

Who is Jesus? The I AM
Second Sunday after Pentecost
June 14, 2009

I'd like to ask you a question this morning that many of you have heard me ask in the past. In fact, we had a series about this a little over a year and a half ago – “I want to meet Jesus.” Now if you were here when we did that series, what I'm going to say next is going to sound familiar; at the same time I know some of you were not here at that time, so the next few moments will be new to you.

I'm going to guess there are about 100 people here this morning. If I were to ask all 100 of us to answer the question of who Jesus is, I'd probably end up with about 100 shades of different answers. For instance, if you're basically 'pro' Jesus, you'd probably tell me about His divinity, some aspect of His love, or the salvation offered through Him. If you're not so sure about Jesus, your answers would reflect that. But – and here's the thing – whether 'pro' Jesus or not-so-sure about Jesus, all our answers would fall horribly short of the full answer to the question, “Who is Jesus?” In fact all our answers would basically trim Jesus down from who He really is to either a Jesus who meets my needs, or a Jesus that I can “deal” with. When we've done this, we've put Jesus in a box that we think we can handle, and then let Him out when we think we need something.

For example, maybe for some the stereotyped, trimmed down Jesus they have in their minds is a Jesus that's *all about love*. He's sort of a first century Mr. Rogers with a beard and a robe. Now if that's the case, if that's how you view Jesus, then what do you do with the Jesus who so ticked off the religious leaders of the day and the good church folks, that they wanted to kill Him? What do you do with the Jesus who was so dangerous to the status quo that it terrified people? This doesn't fit the stereotype of a loving Mr. Rogers type very well, does it? How does the 'love' Jesus, how does the 'Mr. Rogers' Jesus, get nailed to a cross? That stereotype doesn't work very well.

For others, maybe Jesus is the tolerant Jesus – the Jesus who never accused anyone of sin, and had the motto of “live and let live.” If that's how you view Jesus, then what do you do with the Jesus who told people point blank, “Stop it!” We all know the story about the woman caught in the act of adultery that Jesus stopped from being stoned to death, but most people don't think about or remember the next part of the story when Jesus turned to her and told her to stop committing adultery by sleeping with a man she was not married to. That doesn't sound like a 'live and let live' way of thinking. Or what about what Jesus says in Revelation 2 when He told the church in Thyatira that what ticked Him off regarding them is because they were tolerant of sin in their midst? *I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel... she misleads my servants into sexual immorality ... I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling.* The idea of the “tolerant Jesus” just doesn't work.

Maybe others have feelings of fear and anger towards Jesus because, frankly, that's how you were raised to view Him: *as an angry God* just waiting for you to mess up so He can zap you with a lightning bolt. It's easier to keep this kind of Jesus at arm's length, it's safer to keep this Jesus at arm's length, because there's a fear of hurt and rejection and condemnation if you let Him in too close. And yet, how do we give this Jesus with the Jesus in the Gospels that children just couldn't wait to be around, and people couldn't wait to have Jesus bless? There were always children around Jesus, and whenever Jesus wanted to make a point about coming into the kingdom of God, all He had to do was reach out no more than a few feet and gather up in His arms one of the kids who couldn't get enough of Him.¹ That doesn't sound like a mean, angry Jesus to me.

Wherever Jesus went He attracted the wounded, the broken, and the downtrodden. He was so much *not* a mean, angry person that people – especially people on the fringes – loved Him and were always around Him. In fact, one of the biggest criticisms His enemies had of Him was that He was a friend of sinners!² Kind of blows the stereotype of a mean and angry God waiting to zap you out of the water, doesn't it?

For others, they prefer the *intellectual Jesus*. They've trimmed down Jesus to one who is nothing more than a wise man; a good teacher. But how can you trim Jesus down to this, to nothing more than a wise man and a good teacher, with your own intellectual integrity? How is the intellectual Jesus the real Jesus when He claimed to be God? Does that sound like something someone who was *just* a wise person would say? "I'm God"? Jesus got nailed to the cross not because He was wise or good, but because He insisted He was God, and without Him, you'd never be able to get to the Father; to get into heaven – another intolerant statement, by the way. So much for the stereotyped intellectual Jesus.

Then there's the *law and order Jesus*, because you're a law and order kind of person. Maybe that's the way you were raised to perceive Him, or maybe for you there was not a lot of order to your life and you're looking for a god to provide that for you – a Jesus who cracks down on the law breakers and has strict rules and regulations. Then what do you do with the Jesus who creates scandal after scandal when He forgives and releases people caught red-handed in their sins?³ How do you deal with His grace?

Or finally, maybe the Jesus some have come to know is the *detached Jesus* who just sort of floats through life with no emotion. He's the Jesus we've seen in a lot of movies – expressionless, eyes that don't ever blink and just sort of stare at you. He moves along not really connecting to the people and the world around Him. But if that's how you view Jesus, then what do you do with the Jesus you encounter when you read the accounts of His life in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John? How does the detached Jesus even come close to the Jesus in the Bible who cries with

¹ Matthew 19:13-15 and Mark 9:33-37 are just two examples

² Matthew 11:19

³ John 8:1-11 for example

tears and pain that come from the gut-level? Or the Jesus who gets so angry He overturns tables at the local “church” and makes a whip to beat the people out of the church yard?

So which one of these trimmed down versions of Jesus is the one you identify with the most? I’m sure there are many other stereotypes of Him that we’ve not even talked about this morning. Maybe it’s one of those other ones we identify Jesus with.

I have a question for us this morning, and it’s really the question that frames our series. “What if?” What if we stopped trimming up Jesus and putting Him into our own little boxes that we think we can manage, and just let Jesus be Jesus? What would we find? Would we finally meet the real Jesus? Would He make the kind of impact on us He did on the people He came in contact with during His earthly ministry? Wherever Jesus went, and whoever Jesus met, there was always an impact, a change. Would we find that to be true for ourselves if we just let Jesus be Jesus? I do know this, regardless of whether we think we know Jesus a little or we think we’ve got a pretty good bead on Him, if we would just let Jesus be the real Jesus He is, He would blow our stereotypes out of the water and definitely challenge all our comfort zones.

And the best way to do this is to listen to what Jesus said about Himself throughout the whole of scripture, and especially the times in the Gospels when He talks about Himself. We need to listen to what Jesus says about Jesus. The title of this series we’re entering into is “Who is Jesus” and we’re going to look at the passages in the Bible where Jesus describes Himself. The goal of these series of messages is to learn about Jesus through His own description of Himself to the end that we grow closer to Him, which in turn, will impact our lives both inside and outside the church.

For most of this series we’re going to be in the book of John, and that’s where I invite you to open your Bibles to this morning. We’re going to our Gospel reading today, John is the fourth book in the New Testament. So the order goes, Mathew, Mark, Luke and then John. John was the youngest disciple of Jesus, probably no more than in his early 20’s, and the only disciple to die a natural death of old age, versus being put to death like all the other disciples.

To set the context of our reading today, the enemies of Jesus have been harassing Him, and trying to get rid of Him through clever sounding arguments. In an attempt to defame or embarrass Him, the Pharisees attacked Him as being an illegitimate child and came right out and asked him, “Where is your father?” Then they claimed their traditions and the way they have always done things as their basis for being right, and Jesus came right out and told them their ways were the ways of the devil. Finally as a climax to their argument, we get to our reading from today, when Jesus says point blank – “before Abraham was, I AM!” And then the people picked up stones to stone him.

Why did they want to stone Him? Was it because they had gotten so fed up with the argument they wanted to pop Him one? Punch Him in the nose? No. They wanted to stone Him because He called Himself God.

Last week we talked about the word “Lord” as it is applied to Jesus in the Bible, and took a quick look at the Greek of the Septuagint – the “Bible” of Jesus’ day – and saw that “Lord” is written as Kurios.

In our Old Testament, wherever you see the words, “The LORD”, is where the Divine Name was used. In the Septuagint, “The LORD” was written as Kurios. When Moses asked God what His name was, that’s when God gave His Divine Name – YHWH, or I AM. I won’t bore you with all the details of the Hebrew and Greek here (and you gotta know that’s just killing me!), but I will simply say that when God told Moses His name was I AM, the words there are different from Kurios, which is why we say Kurios, or The LORD without uttering the Divine Name. What Jesus did here in this passage in John, was to say the un-sayable name, and apply it to Himself. In short, by saying “Before Abraham was, I AM!” He called Himself by the unutterable Divine Name, and by so doing, called Himself God.

Here’s the point: Who is Jesus? By His own words He equates Himself with God. You can even make a note in the margins of your Bibles of John 10:30. Jesus says very plainly there, “I and the Father are one.”

Don’t ever let anyone tell you Jesus never called Himself God. People who say that simply don’t know what they are talking about, and apparently have never actually read the Bible to see what Jesus actually does say.

So what does this have to do with us today and our series? For the rest of our series we’re going to be looking at this phrase, “I am” when Jesus used it to describe Himself: “I am the good shepherd”, “I am the gate”, and the like. We’re going to look at what He calls Himself as He uses this phrase that would gall His enemies because He was ‘playing’ with the Divine Name, “I AM”, and using it in phrases concerning Himself.

For us today, though, it boils down to this: Jesus is God. Jesus is the God who came directly to us in His flesh and blood. And why did God come to us? He came because He loves us.

He came because He loves you.

He came because He wants us to be with Him in His Heaven forever.

He comes to us again in the body and blood of His supper. Only be careful – just like how we can – and do – miss who Jesus is, we can miss the significance of this supper.

He comes in the supper as our God who gives Himself for the forgiveness of our sins. Come, for the forgiveness of confessed and repented sins – confessed so they are named and by so naming them strip them of the power they would have over us, and repented, saying “I won’t go back to them”, knowing that those sins are washed away.

He comes in the supper as our God to strengthen our faith. Come, not because you're 'good enough', but precisely for the opposite reason: we're not 'good enough', nor have we 'arrived.' We need to be changed and strengthened.

He comes in the supper as our God to connect our hearts to His. Come, giving to our I AM the things that own our hearts and we want to give up. Let Him take those things and open up a new relationship with Him.

By His own testimony, Jesus is God. He's the God who loves us too much to leave us alone, and the God who waits on tiptoes, watching for His prodigal children to come home so He can run down the road and meet them.

Who is Jesus? It's a big question with many answers. For today, tomorrow and the rest of this week, know that Jesus is God; He loves us deeply, and at the same time He loves us too much to leave us where we are.

Would you pray with me please?

Lord Jesus, You are the great I AM. You are the one who revealed Yourself to our ancestors in the Old Testament, and came in the flesh to our ancestors in the New Testament. You are the God who loves us too much to leave us alone, but instead You come to us to change us, renew us, and make us into Your people.

Jesus, forgive us for putting You in a box of our own making; a box that we are so foolish to think could contain all You are. Blow our pre-conceived notions of You away, and destroy those labels we so arrogantly apply to You.

Help us to understand more of who You are through the words You say about Yourself. Holy Spirit, open our hearts and minds and pour yourself in us.

You are the King, the immortal, invisible, only God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit!

Amen.