

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“The Vocabulary of Faith: Jesus”
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John 1:1-14

So, who is he? Who is this Jesus that we claim to believe in and follow? The scriptures tell us that Jesus is the savior, messiah, Christ, Son of Man, Son of God, rabbi, teacher, prophet, King, Lord, bread of life, sheep gate, shepherd, way the truth the life, bread of life, living water, light of the world, redeemer, lamb of God, true vine, King of kings and Lord of Lords and the Word made flesh. Later writers have said he is a demi-god, a good god as opposed to the evil creator god, a spirit who was never real, the world’s greatest salesman, greatest CEO and model for all small group leaders. He is the laughing Jesus and even what my daughter calls, Rambo Jesus. He is also the sender of crusaders, the hater of all non-Christians and the lover of all people. So who is he? The answer seems to depend on each of us. What I mean by that is that across the centuries we have made Jesus in our own image and used him to defend our own beliefs. This is the reason in the Civil War, Jesus was both the one who approved of and condemned slavery. But again, who is he? Though we could spend years unpacking this question, since I am time limited this morning, I want to offer you what I believe are the two critical understandings of Jesus that scripture offers.

First, Jesus is us. Jesus is fully human. What I mean by that is that Jesus experienced the absolute fullness of life. He experienced birth and adolescence. He experienced love, adoration and rejection. He experienced temptation that he had to work to resist. He had to learn and grow in both experience and outlook. He had to seek his own destiny. He was at times, angry, sad and frustrated. He showed compassion for some and righteous indignation against others. He was neither a card-board cutout of a human being nor was he an unearthly figure floating through life. And he experienced pain and death. What this means is that there is nothing that we will experience that he has not. He is the one who understands what it means to walk around in these mortal bodies enmeshed in complex cultures and relationships. Even so, Jesus managed to be the one who continually oriented his life to God, always seeking God’s will and direction for his life. He therefore becomes the model for life, the one whom we are not only to follow but try to emulate. Jesus is us.

Second Jesus is God. This reality is what is at the heart of John’s opening words about the Word was with God, the Word was God and the Word become flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth. For many of us in the 21st century, this is the most difficult aspect of Jesus for us to wrap our heads around. In fact, in a recent survey of self-identifying evangelical Christians, a significant percentage did not believe that Jesus was God. But for the early church

this affirmation was essential to the faith, and here is why. Only God can save. Let me say that again, only God can save humanity and so unless Jesus was God then regardless of all that he did in life or death, humanity would still be stuck in the mess sin created. One way I have taken to explaining this is to use the image of an operating system...meaning the software code that runs your computers, phones and tablets. The Biblical story is that God wrote the operating system of love that was to run creation. People were to love God, each other and creation. Human beings however introduced a virus, called sin, into the operating system and God's desire for love was hijacked by hate, jealousy, violence and greed. Throughout history men and women, prophets, priests and saints have tried to restore the original OS but have been unable to restore the code. This is something only the original coder could do. This is something only God could do. Thus, it was necessary for God to become one of us, so that through his life death and resurrection, he could restore the original operating system of love, so that humanity could once again flourish.

So who is Jesus? He is the intersection where heaven and earth meet. He is the intersection where humans and God meet. He is, if you will, the person in whom Eden exists, meaning in him we discover what it means to be fully human and oriented toward God. And what it means for God to be the one who is oriented toward humanity desiring the restoration of creation. As such he is the one who makes possible the reprogramming not only of our lives but of humanity itself. This is why the Apostle Paul said that when we put on Christ, we become new creations. We become those who are no longer programmed by sin, but by Spirit (of which we will learn more next week). And there is no greater way to experience this intersection than at this table (the communion table) where we witness the fully human one dying for us, and the fully God one offering us new life through the bread and cup. The challenge that I want to put before you this week is this, to ask ourselves, how are we allowing that fully human and fully divine One to reprogram our lives, such that we reflect the love of God and neighbor that is at the heart of this mysterious intersection of heaven and earth?