

Who Is the Jesus You Believe In?

Sermon by Pastor Renata Eustis

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Matthew 11: 16 – 19, 25 – 30

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Jesus says, “To what will I compare this generation?” Then he says some confusing things about flutes and dancers, and wailing and mourning. The best I can understand it, Jesus is saying, “You’re a bunch of whiners who can’t see what’s right in front of you.” He says that because they’ve completely missed the boat on understanding who he is.

And that matters. It still matters. If you’re a Christian, it matters who you understand Jesus to be.

It sounds like the general perception of Jesus—at least among the people he was talking to—is that he is a party boy who hangs out with the wrong kind of people. The people Jesus is talking to don’t really understand who he is—but some people do.

Thirty years ago, I was part of a congregation that didn’t have any clergy. In this congregation, the members took turns given the sermon. I still remember the first sermon I preached—the gist of it was the most important question isn’t “do you believe in Jesus?”. It’s “who is the Jesus you believe in?”

I still think it’s the most important question for those of us who are on this journey of becoming Christians—of becoming people who follow Jesus Christ.

I say “becoming” because I think we are all in process—we have not arrived.

Last week, I was introducing Vicar Tamika to people in Coffee Hour, and a long-time member—someone who has been a huge encourager of me—said some kind words about me and then said how I had really grown as a pastor, and that she would, too. I was thankful for those words about growing. But, as a recovering perfectionist, words about how much you’ve grown—or improved—can be a little hard to hear—because the message you hear is “you weren’t perfect out of the gate.”

Growing was the perfect message for Vicar Tamika on her first Sunday—that’s the whole point of internship—to grow into your pastoral identity. Seeing the growth in our vicars is what I love most about being a supervisor—and I’ve heard you all say the same.

But growth is not limited to the vicar or the pastor. Growing as a Christian is what it’s about for all of us, all the time. The centrality of growing is captured in our vision statement: “Always learning, always serving.” We are on a life-long journey of growing in our understanding of who Jesus is and growing in our following of him.

In the Gospel reading today, Jesus is talking to the religious leaders—the Pharisees and the Sadducees. These are the people who have put a lot of time into studying the scriptures. They are more confident than most about how well they understand God and what God is doing. Their problem is that they think they’ve got it down. They’re no longer

in the humble stance of a learner—of someone who knows how much they don't know—they're the experts. They're not in process—in their minds they've arrived.

And Jesus says, that's the problem. We hear it in his prayer: "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants." The wise and intelligent think they have God figured out—what God is like—how God acts—where God is revealed. Their minds are closed to seeing God in new ways—and they miss what's right in front of them.

On the other hand, the infants—the people regardless of their age—who know they have a lot to learn—who know they have a lifetime of learning ahead of them—these are the people who can see Jesus.

As Christians, we see in Jesus the fullest picture of who God is. Some Christians, I think, slide into the role of the Wise and Intelligent. We think we've arrived. We've got the truth. This is not a great place to be—because we're either mean and lording our truth over everyone else—or we're lazy and stuck. We have a fixed picture of who Jesus is and we're not moving—which means we're not growing—which means we're not alive in our faith.

What is your picture of Jesus? Has it changed over time? If it has, what has made it change?

A few years ago, some forensic anthropologists put together a likely picture of Jesus. Until I saw that picture, I never realized how attached I was to my picture of Jesus. Over time, I'd moved away from the pictures of a Jesus with European features and skin tone. But I never realized that I still pictured him with movie star looks—clean and well-groomed, with beautiful hair—until I saw this picture. I'm ashamed to say that the hardest part for me was that Jesus was short—which makes perfect sense—but, in my mind, Jesus was tall—and wrapping my mind around a short Jesus was tough.

What helped my literal picture of Jesus change was being shown another picture—by people who had no vested interest in keeping Jesus tall and well-groomed with beautiful hair. People—in this case forensic anthropologists—who could share the truth of Jesus as they know it. People who didn't have a fixed idea of what Jesus should look like, but who were open to the revelation.

Moving beyond the superficialities of appearance—what made my understanding of Jesus change the most was studying the Bible and praying with Central American refugees. These were economically poor people who had fled the brutal repression in Guatemala and El Salvador. They had suffered a lot—and they were still struggling here because they had come into this country illegally.

We met every week for the better part of 6 years—and my understanding of who Jesus is just jumped right out of the box it was in. They *knew* Jesus was with them—they *knew* Jesus felt their pain and their suffering. They also knew—with equal certainty—that Jesus came to make it clear that God is moving the world toward wholeness and a dignified life for every person. They knew that Jesus was calling them to be a part of that work.

What I saw through these refugees—who were well acquainted with sorrow and suffering—was a Jesus who transforms our suffering into a deeper way of loving.

The key ingredient in this growing was being in a faith community where I could learn from people who had really suffered and struggled in ways that I had not.

A similar thing happened—with much greater consequences—for Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In 1931, this brilliant German theologian came to Union Seminary in New York to study for a year. During that time, he did something that changed his understanding of who Jesus is more than any course he took at that renowned seminary.

Every week, he worshiped in Harlem with the Abyssinian Baptist Church. He taught Sunday School and he learned from the great pastor, Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. It may not be too much of an exaggeration to say that—for the first time in his life—Bonhoeffer found Jesus—or Jesus found him.

Abyssinian was a large congregation—and Adam Clayton Powell—led this congregation into an active social ministry—with those who were suffering because of both racism and the Great Depression. Through his year of being deeply and regularly involved there, Bonhoeffer met a Jesus who was a co-sufferer with those who had been excluded. He was deeply affected by the Spirituals which revealed a Jesus who was not confined by the church—a Jesus who was a shelter in the storm, a rock in a weary land, a mother to the motherless, a friend to the friendless.

When Bonhoeffer returned to Germany, he was following a different Jesus than many of the other German Christians. He writes, “As much as the Christian would like to remain distant from political struggle, nonetheless, even here the commandment of love urges the Christian to stand up for his neighbor. His faith and love must know whether the dictates of the state may lead him against his conscience.”

Who we understand Jesus to be is not just a personal matter of faith because we are followers—and it matters who we are following. That’s captured in our vision statement, too: always learning, always serving. We’re always learning more about who Jesus is—we’re always trying to understand who he is—not as an end in itself but so we can follow—so we can serve others like he did. So we can live for others like he did.

We’re in process. We’re on a journey. One of the huge blessings for me of being here for close to 16 years is that I can see how we’ve grown. I can see how people have grown individually and I can see how we’ve grown as a community. And, I know we’ve got more growing ahead of us. Jesus is not in a box—and neither are we. What else can we say but thanks be to God.

Amen.