

DOES IT MAKE A DIFFERENCE WHO JESUS IS?

Matthew 16:13-20

NEWSWEEK magazine carried an interesting article a number of years ago about a controversy that had been brewing down in Louisiana. Let me share it with you: "Even if it did double as a bug zapper (it doesn't), the big blue neon JESUS sign outside the Church of Abundant Life in Harvey, Louisiana, would have to go. So say Jefferson Parish officials, who claim they inadvertently approved installation of the five-foot-high, 21-foot-wide sign last November. Now they're fighting to unplug the \$5,000 Savior, saying it exceeds the maximum size for a residential area. The church contends it's not a sign at all but a religious symbol that the government can't regulate. A vote [was] due from the parish Zoning Appeals Board April 15 [of this year]."

Does it make a difference whether the Abundant Life church gets to keep its JESUS sign? It sounds like it may be in poor taste. It probably is an irritant in a residential neighborhood. But we don't want the government regulating religion. Government is too intrusive already. So I hope the Abundant Life folks win.

But a bigger issue is at stake. Is a big blue sign saying JESUS outside a church appropriate in the first place? In a culturally diverse world, might we not offend persons who are not of our faith? I know that here, during VBS, we had to cover the word "God" when we weren't in session for fear of offending someone. Which brings us to a bigger question: Does it really make any difference who Jesus is? Let's think about that for a few minutes this morning.

It's one of the most familiar stories in the Scripture. Jesus and his disciples are in the region of Caesarea Philippi. The disciples have witnessed firsthand Jesus' power to heal and to help. They know he has become the talk of the countryside. So they are prepared when Jesus asks, "Who do people say that I am?" "Some say you are John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets," they answered. "But what about you?" Jesus asked them. "Who do you say that I am?"

We call Peter's response the "Good Confession." In the Roman Catholic tradition, it becomes the basis for the Apostolic Succession of the Pope. In the Protestant world, it is seen as the one, true confession that is that basis of the entire Christian faith. That Jesus is the Christ.

In our pastor's class this last spring we talked about this confession. What does it mean? In my faith tradition we would say that Christians confess that "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God and my personal Lord and Savior"...and then

argue about everything else. So the question is an important one: "Who do you say that I am?"

And that's the question, isn't it? Who do you and I say Jesus is? Does it make any difference who Jesus is to us?

IT MAKES A DIFFERENCE IF YOU ARE CONCERNED ABOUT THE NATURE OF GOD. There are people in this world killing other people in the name of God. We as Christians can't feel superior at this point. We've done more than our share of such killing. But it's wrong! Our God is not a God of death but of life! How do we know? Because Jesus told us so. He showed us in his own life what God is like.

We as Christians make an extraordinary claim to the world: when you've seen Christ, you've seen his Father. When you've seen Christ, you've seen God!

It's like an event that occurred in 1989 in professional baseball in the United States. History was made. For the first time, a father and a son played simultaneously in the major leagues. Ken Griffey, Jr., the nineteen-year-old son of Ken, Sr., started for the Seattle Mariners, while his thirty-nine-year-old father played for the Cincinnati Reds. The physical skills of the father, says one writer, were evident in his son.

How often that occurs. A son resembles his father. But something far more significant is true of the life of Jesus: The very nature of his Father is shown in the Son. What is God like? God is gentle, loving, compassionate. How do we know? Look at Jesus.

My guess is that this is one of the reasons Christianity grew so much more rapidly in its earliest years than did Judaism. All of the teachings of Jesus have their antecedents in Judaism. After all, did he not say that he had not come to destroy the Law but to fulfill it? But if you were to ask the question, what does a Jew believe about God, a rabbi would say to you, "Read the Torah." But as a Christian pastor, I can say to you, "Look at Jesus." A person is much easier to read than a book. That is why, we believe, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Does it matter who Jesus is? It matters because it tells us what God is like.

I was reading recently about a tribe in Africa, a race of strong, tall people. This particular tribe has always believed in one god, Engai. They believe Engai is passionately involved in his people's lives. But here is what they believe about their god: that he loves the rich more than the poor, the healthy more than the sick, the virtuous more than the wicked. Engai favors this group of people over every other

tribe, providing them with rain and sleek cattle and protecting them against their enemies.

We could call such views primitive if we were not aware that this is how many Christians view God--a God who favors some people over others. But this is not the God that Jesus gave us. Jesus taught us to call God "Abba"--"Daddy"--and taught us that God loves all people equally whether they are rich or poor--black, brown, yellow, red or white--whether they live in the United States or in Communist China. God plays no favorites. God loves us all. Is that important? You bet it is. It's important in how we think about others and it is important in how we think about ourselves.

Years ago, Brennan Manning related a story about a priest from Detroit named Edward Ferrell who went on a two-week summer vacation to Ireland. His one living uncle was about to celebrate his eightieth birthday. On the great day, the priest and his uncle got up before dawn and dressed in silence. They took a walk along the shores of Lake Killarney and stopped to watch the sunrise. They stood side by side with not a word exchanged and stared straight at the rising sun. Suddenly the uncle turned and went skipping down the road. He was radiant, beaming, smiling from ear to ear.

His nephew said, "Uncle Seamus, you really look happy."

"I am, lad," the old man replied.

"Want to tell me why?" asked the nephew.

His eighty-year-old uncle replied, "Yes, you see, me Abba is very fond of me."

That's cause for happiness, is it not? "Abba is very fond of me." How can we know Abba is fond of us? Jesus. It makes a difference who you think Jesus is if you are concerned about the nature of God.

IT ALSO MAKES A DIFFERENCE WHO YOU THINK JESUS IS WHEN YOU ARE TRYING TO LIVE OUT THE CHRISTIAN LIFE. Jesus not only shows us what God is like, Jesus shows us what we will be like if we take the title, Christian, seriously. Jesus is the standard by which we live our lives.

The highway department of a country not far from here once set out to build a bridge working from both sides of a deep river gorge. When the workers reached the middle of the waterway, they found they were thirteen feet to one side of each other. It seems that each crew of workmen had used its own reference point. No wonder they did not connect.

I can't help but wonder if that why there is so much chaos in our society today. Everyone's using their own reference point. What we need is a universal reference point so that we can say, "Here. Here is how the good life is lived."

For Christians there is such a reference point--and that is Jesus. What would Jesus tell us? That is the question that continually helps us in our quest for right living. Jesus not only revealed the character of God but he also patterned the ideal life for humanity.

When we idolize footballers, we wear their colors or jersey numbers. When we lift up anyone as an idol, we dress, act, think differently. When you worship someone, it is natural to want to be as much like that person as possible. When we say that Jesus is the reference point for our lives, it means we want to make our lives as much like his as possible.

Does it make any difference who Jesus is? Only if you are concerned about the nature of God; only if you are concerned about living a Christian life. **AND ONLY IF YOU ARE TRYING TO FIND ANY MEANING IN LIFE.**

In a famous sermon a few years after the discovery of atomic power, Peter Marshall spoke some words that you and I need to hear. I quote: "Not a single one of the new powers discovered by man possesses any redeeming force. Neither fire, nor steam, nor explosives, nor electricity, nor atomic energy can change his nature."

"The greatest force ever bestowed on mankind streamed forth in blood and sweat and tears and death on Calvary . . . when Jesus of Nazareth was crucified on the cross. "It was a power so great that it shattered the last fortress--death. It was a power so great that it made atonement for all the sin of the entire world. It was a power so great that it provided for those who would accept it the ability to live victoriously like children of God, in fellowship with Him Who made the world and the sun, the moon and the stars.

"It was power that would enable believers to do the mighty works of Christ, and to experience, flowing in and through their own lives, the energy of God. "Here is a power so tremendous that with it nothing is impossible; and without it, nothing we do has any eternal value or significance."

And that is true. It is our relationship with Christ that not only shows us the nature of God, shows us the nature of humanity at its best, but gives us the power to overcome the humdrum nature of our daily lives. It is Christ and Christ alone who gives us the power to be all that God calls us to be. Does it make any difference who Jesus is? Yes, it makes all the difference in the world.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German theologian who was executed by Hitler during World War II. Years later, one of his students recalled the last classroom session he had with his teacher. Bonhoeffer, knowing his arrest was imminent, asked his students a question that took them by surprise: He asked them if they loved Jesus. This is not the typical question one hears in a seminary classroom. Usually the classroom is reserved for more academic questions. But Bonhoeffer knew this was the heart of life. This is the question that stands above all others. Do you love Jesus?

Jesus turned to his disciples and asked them, "Who do people say that I am?" It was Simon Peter who gave the answer that has resonated through the ages: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Is that the answer you would have given? Does it make a difference? Do you love Jesus? All of heaven and earth depend on how each of us answer that question.