

February 20, 2022

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

John 7:37-52

“What to make of Jesus?”

1. Here at FPC I teach an 8 session class we call “Journeys of faith”
 - a. It focuses on
 - i. helping folks share their faith story,
 - ii. to hear and support one another in that process
 - iii. and to learn what the Presbyterian perspective is on faith and church, God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit
 - b. The class is something which attracts folks who are wondering about becoming members of the church (though the class isn’t a membership requirement), and it is also a class taken by long-time members
 - c. I make it very clear that taking the class puts you under no obligation to join the church
 - d. So this one year someone who took the class and who very loyally attends church, who wasn’t officially a member, came up to me and said: I don’t think I’ll join church
 - i. Sure, I said, that’s no problem. I know I see you at church every Sunday, so tell me more.
 - ii. Well, I really like what the church stands for and does, its work with social justice and such. I just don’t know about this Jesus thing.
 - iii. That person comes to church regularly, still trying to figure out this Jesus thing.
 - e. I get it.
 - i. It’s hard to wrap our head around the concept of Jesus as God and Son of God
 - ii. It’s complicated to think about resurrection and what that means or could mean
 - iii. But the “Jesus thing” that person had no problem with was his courageous love, his solidarity with the poor, his challenge of the powerful.
2. “This Jesus thing” is what had all the characters in today’s gospel tied up in knots
 - a. To some, he sounded like a prophet
 - i. There were ways in which he sounded like Moses to some. Just in this story, the timing in their religious festival in which he was speaking about water would have had echoes for them of Moses giving water in the desert (Coloe)
 - ii. He taught with prophetic authority, challenging people to turn back to God
 - iii. And then there were the signs he would perform, which showed his connection to God
 - b. To some, he sounded like the Messiah, the one who they had been waiting for
 - i. They had read in the scriptures about the coming of a person chosen by God, an anointed one of God (Messiah means anointed one) who would bring them to freedom
 - ii. To us, the term Messiah (or its Greek translation, Christ) feels so closely connected to Jesus that it’s hard to separate the titles from him
 - iii. But picture if you will a faithful crowd seeing Jesus and learning from him, and thinking that he was the one they’d been waiting for, he would lead a movement which not only would renew their faith, but free them from the

oppression of the Roman Empire, which had colonized the land and controlled the people.

- c. And yet to some, he sounded like a fake, like a self-promoting fake, a danger even
 - i. After all, the religious teachers argued, the Messiah can't come from Galilee, that backwater!
 - ii. The teachers resented and rejected what he taught, and they wanted him arrested, but the police were reluctant because they were impressed by him
 - iii. And we find Nicodemus, who once came to Jesus under cover of darkness, now standing up publicly for Jesus, saying the religious establishment wasn't treating Jesus justly.
- 3. We are still trying to figure out what to make of Jesus
 - a. U2, one of my favorite rock bands, has this song called "I still haven't found what I'm looking for" <https://www.npr.org/2019/07/26/743620996/u2-i-still-havent-found-what-im-looking-for-american-anthem>
 - i. They've described it in various ways. I like their description of it as a Gospel song
 - ii. It's not much of a stretch to think of it as a song about faith, and Christian faith at that, with lyrics like this:

I believe in the kingdom come
Then all the colors will bleed into one
Bleed into one
But yes I'm still running
You broke the bonds
And you loosed the chains
Carried the cross
Of my shame
Oh my shame
You know I believe it
But I still haven't found what I'm looking for

- iii. I get it.
 - 1. Jesus was going to upset anyone's perspective on him. That's the point.
 - 2. Jesus wasn't coming in to win a popularity contest or to win votes or whatever.
 - 3. He was coming to place humanity on a new track, and to connect people with God in a new way.
- iv. And still, we don't know what to do about this "Jesus thing"
 - 1. We will always wrestle with it, whether we come at it from a perspective of a very church-rooted faith, or the skepticism of one without faith at all
 - 2. And it feels like we still haven't found what we're looking for, and it's maybe because we can't find a Jesus we can neatly put in a box and control or market
 - 3. We're not special. If Jesus had come to us, here, today, we would have been flabbergasted, confused, or maybe completely devoted as those in the passage today.

4. To understand Jesus, to believe in Jesus, means his message has to rock us out of complacency, to challenge us in ways that make us really uncomfortable, to prompt us to step into an unknown direction.
 5. So actually, we don't want too cozy an image of Jesus. There needs to be some discomfort so we can know we're getting closer to the full picture.
 6. And if we dare think that Jesus agrees with us, dive a little deeper and see how he pushes us into grace or forgiveness or commitment which makes us realize there is so much more to his teachings and example for us
4. This Jesus thing... it's complicated and challenging. It's life-giving and life-altering. It will take you to unfamiliar places and make you feel like you're finally home. But above all, it's about realizing God loves us more than we can possibly imagine, and calls us to love others more than we ever dared to love.

Reflection questions

1. Please share a song (religious or not) which really speaks to your faith: shapes it, or challenges it.
2. The John 7:37-52 passage speaks of a lot of different opinions about Jesus, from complete faith to utter rejection. What is it that people found attractive and repulsive about Jesus?
3. What kind of reception would Jesus have gotten if instead of 1st century Palestine he had come to 21st century United States, and why?

Wisdom Commentary. John 1-10. Mary L. Coloe. Series editor Barbara E. Reid. OP. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press. 2021. P.206-217.