

## **Sermon September 15, 2024**

### **Who Is Jesus?**

A woman I know was helping write a new mission, vision and values statement for her church. Someone in the group commented that there should be something about Justice reflected in the statement. “We don’t really focus on Justice here,” she said, “we are all about Peace.”

I’ve thought about that conversation a lot recently. Pulitzer Prize winning editor, William Allen White once wrote “Peace without justice is tyranny.” True justice-filled peace reflects a place where no one is oppressed and no one has power over the other. Think about the least peaceful places in the world, and you will see signs of power used to control others, oppressive policies and a lack of equity. You will see injustice.

Those in power don’t want justice that threatens their privilege... so any acts towards peace are weak and do not lift up those who have experienced persecution. People who march with cries of “No Justice, No Peace!” are longing for a world where everyone is valued and accepted. Peaceful justice ensures fairness and equality for all, and it lifts up those who feel powerless or alone.

Justice is the foundation to true peace. Remember this: The lack of justice and Herod’s desire for an easy peace that would secure his position in the government led to Jesus’ death. He knew that Jesus was innocent, but wanted power and privilege more than justice

And the empty tomb is God’s response to all of us that God wants something more from all of us!

“Who do you say I am?” Jesus asks us today. And we struggle as much today as Peter and the crowds did. We reach out to Peter’s proclamation and proclaim Jesus to be the Messiah. But what does that really mean to us? We use lots of words to describe Jesus – friend, savior, Lord, Christ. We say the words, but do we really know what we mean? What do we say when Jesus asks us who he is?

People have been trying to figure out who Jesus is since Jesus walked that dusty road.

Early church leaders fought long and hard over who Jesus really is, fighting over every detail of their faith is he human...is he divine...is he both... how was salvation accomplished. Wars were fought, churches split, people were kicked out or executed for disagreeing in their beliefs.

There have been quests for the historical Jesus, trying to figure out what is “true” and what isn’t. If we can prove that Jesus really did this or really said that, then we will really understand who he is.

But ultimately we stumble around just like the disciples did all those years ago, seeking answers.

Who do people say that I am?

Jesus knew that his time was short and he wanted to be sure that the disciples would be ready... that they understood that his purpose was greater than even Elijah or John the Baptist’s. Jesus knew that God’s plan was truly revolutionary, just not in the way people expected. Peter could not really understand because he didn’t have the framework to understand. You couldn’t look to the understandings of the past, because Jesus was leading them to a new future... a new understanding of what it means to be the Messiah, the Christ. As Paul says to the Corinthian Church: “We preach Christ Crucified”

So Jesus follows Peter’s proclamation by teaching them about Christ crucified, telling them what it would take for the world to be saved. He revealed what would result in the events of Holy Week – his trial and death, before rising again. **And, he says, you need to be willing to do the same thing as Jesus – to pick up your own cross and follow Jesus.**

“Stop it!” Peter cries out, proving that he really didn’t get it. Peter didn’t like what he heard because it didn’t fit his view of how God would save the world. Peter wanted to hear good news – news that made life easier and happier. Peter did not want to hear the real GOOD NEWS found in the Gospel of Christ Crucified.

Peter sought Peace without wanting to advocate for Justice.

Jesus knew he had to stop everyone from putting these false expectations on him. “*No you stop it,*” he says. Stop looking at this through the lens of human history and look at what is happening through God’s eyes.

But, really Peter cannot begin to understand who Jesus is until he sees it with his own eyes... it's beyond his imagination. A witness to the one condemned to the Cross, who forgives his killers and is ultimately vindicated in Resurrection by the God who called him there and empowered him to love with God's unlimited love.

We are not witnesses, but we pass on the memories of those who were there when they crucified our Lord. When we say that Jesus is our Christ, we are saying we are willing to follow him to New Life. Jesus reminds us today that to follow Jesus is to deny ourselves... to be willing to look beyond our personal hopes and dreams and look at the world the way God does: a place where true justice and peace abide.

Jesus tells that we need to be willing to drag the cross with us, no matter how difficult or dangerous it may be. To put ourselves and our needs aside for the sake of our neighbors.

Jesus is calling for a Just Peace world.

James reminds us that it is not enough to proclaim faith in Christ. If your words are cruel or judgmental, you are not living your faith. And, you need to LIVE IT, he says... To act on it. We are called to show our faith in love and action. James said that faith without works is dead. To follow Jesus, you need to be willing to live your life just like Jesus did – bearing the cross of service and living a life of unlimited love and forgiveness.

Who do you say I am? Jesus asks us.

It's a question we struggle to answer every day. We get glimpses of it in how we treat each other, how we live our faith. And, we do not search for answers alone. We are blessed to drag our crosses in the company of a faithful band of followers of Jesus. We may not know all the answers, but we are willing to seek them out together, to experience them at the table where we celebrate Jesus' self-giving love. It is in the loving acts towards our neighbors where we experience a bit of that self-giving love together.

So as you prepare to leave this place, don't forget your cross.

Who do you say I am? The one we want to follow, no matter what.