



LESSONS for LIFE

Sunday, April 13, 2008- 7pm

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Who Do You Say That I Am? Part III

Rev. Jo Bell

Welcome! We are in the third of a three part series, the last sermon of a three part series. How many of you, just for a feeling for me, have not been here either last week or the week before? Alright, I'll review. The sermon series is called 'Jesus, who do you say that I am?' and starting after Easter, which is a great time to ask the question 'who do you say that I am', it's actually a question that Jesus first asked. And when He asked that question there were many answers given and scholars say, "Yes, many answers were given and He did nothing in His power to kind of clear up all the different answers." So we have spent time taking a look at the concepts. The first session was really a pre and post Easter Jesus. Jesus the historical figure, the man and Jesus the risen Christ and differentiating the two and seeing the importance of differentiating the two to really seeing Jesus of Nazareth, a man who walked on the earth, what He may have taught, what He may have said, what He may have done. As well as the risen Christ and the spirit of Jesus that is now present on the earth and present with us each day. And we talked about how dangerous it actually can be to blend those two and therefore to possibly lose both. That was two weeks ago. Last week we took a look at the word "You" and who do you say that I am? And we looked at our very selves and who do we need Jesus to be and allowed that agency, that responsibility. How do we follow the One? How do we follow the teacher, the healer? How do we follow the one that all the stories have been written about? So we grab some of the oneness back on us. This week I shared that we would talk about Jesus' understanding of God because of all things the Jesus seminar people and our own Canadian Rex Wyler, a brand new book out, there are so many books out. As a matter of fact you all keep sending me articles, thank you very much, "Have you read this, have you read this, have you read this?: the Maclean's article, the letters from the Maclean's article and other Maclean's articles and now the Toronto Star. Everything, everyone gets into this who was He around Easter. There was one author that said, 'Jesus books do real good in April, not so well in August.' Anyway, loads of stuff we've talked about because the scholars say that with all the new findings and historical data and the discoveries being made we know more today about the early Christian Church than we did even just fifteen years ago because so much new scholarship has been developed based on the discoveries and authors and scholars writing on those discoveries. So that kind of leads us to tonight. We have discussed though that when you go and seek Jesus and you are willing to take a look at the Gospels and who wrote what, why they may have written what and not take that as the literal truth, that you may lose some of who you thought your Jesus was. Not the intention of this series at all but rather like Jesus to invite us to look at something we thought we knew, maybe someone we thought we knew and to look at Him very differently. We put it back to the Matrix. Remember Neo had the option to take the red pill and go to a place unknown to him, to step outside the matrix, the conventional wisdom of his time and to see, or be willing to see, a new reality. Or if he didn't want to he could have taken the blue pill and forgotten everything he might have known, might have learned. He would go back into the matrix, go back living inside



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the conventional wisdom of his time. And that's what I want to talk about tonight, conventional wisdom. Conventional wisdom is the unwritten way things are and I believe that Jesus was a guy who just didn't buy that. I believe that He was a spirit person, believed Himself to be anointed by God and who taught an alternative wisdom - a wisdom of the road less traveled, especially in his time, a wisdom that is counter-culture to the dominant consciousness of His time. Conventional wisdom can invade a culture and become the norm of a society and really kind of life up and embody all the values of a society, of a people. And living inside that conventional wisdom, not questioning it but being inside it is kind of like living in the matrix; not quite going outside of what is understood per se. And we get bound up by these ways of being without ever knowing it. Jesus always invited anybody who would listen to Him to step outside of what they thought they knew and to look at things differently. He used incredibly invitational language and He often said, "Consider this" and he flipped the conventional wisdom of His time upside down which did not make Him ridiculously popular. The conventional wisdom of his time really saw God as a law-giver and judge, the one that must be satisfied, the one whose requirements must be met if one is to win their way into heaven. In Jesus' alternative view - invited people to change their image of God from a judge to one whose primary characteristic was compassion. To Jesus, the God He knew was one of cosmic generosity and an overflowing love for life and creation. To Jesus compassion was the central quality of God. It might be hard to see that in 2008 what a radical concept that was but to sneak back into the Gospels and the different ways those Gospel writers told the story. In Luke we read, "be compassionate as God is compassionate" yet in Matthew, side by side, written just about 20 years later, we read, "be perfect as God is perfect." Grab that shift. From, "be compassionate to be like God" to "be perfect to be like God." And then the King James version moves even further and changes it all and says merciful, "be Merciful as God is merciful." In all three of those they call us to a different way of being. If Jesus saw God as compassionate, in the Hebrew of the time compassion means 'to feel with.' And compassion is quite different from mercy because, well mercy seems to denote that there seems to be superiority in relationship with a subordinate. One gives mercy right? because they can, because they are the one who's held power over. Compassion suggests something very different. Compassion gives life, nourishes, cares, embraces and compassion is much of a 'with' than an 'over.' Really different shifts with a couple different words. So to be compassionate as God is compassionate, for Jesus to say that it was quite a radical thing to say because they didn't necessarily see God as compassionate, as God's primary characteristics. Instead the conventional wisdom of His time said God is not compassionate, God is holy. Holy. And there is the central conflict between Jesus and the conventional order of His day because compassion, for Him, was political. He directly and repeatedly challenged the socio-political paradigm of His world and really compassion became a political event for Jesus. Now, He was often found in conflict with His peers, with His friends, with society about the purity laws and issues. Sometimes in North American churches and European churches we don't see the stories that were told or the parables that were told with Jewish eyes. We don't see the purity system inside those stories so we think we understand them and yet we are missing this big chunk of what He may actually have been saying. Because purity was political and it structured the first century Jewish/Palestinian society into a caste system based on purity, based on holiness. Someone can be more holy than another because someone could be more pure than another. Stay with me a little bit here. God laid down laws in Leviticus and said, "Speak to all the congregation of Israel and say to them you shall be holy, for I, your God, am holy." He said that to a tribe of Levites who were to be set apart and care for the temple. Therefore Levites were seen and required to be more holy than the average priests. Okay, required. What this created was an



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economics and a politics of purity and an order of pure, and a little less pure and a little less pure and a little less pure to impure. And that really was the order of the day. That is how we create an outcast, someone who is seen as outside the purity system, who isn't upholding the laws of purity, who isn't like God actually and we create 'other' and 'unclean.' This 'other' and 'unclean', these impure, can be people, they can be places, they can be things, times, entire peoples. Sometimes purity was attached to your birth, your birth order, where you were born, who you were born unto. Sometimes it had to do with what you did. Did you follow the purity codes or not? Tough thing though was to follow many of them, was expensive. Purity then got kind of got broadened as the years went on. People who are not whole, people who are chronically ill were less pure and were actually called impure. Outside the city walls, don't come to temple, don't come inside community because when you touch someone who is impure you actually became impure yourself and had to go through rituals of cleansing. Men, in their natural state were thought to be more pure than women mostly because childbirth and menstruation were considered sources of impurity and because that was a natural way of a woman; there is where the system broke as well. So to sum up, the fact of this purity system which was really supposed to be about God, right, the intention was probably appropriate and in that day meant for good but what happened, as humans often do, is we break stuff over the years, we misinterpret what we change, what we alter, and what happens is that the effect of the system created a world that had sharp social boundaries between pure and impure, whole and not whole, male and female, rich and poor and Jesus didn't like it at all. So inside many of His parables are attacks on the purity system. One of them that many of us think we know is the story of the Good Samaritan. In many churches that has been taught as a story that talks about hospitality or inhospitality because it was not a hospitable thing to do or a good neighbor thing to do to walk by a man who was half dead on the other side of the street. Yet, if you take time to sneak back and put Jewish eyes to the story and understand the purity system that drove people at that time, the priest and the Levite, at the first part of the story, who walked by were required, obligated actually to maintain a certain level of purity. Contact with death was major impure and it sounded like the guy over on the other side of the street was half dead. You would have had to go so close to find out if he was dead or not that they would have actually become impure. So, not based on good neighbor, not based on being inhospitable, they walked because purity was the primary order of the day and they had to remain pure. On the other hand, the Samaritan, who by the way because he was a Samaritan by the rules of the purity system was already so impure that it didn't matter. So he could go over and offer aid. So see how grabbing another understanding, putting Jewish eyes to the story, the story changes radically? Again, why we so misunderstand the writings in the Bible is because we try to put a western spin on them. We don't want to do that but so often we are simply ignorant of ritual and of tradition that is thousands of years old but you have to do that to go find out what Jesus was really saying. If that is our journey back to Jesus in what he really said, you've got to get there. You've got to go underneath it. Because Jesus ate with a lot of folks and eating back then was also political. Who you ate with, how you ate with them, it was all based on this purity system that was so deeply imbedded into their understanding and in their community, so much so that churches today, with the table, with communion we still know some can eat and some can't eat. Some are invited and some are not invited. Because compassion leads to an open, inclusive table where purity leads to a closed table. Our founder Troy Perry set down the tenants of worship inside MCC a few decades ago and he said, " In every MCC service two things are going to occur. One: communion. Two: an offering." He wanted us to give and to receive and let that circle be what we stand for, for what is at the middle of our understanding of what it means to be like God, to be like Christ, to follow



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Jesus. Nancy Wilson says that MCC folks are promiscuously hospitable. We will invite any and all who will come with a passion because we know what it feels like to not be invited. At MCC when Brent offers communion in just a moment he is going to say, “for all, anybody, come” and we are going to sing ‘Come just as you are.’ That is how we understand the teachings of the one that we follow; the teachings of the one who was a man, who was filled with the spirit of God. Part of the reason for this series, part of the reason why we think it’s important to say who do you say that I am, is for you to ask the question, for you to seek the Jesus because for whomever you believe Him to be, then or now, He was a man who followed the God of understanding, who tried to live as much like the God who He understood to be a God of compassion and abundance. Who we believe we are matters. Who Jesus believed He was matters. Who He believed God was matters. He lived a life treating the untouchable and the impure, loving them as He believed God did. Near the end of His teaching He said, “Go on out of here unto the ends of the earth and do what I have taught you.” He challenged them then and He challenges us here tonight, as He says down through the ages, “I expect you to do even greater things than this.” Why don’t you try?

Amen.