

Grace Covenant Presbyterians Church
2nd Sunday after Epiphany, January 15, 2023
1 Corinthians 1: 1-9
John 1: 29-42
“Who Knew?” by Rev. Sue Trigger

I'm going to ask you a question similar to the question I asked the children. I asked the children what they think of when they think of Jesus. I am asking you to describe Jesus. What do you think Jesus looked like? What was his personality like? The truth is, we don't know very much about Jesus. Other than the gospels, the only historical reference we have for Jesus is a brief acknowledgement by the Jewish historian, Josephus. Looking at Jesus through our 21st Century eyes raises a lot questions. What do we actually know? How can we be sure of what we do have?

We'll start with what we do know. We know that the gospels were not written by eye witnesses of Jesus's ministry. They were written 60 or more years after Jesus's death. So what we have are accounts that come from communities started by or influenced by the disciples. At best, we have second hand information.

We know that the consistencies in the gospels is a testament to the memory of those who passed on the stories. Scholarship suggests that there was a written source, called Q, that influenced the first three gospels, which helps account for the similarities.

We know that in the 4 gospels is a variety of interpretations of Jesus's life and ministry. They are not identical and sometimes they are inconsistent. The account of Jesus' baptism we read today from the gospel of John expands the story that we read last week in Matthew. In the gospel of John, John the Baptist says, "I myself did not know him, but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel." That seems odd. The Christian tradition, based on the gospel of Luke, teaches that John and Jesus are family, born to Mary and Elizabeth who were cousins. So did John know his cousin Jesus or not? We can't know from the gospels. Another thing we know is that the Jesus people knew in the first century was very different from the Jesus we know today. When Jesus began his ministry, he was not widely recognized as the Messiah. When he began his ministry, Jesus went home and read from the scriptures in the Synagogue. The crowd didn't recognize Jesus as God's messenger. They asked, "Isn't this Joseph's son?" They became angry with his bold teaching and tried to throw him off a cliff. In the gospel of Matthew, John the Baptist didn't know who Jesus was until right before his death when he was in prison. He sent some of his followers to ask Jesus who he was. Are you the one John said was coming, or should we expect someone else?"

What we have in the gospels, are accounts from believers who were trying to make sense of what they saw and heard from a man from Galilee who many didn't know, and those who did knew him as the guy next door. These early believers were not trained theologians, the only member of the group called rabbi was Jesus himself. So what we have are variations in interpretation from men who saw Jesus through a very different lens than ours today.

There is a phrase that is often said during the Sacrament of Communion, especially in Roman Catholic liturgy. The phrase is, "Great is the mystery of faith." Nothing could be more true. The phrase reminds us of two important things. First, understanding God is a mystery. Despite generations of scholarship, we will never fully understand God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit. Which leads us to the second part, Christianity is a faith community. Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher and theologian, said that at some point you come to the place where you have to take a leap of faith because faith is beyond logic, reason and rationality.

Judaism offers us a valuable tool at this point. I attended a worship led by Amy Jill-Levine, who is a New Testament scholar who happens to be Jewish. She explained that Christians look to the Bible for a specific plan to unfold that culminates in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Whereas Jews look to the Bible as a set of teachings that invite us to contemplate how to live. Levine suggested that we can deepen our understanding if we ask the question, "What does this story, or this teaching, help us understand about God?"

So let's apply that question to Jesus. When you think of Jesus, what do the gospel stories help us understand about God? (discuss)

You can see how our answers have shifted when we looked to scripture to show us something about God rather than looking for historical fact and consistent stories. It's a good reminder that faith is not built on historical fact, but on a mysterious relationship with our creator, redeemer and sustainer. Faith is a lifelong journey. The message we find in scripture today may not be the message we find in the future as our understanding grows and changes.

Another tool that can help us on our faith journey is the umbrella approach. When we look for understanding in the Bible, we look for the consistent teachings that arch throughout the Bible. One of those umbrellas is the consistency of God's love. From the story of creation to the revelation of John, the Bible reveals God's love for us. As Christians, we look to Jesus who taught us to love according to the most fundamental teaching of the Jewish faith, the Shema. Drawing from Deuteronomy, Jesus said that the greatest commandment is to love the

Love your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength (Deut. 6:4) and the second is like it, love your neighbor as yourself.

What does this teaching help us understand about God? That God loves us fully. Because God loves us fully, God asks us to do the same. Jesus said, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (**John 13:35.**)

The history of Christianity has showed us that looking for historical facts and creating rigid doctrine has led the Church to disagreement and division. In our wrangling to find accuracy, we often lose sight of the fundamental teaching of Jesus, love God and love one another. Thankfully, God is patient and merciful.

In a couple weeks we will be looking at the beatitudes. You’ll find it in the sermon on the mount and in the sermon on the plain. So which is it? The gospel of Matthew has Jesus teaching from a mountain. Luke has Jesus on a plain. We could sink down into the weeds and try to figure out which one is accurate, or, we could look at both sermons and ask, “What does this sermon help us understand about God?” Until then, I encourage you to give yourself permission to see the inconsistencies in Scripture, to accept that we really don’t know that much about the human life of Jesus. The truth of the Bible doesn’t live in documented and historical facts. The truth of the Bible lives in God and in us.

There is a meme that has been traveling on Facebook that asks the question, “How do I know that you’re a Christian? The answer: Ask my neighbor.” Look for the love for where there is love, God is there. Thanks be to God.