

Sermon Preached by The Reverend Jonathon W. Jensen, Rector
Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year C
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John 10:22-30

“If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.” These are the words of some religious people gathered around Jesus. I wonder how many of us have asked this question in some form or another. Wouldn’t you like a straight answer from Jesus? If you are really the one we should listen to, follow, and be like, tell us plainly and clearly. There are so many competing ideologies and religions all purporting to be the one real – truth. Are you really the one? Tell us plainly.

While we may have honest and heartfelt intentions, those who asked the question originally probably did not. It is likely they were looking for a way to trap Jesus. At worst, to them, he was a manipulator and at best just a crazy man claiming to be God. If he responded by saying plainly – for the record – “Yes, I’m the One” – they would have legal grounds to get rid of him.

The problem was exacerbated because Jesus was in Jerusalem during a major feast. Jerusalem was a center of culture and religious power. It was one thing for him to preach in the deserts or small towns. If there was a man in Jerusalem attracting crowds and claiming to be the Messiah, it was a threat to power and the way things had been. They expected the one from God to be a spiritual, political, and military leader to restore Israel to its former glory. The people had clear expectations of what their leaders should look like and what he should do.

What if Jesus had addressed their statement directly? Yes, I am the Messiah. Then what? Would we react or live any differently? Would it make any difference to us? A church member once told me she wished Jesus would just speak more plainly. He’s too cryptic and convoluted, she said. When he does speak directly, he often says things we might not rather hear. Pray for your enemies. Forgive and you will be forgiven. Love your neighbor. Sell what you have and give to the poor. Take up your cross and follow me. That’s just plain meddling.

Examples are given throughout the Bible pointing us to the fact that the first disciples believed Jesus to be the One from God because they **experienced** him as the spiritual and religious teacher of teachers. Near the end of this Gospel of John, the writer states it plainly. He writes, “In his disciples’ presence Jesus performed many other miracles which are not written down in this book. But these have been written in order that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through faith you may have life.” One might say that is the point of the entire New Testament. They wrote these things because they **had experienced** Jesus as the one who taught and lived like following God made a difference that would change the world.

If the Gospel statement doesn't convince you – don't worry – you are in good company. A perfectly reasoned argument claiming Jesus is the world changer or stories pointing to that fact just don't work for most people. Those who believed him to be the Messiah were not convinced through argument or miracle but because they experienced Jesus in their lives first hand.

The followers of Jesus came to know and love him not because they are told to – but because they experienced his love day after day. In teaching, preaching, healing, miracles, just by being together – that made his message real and true. For something to be **real** for most people, it must be experienced. We are increasingly mistrustful of authority figures – be it a priest, professor, police, a politician, or someone running for president. Authority or tradition is less trusted than experience.

Let's put believing the truth of something by experience into our context. Is this a place to be told about an institution called Church or a community of mission in which we experience Jesus changing lives and the world? Do you experience Jesus here in the Eucharist, in music, in the space, in silence, in fellowship, in serving our neighbors, and even sometimes in the sermon?

As a thought experiment this week, I asked several people two questions. The answers are revealing. I also asked this about ten years ago with similar results. Just free association.

1) What comes to mind when you hear the word **Jesus**? The responses were – life, peace, forgiveness, friend, kindness, prophet, miracles, good, acceptance, tolerance, holy, liberation – I want to be like Jesus. What do **you** think of when you hear the word, "Jesus?"

2) The second question was – What comes to mind when you hear the word **Christian**? The responses were – after some nervous laughter – boring, confused, goody goody, hypocritical, rigid, inconsistent, intolerant, judgmental – I don't want to be like the Christians I've met. Why are the responses to "Jesus" and to "Christian" different? Are you surprised? Isn't a follower of Jesus supposed to be like Jesus – even just a little bit? What do **you** think of when you hear the word Christian?

The responses say a lot and are what I would have guessed. One person even said, "I used to avoid Christians but I've met a couple recently who are okay. Maybe I'll give them a chance." That is our country, our neighborhood, and our mission field.

Our real mission as disciples of Christ is not to try to convince everyone our way is right the only way to be. We don't need to waste time plainly telling all those who will listen and those who won't that Jesus is the answer to questions they aren't even asking. Jesus knew it wouldn't matter to tell people who he is. We, the followers of Christ, don't have **to tell others plainly** that Jesus is the Messiah. We show plainly in our lives and as a community of mission together. We show who Jesus is to our neighbors by cultivating lives with value and meaning and generosity and purpose that flows from being like the one we dare to follow.

What do you think of when you hear the word, Jesus?