

WHO ARE THEY SAYING I AM?

To be sure, the sermon title does not reflect our most important concern. What matters to us far more than what anybody else is saying about Jesus is who *we* think Jesus is. That's what matters and makes a difference in our lives, regardless of what anybody else may think about it. Sometimes it's nice to be so self-centered. However much that may be mocked and derided, it brings greater clarity and takes us past a lot of play-acting and pretense and posturing. Ultimately, who we say Jesus is and what we really believe about Him will shape and light our lives – for better or for worse.

Nevertheless, we do live in a world with lots of other people. We know that what they think and how they live impacts us, whether we want it to or not. We are not always very sure about how much we impact those around us, but probably a lot more than we imagine. It is also true that opinions regarding Jesus vary more today than perhaps ever before in history. The last fifty years, at least in the United States, have seen some remarkable changes in this regard. When I was a boy, there were always a few atheists around, if you hunted for them. Bertrand Russell got a lot of attention and sold a lot of books playing the atheist card. Walter Kaufmann, a far deeper and more thoughtful man, wrote a book called *The Faith of a Heretic*. He wasn't just fooling around. I often encouraged study group people to read his book. I would tell them that if you can read Kaufmann and keep your head and your faith straight, then you aren't just mouthing words somebody else thinks you should be saying.

But the reality fifty years ago was that most people across the land considered themselves to be Christians. The vast majority of them either went to church or felt guilty about missing a Sunday. It was clear to them that they should go to church, and pretty much everyone agreed that all of us would be better people if we did attend church.

Today that has all changed. Far fewer people consider themselves to be Christians, at least in any formal way. Most people think that going to church is usually a waste of time. Few would agree that going to church would make them better people. There are more atheists and agnostics today than ever before (perhaps only because it's now okay to say so). A growing number of people consider it a mark of good citizenship to make sure that Christianity does not have an unfair influence in

the larger culture. To them, “unfair” means “any.” The animosity toward the Christian Faith in general, and toward any practicing or confessing Christians in particular, is greater today than ever before in my lifetime.

So what! So this is a new year. In the weeks ahead I am going to be telling you about some of the things I see, believe, and love about Jesus. It won't be all cut-and-dried, as we used to say. It won't come like a treatise in systematic theology. That is, we will bounce all over the place: from healing, to teachings; from encounters, to incidents that reveal Jesus' choices. And I think it's still surprising to compare what most people think Jesus said – and how they think He wants us to behave – with how Jesus Himself lived and behaved.

In the weeks ahead I am going to be telling you about some of the things I see, believe, and love about Jesus. Along the way and more clearly than ever, I hope to learn what you see, believe, and love about Jesus. In both our new TNC Forum (“Center for Intriguing Thoughts,” starting next Sunday) and in our discussions after the worship services, I suspect this will be happening more and more.

In any case, *The New Church* really is about Jesus. *The New Church* really is about: How can we be followers of Jesus? In many places, even in many churches in our time, it feels like and looks like people are trying mostly to find loopholes, excuses, and reasons that will allow them to get out of following Jesus. Perhaps this is not a conscious intention in many cases. But even studying the Bible or studying theology – studying Christian beliefs – seems often to be a subtle way to distance ourselves from a personal relationship with Jesus, protecting ourselves from actually deciding to follow Him. I will be suggesting, more for myself than for anyone else, that in 2012 we keep asking ourselves: Am I looking for loopholes, am I looking for excuses – or am I truly looking and longing to find ways to follow my Lord?

But if I am going to ask such questions, I do need to be aware of the atmosphere and attitudes of the culture all around me. If I want to find any loopholes, they will be provided very quickly. If I want even learned, religious experts to help me find excuses for being half-hearted or confused or for staying on any fences regarding Jesus, that also will be quickly provided. Allegiance or commitment to Jesus Christ is not the hallmark of our day and time. Neither is it the hallmark of what our churches are preaching or teaching. Neither is it easy or simple to be true followers of Jesus, even when that is our true and top priority – our heart's desire.

Such a remark might sound strange and surprising in many places. I doubt that it does in *The New Church*. It is my impression that we are an unusual combination of open-minded yet religiously sincere seekers. We are not afraid to ask questions, yet we also hope to find some answers. Lots of people in our time are very open-minded and are willing to ask endless questions, but they have very little interest in finding any answers. In fact, to them an answer is just something to turn into another question. But what are the questions under all the lesser questions? For serious searchers – for real pilgrims, for true seekers – the real questions are not a mere intellectual pursuit. It certainly is that, for as far as that goes. But the real questions are: How shall I live? What am I living for? What or whom do I really believe in enough to bet my life on it? The intellectual pursuit, however serious and sincere, is merely the preamble. Hopefully we go on growing and learning long after we find convictions on which to base our lives. As always with Jesus, finding Him is not the end; it is only the beginning. Nevertheless, a true seeker is not determined to keep life free from all commitments or unsullied by any devotion or allegiance. Finding no one and nothing to follow is neither freedom nor brilliance. It only means that some people are determined to keep their lives empty and separated from any real purpose.

That brings me to a couple of preambulatory remarks. It would be better if I could keep away from such things, but that's more difficult than you might know.

1.) Even though Jesus does outrank us (at least from any Christian perspective), we each get to decide what we think of Him, how we will regard Him, and what, if any, *place* He will have in our lives. That is a hugely significant part of the passage we just read. Jesus is on retreat with His disciples at Caesarea Philippi. There is no mission or ministry up there – at the headwaters of the Jordan River, thirty miles north of Capernaum, which is home base for Jesus' ministry. Jesus and His top disciples have walked thirty miles north of the Sea of Galilee. The territory they are in is under the rule of Philip the Tetrarch, not King Herod. So Jesus has waited for a “vacation time” – a retreat – a place and time where He and His disciples will not be interrupted by the responsibilities or demands of the mission they are all now involved in.

And now, with time for reflection and real sharing, His double-barreled questions come: “What are people saying about me? Who do they think I am? And who do *you* think I am?”

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Jesus has only referred to Himself in public as the “Son of Man.” Suggestive, but enigmatic. Prophetic overtones, for sure, but not decisive. It is enough to make His detractors angry, but not enough to stand up in court – that is, not enough to get Him arrested.

Part of the drama of the Jesus Story – and part of the puzzle – is that Jesus does not try to *make* people believe in Him. Lots of His followers have failed to follow Him in this regard. That is, they are pushing His identity and/or trying to *make* people believe in Him in a way that Jesus never did. Jesus’ Way is not the way of our world. No other king we have ever known or heard about was being so reticent about his position or his identity. What we hear is: “My name is Jake McGee, and I am running for President.” Even that is the mild form. That at least asks for support and backing. “My name is Charlemagne [or Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Henry the Eighth, or whatever] and I was chosen by God to rule over you, so I rule by divine right and decree.” But who would ever have imagined that the true and rightful King – the greatest King who ever came or ever will come to our planet – would be waiting and watching for people to “catch on” from their own observations, their own experience, their own awakening, their own inner discernment?

Out of earshot from all possible observers, Jesus quietly asks His nearest and dearest friends: “What do you think? You’ve been watching me, seeing what I do, hearing what I teach and preach, going about with me – what do you think? Have any of you started to catch on?” And they have ... started to. But at the end of the retreat, before going back into the mission where others are involved, Jesus gives them strict orders not to breathe a word of it to anybody else. Jesus wants people to come to their own conclusions and convictions about Him. How can we understand such a phenomenon? No Twitter, no Facebook, no website – not even ads in the paper or on television? What is going on?

If Jesus has anywhere near the stature and titles we now assign to Him, how is it that we are all *still being given the choice* – still being allowed to decide who He is, what we think of Him, and what place, if any, He will hold in our lives? I repeat: that is not the way of our world! How can Jesus ever hope to get anything done in our kind of world if He is going to go at it that way? I am your King – your true and rightful King – even the Messiah, the Son of God. But only if you say so. Only if you agree. Only if you want me to be. And Jesus will never ever be our King on any other basis. Allegiance and obedience to Jesus is chosen and truly given, or it does not exist. That is the way it works, and the

way it still is on January 1, 2012: My Kingdom is not of this world, and does not work on any of the principles or ways of this world. Choose Jesus and He is there for us – instantly and all the way, even unto eternity. But without this choice on our part – nothing. Without our response – without our wanting and choosing Him to be our King – it is for us as if He had never come.

To me, that is incredible. Incredibly sad – and incredibly wonderful at the same time. And the truth is, sometimes it greatly bothers and annoys me. I truly love Jesus for being this way. But when I am hurt, angry, in trouble, annoyed, or discouraged, I think to myself: “Why can’t You just be the King we really need? Why don’t You step up to the plate and call for the allegiance You deserve, and make everybody obey? You could fix things in two days if You would play by our rules. What in the world is wrong with You!? Any idiot could tell You that Your Way will never work here. Take the ring, and use it for everybody’s good.” (Tolkien wasn’t just writing a cute story, was he?) And about that time I usually get over my tantrum, apologize deeply and sincerely, and thank Jesus again for being the King He really is.

2.) The other side of this same coin, from a certain perspective: If we do declare Him our King, we cannot reduce His identity just to please others who are disturbed by it. I think that’s quite a sticky wicket in our time. More and more people think it’s really important that at least some of us Christians try to be more open and “friendly” toward people of other faiths. Apparently we come across sounding like we think we are superior, or that our faith is clearly the best or the only true one. Of course, all other religious people feel that way about their faith too, but somehow that doesn’t give as much offense. Some Hindu and Buddhist teachers claim they are open and respectful of all religions as much as of their own. But that is disingenuous. They only say such things after having reduced Christianity down to their own definitions and concepts. That is, no Christian would consider their descriptions or assessments of Jesus or of Christianity to be fair or accurate. And if they were, the Hindu or Buddhist teacher would cease to be so understanding or accepting. It is, in short, a good “missionary” ploy, but neither honest nor accurate.

Anyway, the problem is that we want to be open, accepting, willing to share. But we belong to a religion that declares Jesus to be the true Messiah and Son of God. We cannot share this identity or “position” with any other person or being, without denying and rejecting our claims regarding Jesus. And that is not acceptable either.

My “solution,” as you know, is for all of us to stay honest with what we do claim and believe, and stop trying to make any of it palatable to the ears of others – and to stop expecting others to reduce anything they believe to please us. And when possible, all of us should try to share our spiritual experiences, rather than try to falsify or homogenize our theology. It is nevertheless a sticky wicket. I may not know with great clarity or precision how to define who Jesus is. But I do know that what I mean by claiming Him as my Savior – and the position He holds as my Lord – cannot be shared by any other. Jesus did mention the problem to us: *“No one can serve two masters,”* He said. (Matthew 6:24; Luke 16:13) It is part of the whole category of pruning, of staying focused, of being patient, of becoming willing to obey the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Jesus was never any good at the shotgun approach. Why do we think His ministry lasted for only three years among us? He is the purest laser-beam mentality we have ever seen. *“Purity of heart is to will one thing.”* *“He who is not for me is against me – and he who does not gather with me, scatters.”*

I mention this at the moment only to remind you, as we head into conversations that will be specific to Jesus, that this is and will be an issue. There are some who will be exceedingly annoyed by such conversations. In my opinion, this cannot be helped. None of us talk about Jesus for very long without offending somebody. So get ready. And don’t be surprised. I do keep hoping that the love of Christ, which keeps increasing on the inside, will get big enough to make up for some of the damage I do by my exclusive love and loyalty for Him. I no longer have other choices, since I can still remember what it was like when others were running my life. That is no longer okay with me.

On a much lighter note: We will encounter some who cannot fathom why there are any issues in the first place. If we just read the Bible, don’t we know everything there is to know about Jesus? How logical that sounds! If we just know the scales, don’t we know everything there is to know about playing the piano?

Happily, all of you know it’s not that simple. How do we deal honestly with the New Testament records? The Gospels come out of Aramaic and are written in Greek. Most of us study them in English. All translations are also interpretations; there is no help for it. The entire New Testament was written two thousand years ago. If we pay no attention to customs, usage, context, politics, issues, and attitudes back then – in comparison to now – how can we understand? Even between

Los Angeles, Atlanta, Seoul, and Hong Kong, there are significant differences in language, culture, and values. What if you are a Gemini and I am a Scorpio? Will that make any difference to how we hear the Bible? If you were born into wealth and privilege and I was born into skimpy and scornful or abuse, will that make a difference?

If we believe everything Matthew tells us about Jesus, we cannot believe everything Luke tells us about Jesus. And that doesn't even get us to John. What does Jesus mean by "love"? And why does He almost never *talk* about love, except to quote a few Old Testament comments? Who does *Jesus* think He is? Does Jesus break from Old Testament teaching and convictions about God, or does He merely rework them a little bit? What was Jesus trying to accomplish in His ministry on earth? Did He accomplish it, or did His enemies cut the ministry short by killing Him so soon?

Is Jesus a simple, though profound, peasant carpenter, or is He the most brilliant mind we have ever known? Did Jesus just do what came to mind day by day, or was He an incredible planner and strategist, following patterns and precepts (from prophets and Old Testament threads and themes) with unerring precision and allegiance to God?

Just read the Bible? Just read the Bible?! I have been reading the Bible for almost seventy years now, and one thing I know for sure is that I do not agree with a lot of other people who read the Bible – nor they with me. Is communication and understanding regarding the Bible hopeless then? In many cases, yes it is. At least in this realm. I do know that. Do you know that yet? I think it is really important to admit that, and to learn not to create heat when there is no possibility of light. Some people hold presuppositions so entirely different from my presuppositions that trying to communicate about any religious concepts, never mind about Jesus, will only cause aggravation, and waste time and life. Does that mean I think they are bad people or that they have no value? Strangely enough, not at all. They may be very sincere believers, and they may do wonderful things in their efforts to serve and love Jesus. Yet their beliefs are of no use to me; I have been around the infield (so to speak) with their kind of beliefs so many times that I really do know this now. Nor are my beliefs of any use to them. What lights my life would only darken theirs. And what lights their life would be utterly abhorrent to mine.

Does Jesus give either of us any advice about such a situation? Of course: *“Other sheep I have, not of this fold.” “Do not give dogs what is holy, nor cast your pearls before swine.” “Shake the dust”* Let it go. There is plenty to do where the reception and receptivity is much better. Be busy where you can make a difference. And you see, this advice holds as good for them as it does for me.

Just because we are Christians and want to be loving does not mean we are brain-dead. I know that most of the people around me don't mean what I mean when they say “Jesus.” Do any of you mean what I mean when you say “Jesus”? Probably not by any precise definition. But you and I come a lot closer than some of the folk I was just talking about – close enough at least that we can still talk, share, ponder, wonder, benefit from our efforts to communicate, and be blessed by our desires to share and strengthen each other's faith.

In any case, I still hunger to talk about Jesus, and to share with other people who care about Him. Right or wrong, I keep hoping that more and more people will mean what I mean when they say “Jesus.” And that when they think about Jesus, they will see what I see, believe what I believe, and love Him as much or more than I do. How silly and unforgivable is that?

Well, if somebody loves Jesus more than I do, that might make me a little jealous – at first. But that would still be okay. Do I think anybody would be better off if they loved Jesus more? Oh yes, indeed I do! They would be infinitely happier, more fulfilled, more purposeful, more peaceful and patient, and, by clearer definitions, more loving – at least far more loved.

So why isn't all of this truer of me? Such thoughts – such self-awareness – shut most of us up, at least at times. If Jesus loves us so much and helps us so much, why are we not more perfect ourselves? But such awareness does not shut me up – not anymore. Knowing and loving Jesus is more important than how I am doing. Caught in the crossfire between who Jesus really is and how well I am demonstrating my faith in Him – that is no longer enough to keep me quiet. Trusting Him can still win out, even over all my imperfections. I hope you are coming to this same awareness too.

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And on the hard side of this crossfire – the part about what a poor example I am – the truth is: We are working on it, He and I. The grace and love and delight in Life is all greater than it used to be. What I see and believe about Jesus gets truer all the time. So yes, I want that for each of you too. Not as it comes to me. But as He comes to you.

A new year is upon us. I do truly hope it will be filled with many blessings for each one of you. I hope some of them will be material blessings, some of them relational blessings, and some of them blessings of health, clarity of purpose, renewed hope, or increased energy. But most of all I hope that *The New Church* will lead us all into growth, renewal, and far more awareness of who Jesus really is, and how much He really loves each one of us. That'll do it! You realize it too, don't you? That'll do it! "*BEHOLD, I AM MAKING ALL THINGS NEW.*" (Revelation 21:5)