did they imagine He was saying to them?

Can you imagine yourself saying such things to anybody? I don't know about you, but I truly do not think I am more important than your wife or your children, and certainly not more important than your own life. Some of you had parents I might try to compete with, but even then, it is only a partial and specific fight for you to become your true self.

People do not “hear” Jesus; they do not watch Him; they do not pay much attention to His motives or attitudes. And they forever reduce or trivialize His sayings and actions down to something more compatible – down to normal human behavior. Then, having ignored or emasculated the story, they do not see why Jesus is so special.

I have not talked about the Trinity. I have not taken us into the Resurrection, or the way in which our Risen Lord keeps faithfully coming to us in prayer, in vision, in dream, and in constant inner influence. I am not appealing to creeds or what the Christian church has often said we are supposed to believe. I am simply saying that you cannot make Jesus' story fit into the normal confines of anything we accept or expect from any other human who has ever lived.

If I consider the claims (of creed and tradition) that Jesus was *Christos* – Son of God, *even* God – I am offended. That is, blanket statements and claims that Jesus is the Godman – because we need a Savior, because He is holy, and because we should be reverent and worshipful – do not move me. They put me off.

Many of you have struggled with the man/God concept too. It is not possible to be a Christian and not wonder at the claims we make about Jesus. For me at least, the impact does not come from such outer creedal or institutional claims. I am moved by the life of the man. And it is in this very fascinating yet familiar quest – interest in the man, trying to learn and understand more and more about Jesus – that I am finally overwhelmed by the realization that “manhood” cannot contain or describe Him.

What difference does it make? I will tell you, though mostly I have hoped you would come to it for yourself. I have downplayed the divinity of Jesus as Christ and Son of God because we must each come to it from within, not as something laid on us from outside. At the same time, I do not wish to mislead you; some of you, it seems, think it doesn't really matter – that one view of Jesus is as good as another.

The issue is power. The channel is faith. I keep telling you that when you hear the word “faith,” you should translate it “trust.” What is the difference between your understanding of the power of Jesus if you think of Him as a nice man, a good man, but merely a man – and the power of Jesus if you know Him to be *Christos*, Savior, and Son of God? And can you possibly imagine that this would not impact your faith – your trust?

If you are going to have faith in Jesus – that is, put your trust in Jesus, bet your life on Him and His truth – then the power available to you in the first view is infinitesimal in comparison to the power available to you in the second view. Put another way: Every moment of every day, your life is impacted by your expectations – by what you think is important, by your confidence, by your view of what is possible or impossible. And all of it is dramatically altered by what you think Jesus is capable of – and by how much you think Jesus cares about you. The issue is power. If Jesus is merely a man, then that is one thing. If He is *Christos* and Savior and Son of God, then that is an entirely different matter.

“Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” Yes, well, that may be all fine and wonderful – *but who is He?* If He is the village idiot with delusions of grandeur, that is one thing. If He is the true Prince of the Universe, that is quite another thing!

There is no way to pretend at such beliefs. Trying to believe what we do not really believe is a fool's errand at best. But do not imagine that it does not matter. If you have total faith in Jesus but think He is a wimp, that does not give you much strength or power when or where you need it. Some of you try to just switch to God and leave Jesus out of it. But the truth is, Jesus came to us because this approach did not work very well for most people. God chose to reveal himself in Jesus Christ because his presence was too vague and distant for most of us.

In any case, all the creeds of the church about Jesus' divinity were put in place and defended so hotly to protect the claim of power. Jesus was claimed and proclaimed divine not because of irrelevant theories or because the early church fathers were stupid or control freaks. He was claimed and proclaimed divine because they believed it was true, and they wanted to assure the people that Jesus had not only the desire but *the power* to save us. And quite clearly, no *human* has the power to save us.

So when you pray, and when you are under fire, and when your loved ones are sick, and when you struggle with temptation, and when your life seems to be going down the tubes – it is *then* that you need to know whether Jesus is just a Galilean carpenter, or the *Christos* of God who brought the worlds into being – and who will love you and be with you through everything you ever face, in this world and in all that is to come.