

What does Jesus need us to know?¹
Sermon February 5th, 2017
Series Credo: Faithful Moorings

This sermon like my last one a couple of weeks ago continues the conversation with our context.

That Sunday, I responded to the women's march

This Sunday as we pick up our series

Credo: Faithful Moorings, which is our attempt to revisit, reclaim and redefine the main articles of our Faith.

my topic this week is Jesus.

Granted it is not possible to say everything there is to say about Jesus on one Sunday despite Jeff's advertisement that I would do so.

So, I've narrowed it down – if you can say that to

what we need to know about Jesus

in order to deal with our current social/political/religious context.

Or you might say, what Jesus needs us to know.

First, his context was socially/politically and religiously complex like ours only on a much smaller scale.

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Years ago when I was in Palestine/Israel, I sat up on the hill on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, now known as the Sea of Tiberius, not far from Capernaum where

it's easy to imagine Jesus also sitting, given that we know he often climbed the hill behind his home base in Capernaum to pray.

From there

he could see the whole of the sea stretched out before him (roughly the Sea is 20 km long and 10 plus km wide – smaller than Lake Ontario) up on the cliffs on the east shore were ten major Roman cities known as the Roman Decapolis,

Behind him and to his left following the Jordan River north to its source in the Hermon Mountain Range in Caesarea Philippi was a shrine to ancient gods and during Jesus time honoured the Roman emperor as God.

Down in front of him – Capernaum, home of a Jewish community and synagogue but also a town through which ran a major Roman road. A garrison of mercenary soldiers under Roman centurion supervision was also stationed there. This is where Jesus stayed in Peter's house when he wasn't travelling.

Down the shore to his right – the northwestern shore of the sea were Jewish fishing villages and they would have stretched almost all the way down to Tiberius, home of one of the Jewish puppet kings of Roman rule. Further to the south beyond his vision – a four or five day walk was Jerusalem the center of religious power and formerly crazy Jewish King Herod's territory.

The poor were poor, and the wealthy elite were either religious leaders, or tax collectors or Roman commanders. Within the disgruntled masses resistance and revolution were brewing. The Zealots among them wanted to change the political landscape with force.

It was socially complex, and politically unstable despite the propaganda of the Pax Romana or peace of Rome. Within a generation of Jesus, the Jews presumably led by the Zealots among them revolted against Rome and Rome crushed and destroyed their great temple.

It was a complicated world

What else do we know about Jesus? Or what else would he like us to know?

In the face of this social/political complexity he did several things that each of the four gospels attest. He preached in the synagogues and hillsides and beachfronts, he taught his followers through parables and stories and he healed their diseases. And according to Matthew, he had compassion on them as if they were sheep without a shepherd. Over and over again his words and actions revealed his deep compassion for all, and especially the least of these.

His tools were story, healing power, prayer, compassion and a divinely inspired sense of his purpose.

Another thing we know about Jesus is that he had followers. Understandably, his divinely inspired sense of purpose, his healing power and his storytelling made him compelling. People listened to him, were amazed by his words and actions and deeply grateful for his healing and wanted to be near him.

And again each gospel attests that there were a chosen few who formed his inner circle. The gospels name the 12 men, but we know there were also women who provided for his needs out of their own resources, Luke 8:3, and who stayed with him when he was crucified and were the first to experience his living presence at his resurrection.

Finally we know that he had a significant connection with God whom he called Abba or Father and that he was baptized by, guided by and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

In John we hear him pray for his followers that just as he is in God and God is in him, so it would be for those who followed him.

He longed for them to experience union with God in the same way that he experienced union with God and he knew that when he was no longer physically with them, they too would be baptized by, guided by and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

So, to recap briefly, what do we know about Jesus?

Jesus' political situation was socially/religiously/politically complex and dangerous.

Second, he approached his situation with the tools of compassion for all – he preached and taught in every imaginable context, healed those who needed healing, and in words and actions showed people the kind of universe he wanted to live in, the kind of universe he wanted them to live in and he called it the Kingdom of God – a compelling alternative to his challenging and fraught context.

Third, he wanted people to follow him and they did

and he told them that it wouldn't be easy,

that they would be hated,

that they needed to take up their own cross

and that living as he did with compassion for all wouldn't just make everything nice and neat, and peaceful, - Matt. 10:34

Do not think that I have come to bring peace, I did not come to bring peace but a sword." Families will be divided within themselves.

and fourth, he did everything he did from a connection to God whom he called his father and through the power of the Spirit.

And now I ask, in our context are we being the kind of followers of Jesus that Jesus would recognize? Again what does Jesus want us to know?

There is more political anger and anxiety right now than I recall for a really long time if ever in my lifetime. Something has gone horribly wrong and we're all trying to figure out what it is.

There are of course several insightful articles that are helping us to be both informed and wary about where we find ourselves globally in the face of such an erratic leader south of the border.

And in some of those articles we are being warned to remember that anger and fear can lead to the kind of civil unrest that may give this leader justification for further civil suppression and/or reason to start a war.

So as Jesus' followers, who live in Jesus as Jesus lives in us and empowered by the Spirit – can we hear Jesus address us in our context?

The first place that I heard Jesus this week was through a thoughtful article in the Guardian by Zoe Williams.

https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/feb/01/totalitarianism-in-age-donald-trump-lessons-from-hannah-arendt-protests?CMP=fb_gu

She brought our attention to the writing of Hannah Arendt, a Jewish survivor of WWII who came up with the phrase, the “banality of evil” - a set of ordinary mundane decisions day by day. It is not the big things that will be the undoing of society it is all the little ones all in a certain direction. By contrast, Jesus' actions and hopefully the actions of his followers have power when we respond likewise:

a million daily actions that resist the hate with compassion and goodness.

Day in and day out, Jesus taught and preached and healed and lived compassion in a tiny plot of geography between the east end of the

Mediterranean and the Jordan river. Palestine/Israel is a pretty tiny part of the world. In that small space Jesus' tool was compassion person by person by person and his followers are called to do likewise.

I'm reminded of one of my favourite poems that I have quoted before – The mad farmer's liberation front – just a few lines from it.

So, friends, every day do something that won't compute.

Love the Lord.

Love the world.

Work for nothing.

Take all that you have and be poor.

Love someone who does not deserve it...

and by doing these things and many others

we will be practicing resurrection.

which is the last line of Wendell Berry's poem

Practice Resurrection

And this leads me to the most important thing that we know about Jesus.

That I'm certain Jesus wants us to know

Resurrection

Jesus lives – is alive.

We know it because Jesus lives in us, according to his prayer that he is in us and we are in him, just as the Father, or Abba God was in Jesus and Jesus was in him.

Call me crazy, but I talk out loud to him sometimes and in composing this sermon asked him what he wants us to know.

Now I don't hear voices in my head,
but I do hear Jesus through my familiarity with him and his stories and the way his Spirit lives in me.

So, because I talk to Jesus, I also asked him.

What's up with this tension between praying that we all be One and saying that you didn't bring peace but a sword.

Christians don't feel like One these days. In fact we seem more divided than ever.

I think that "not peace but a sword" for us today means that we will either understand what it means to follow him or we will not – and these things will divide us – even as his prayer remains that we be One in him. What I'm confident it does not condone is taking up the sword or violent persuasion. It was a metaphor.

However, we need to be as wise as serpents about other things that actually divide us – not just differing views.

We need to know that the echo chamber of our internet system that knows what we want or where we will click before we want something or click somewhere means that we barely actually know the person who names themselves a Christian somewhere else on the globe.

The division between conservative and progressive Christians has never been greater and when we stereotype each other, fear each other and frankly do not love each other none of us are the kind of Jesus' followers that Jesus will recognize as his own.

And so I urge all of us to take the painful and difficult step of staying connected.

I have only one friend that I know of who has radically different Christian and political views than I do and I don't wish to lose her. I know I need to call her and maintain connection.

I have a brother who lives in Texas who does not fully understand the current uproar in Canada. Apparently our news paid way more attention to the presidential inauguration than his did. I talked with him a couple of weeks ago and it's time to talk again.

Likewise I have heard of others who tentatively and tenaciously are reaching across borders so that we do not become what we most decry –so homogenous in our correct or progressive views that we do not hear the longing for life of our sisters and brothers who seem to think of Jesus entirely differently than we do.

And still we have Jesus' prayer in John that they may be one as he is one with God.

The living Jesus is our compassionate teacher.

He knows the depths of anger and anxiety we feel about the swirl of political craziness that is causing real harm to real people and our planet

He saw his version of it as he prayed on the hills overlooking it all.

And so if I listen really carefully to the Spirit of Jesus that lives in me and I encourage you to do the same
Let's ask him what it means at this time to practice resurrection.

Resurrection is life that has already conquered death.
And we get to be part of that resurrection life now
- in a tiny million ways day by day.

Thanks be to God through Christ Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit.