



What is it about Jesus?

What is it about Jesus that makes him the most compelling figure in all of history? This morning I begin a new series of messages titled *What Is It About Jesus?* Coming through the Easter season I thought a good deal about how the story of Jesus is so embedded in not only our society, but in most of the world. The coverage of Easter on the news and in so many publications reminded me that even among those who are not very religious, or not religious at all, Jesus remains a very compelling figure. Even among those who find little or no attraction to the church, there are many who are greatly attracted to Jesus.

During his ministry, Jesus often attracted large crowds. The gospels, in their stories of Jesus, often reference that crowds of people followed him wherever he went. Why did Jesus attract such crowds? Was it simply because people hoped for a miraculous healing, a free meal as in the feeding of the multitudes, or was there a deeper reason? And what was there about Jesus that caused Peter, James, and John to put down their fishing nets and follow him? Why would they step away from their livelihood and become disciples of Jesus? What kind of person has that level of attraction? Why was Jesus so popular among the sinners and the outcasts? Why did they flock to hear and see him, while at the same time avoiding, for the most part, institutional religion? Why is Jesus still such a compelling figure to so many around the world?

I know that the obvious answer is *because he was the Son of God*. Of course, as the Son of God, Jesus would draw people to himself, but people in the time of Jesus did not have that understanding in the way we have come to understand him. Before people had any real understanding of who Jesus was, many people were attracted to him. Before people could grasp or understand his mission, large numbers of people followed him. While many believed, or at least hoped, that Jesus was the Messiah, plenty of people had not yet come to that realization, but still they followed him. The question persists today, as it has for two millennia, *what is it about Jesus?*

As we move through this series of messages, I will speak about passages from the gospels that offer insight into this question. We will discover that some people were attracted to him because they were in hopes of finding physical healing either for themselves, for a friend, or loved one. Others were attracted to Jesus because of the desire to see a miracle, or to be a beneficiary of one of those miracles, such as the feeding of the multitudes. Others hoped to find a political leader who would lead the nation of Israel to victory over the Romans. Beyond these reasons, however, was a combination of deeper factors that

provided the foundation for the appeal of Jesus to so many people. One of those factors was his teaching. Matthew 7:28-29 provides an oft-repeated reaction to the teaching of Jesus – *when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law*. People were hungry for truth, and in his teaching, Jesus provided that truth. Another factor was his treatment of people. Jesus was accepting of people regardless of who they were or their station in life. The often-repeated criticism of the religious leaders was that *this man welcomes sinners and eats with them* (Luke 15:2). Many people, in the time of Jesus, were alienated from institutional religion because they did not feel accepted, but Jesus neither rejected nor barred from association with him those people whom institutional religion turned away, which won him great admiration from many.

We begin this morning with a passage from Matthew's gospel that sets the template for Jesus' ministry.

Matthew 4:23-25 –

23 Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.

24 News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them.

25 Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him.

Today we will talk about *the* defining characteristic of the ministry of Jesus, and that is love. The way in which Jesus expressed love is demonstrated in several different ways – mercy, grace, and forgiveness.

But before talking about those expressions of love, I first want to talk about some of my own faith story and why Jesus has remained so compelling to me. Last Sunday afternoon, after the conclusion of Easter services and all the activities of Holy Week, I had the question of *what is it about Jesus* much on my mind. I was preparing to watch *Jesus Christ Superstar* on NBC, which prompted the question of *what is it about Jesus* once again. At that moment I knew I had to share at least a portion of my faith story and why I find Jesus to be so compelling.

To be honest, my faith story is not much of a story, actually. It's probably one of the most boring stories that you've ever heard. I do not have a dramatic testimony of change and conversion. I did not have a falling away and reawakening. I've not done anything earth-shaking. I've not preached to thousands nor have I baptized scores of people. The biggest thing, I suppose, is that I do my best to show up every day. I've done my best to show up for my family and my church, and to do what God would have me to do.

My faith was shaped by many people, certainly my parents among them, and by others who served as role models for me. Bill Norris, who was the minister at my home church from the time I was in the fifth grade and into my college years was very influential to me. I have spoken of Reverend Norris before, but as I am speaking about my faith story it is important to mention him again. My first week at college Reverend Norris gave me some very important advice. Reverend Norris was a trustee of Milligan College, where I attended, and as I was walking across campus one evening he caught up with me and offered me that advice, advice I have never forgotten. He told me that I was now on my own, and being on my own I would discover that my faith had been dependent upon other people, such as my parents. They made sure I attended church and reminded me to take my faith seriously, but now that I was on my own it was up to me to nurture my faith and to make it my own. At first, I was a bit offended

at what Reverend Norris said, because I believed that I was not dependent upon others in any way for my faith, but in actuality, I was. His words of advice came to be very important to me, coming at a critical juncture in my life, and helped to guarantee that faith would remain at the center of my life. Bob Mack, of whom I have also spoken, was equally influential in my life. Bob was the director at Elkhorn Valley Christian Service Camp in Bergholz, Ohio, where I spent many weeks of my summers as a young person. Bob also preached at my ordination service and had one of the most dramatic life changes of anyone I have ever known. I still remember the day he told me about his life before he came to faith, which was so different that I could not imagine it was the same person. As my faith story was so ordinary and boring, I remarked to Bob one day that I wished I had a more dramatic story. His words were important to me, as he said that my story was just as important as anyone else's, and for young people, it was important for them to know it was possible to make it through adolescence without succumbing to many of the temptations that confronted us. I have always appreciated the way Bob made me look at my story differently from the way I had previously understood it.

Though my story is not at all dramatic, I have spent a great deal of time over the years thinking about faith and what it means to me. I have also read and studied a lot, working to deepen my faith and to understand more about the mysteries of faith. I have also listened a lot to the stories of others, and I have learned from them. I have debated a lot as well, discussing – and sometimes arguing – with others about various interpretations, theology, and other matters. I have tried to help others who have struggled with faith, and I have had very interesting conversations with people who have no faith or are opposed to faith. Through it all, I can say that Jesus has been *the* compelling figure of my life, and I cannot imagine life without that very powerful connection.

With that as a longer-than-normal introduction, now I will move on to the love of Jesus, and the way he expressed that love. Love provided the foundation for everything Jesus said and did, and was and is foundational to who he is. Love, as are the other elements of the life and ministry of Jesus that we will study in the coming weeks, was non-negotiable to Jesus. To be his follower, these elements must be a part of our lives as well.

Mercy

We live in a culture that seems to be losing its sense of mercy. We have become so harsh, or maybe, because of the prevalence of social media, we are just more aware of the harshness that was already there. The world is, and always has been, a harsh place, and because of this, we are in great need of mercy.

Jesus was astounding in his sense of mercy. The gospels are full of stories and examples of the mercy of Jesus. There are a few examples that I always turn to, one being the story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10). Zacchaeus was not a popular person in the city of Jericho. As a tax collector, he made his living and built his fortune from taking advantage of others. Luke tells us that Zacchaeus climbed into a sycamore tree because he was short, but I believe it was also because the crowd was most likely not inclined to let him into a position where he could see Jesus passing by. Jesus showed mercy to Zacchaeus, and I imagine the crowd was not much inclined to appreciate the mercy. Mercy, you see, is not always a popular gift to offer, because we want to determine who we believe is worthy of mercy. Mercy, however, is a gift that Jesus will offer whether or not we agree. Jesus also showed mercy to the woman taken in adultery (John 7:53 – 8:11). This is one of the most famous passages in the gospels, and one of the most dramatic as well. In it, Jesus confronts those who want to see the punishment of stoning meted out on this woman. There was no sense of mercy among them, tragically. In keeping to the letter of the law, mercy was lost, and that is a very important lesson for us today. There are those in some corners of the church world that become so wedded to the letter of the law that they lose any sense of mercy. Like the scribes and the Pharisees, they become a theological version of Barney Fife, so insistent upon following the letter of the law that everyone ends up in jail and mercy is absolutely

forsaken. Another examples is the woman who anointed Jesus with ointment and was harshly condemned for doing so (John 12:1-50). Her critics pointed out that the ointment could have been sold and the proceeds given to the poor. The fact that they had not done so already proved they were neither as concerned for or merciful toward the poor as they claimed to be. Then there is the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:21-35). In this parable, Jesus tells of a servant who owed a huge debt to his master. Demonstrating mercy, his master forgives him of the debt, but the servant, instead of learning the lesson of mercy, goes to another servant who owes him a small debt and threatens him if he does not offer immediate payment. The other servants, outraged by this behavior, report the behavior to their master, who calls in the unmerciful servant and has him thrown into prison until he can repay his debt. We can go on and on, but the point is that the gospels are full of examples of the mercy of Jesus.

Mercy is what we might call a *pass-through* gift. If you are familiar at all with accounting, you will understand the concept of *pass-through*. Tanya has an accounting degree and worked in that field for a number of years and *pass-through* was a concept that she could never get me to understand. I couldn't work her accounting calculator, as it required me to put in a number as a debit or credit when all I wanted to do was subtract 2 from 4. It was, therefore, slightly alarming for me when Tanya wanted me to handle our family's books. As she worked with accounting all day, she requested that I take care of our own accounting. I started to protest, but then I realized *okay. I can go to the music store and buy gear and no one will see the receipt except for me!* Well, *pass-through* is a theological concept as well as an accounting one. Mercy must pass through us to others. As we have received mercy from God, mercy should *pass through* us and into the lives of others. And as it does, mercy also must be offered freely to everyone. It cannot be offered only to the people to whom we have a natural affinity for or to those we like. That's what makes mercy so difficult; we don't always want to offer it, but that's what Jesus asks of us.

Grace

Grace is the other side of the same coin as mercy; they are two expressions of the same gift, and we call it amazing grace for good reason. Grace is the heart of the gospel, and one of the most important lessons about grace is that it is undeserved. In the eyes of God, no one has to earn grace and no one has to be found worthy or deserving of it. In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes a good deal about grace. Though the letter to the Romans can be very weighty theology, the basic message is of the free gift of God's grace. It is a gift, Paul says, that neither can be earned or needs to be earned. Romans 3:20-24 says *20 Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin. 21 But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. 22 This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*

And all are justified freely. Those are very important words and they provide the foundation for the gift of grace. The *free gift of grace* is a concept that is foundational to the gospel. We are not required to earn God's grace and we are not, then, to do anything other than offer God's grace freely to others.

And, just as we are to allow the gift of mercy to pass through us to others, so we must also allow the gift of grace to flow through us and to others. The pressing question becomes, then, can we be people of grace? Grace is not easy. Grace is, in fact, very difficult. It is easy to find ourselves wanting to withhold grace from those we don't feel are deserving of it or from people we simply don't like.

Forgiveness

I have heard many, many people over the years comment that *I guess I haven't forgiven because I haven't forgotten.* I think it is extremely unfortunate that someone wedded together the words *forgive*

and *forget*. It is not necessary to forget in order to forgive. Nowhere in Scripture is that connection made. Nowhere in the history of Christian theology is that connection made. It is impossible, I believe, to forget some hurts, but just because you don't – or can't – forget does not mean that you have not or cannot forgive.

Forgiveness is so powerful because it not only releases the offender; it also releases the offended. In January I read an interview that powerfully demonstrated this point. The interview was with Rachael Denhollander, who was one of the abuse victims of Dr. Larry Nassar (Nassar was a physician affiliated with Michigan State University and the USA Gymnastics National Team doctor). Rachael was one of the 150 victims who read victim impact statements at his trial. Rachael and her husband now live in Louisville, where he is a student at Southern Seminary. At the end of the interview she spoke about forgiveness, which she granted to Dr. Nassar as she read her statement. Her words are very powerful, and very instructive and helpful as well when it comes to understanding forgiveness –

Interviewer – *What does it mean to you that you forgive Larry Nassar?*

Rachel – *It means that I trust in God's justice and I release bitterness and anger and a desire for personal vengeance. It does not mean that I minimize or mitigate or excuse what he has done. It does not mean that I pursue justice on earth any less zealously. It simply means that I release personal vengeance against him, and I trust God's justice, whether he chooses to mete that out purely, eternally, or both in heaven and on earth.*

I find that to be a very powerful statement. It reminds us, first of all, that forgiveness does not mean that we gloss over the hurt and the pain that has been caused and it does not mean that we act as though nothing happened. What it does mean is that we find release – release from a desire for vengeance and a release from the bondage of bitterness and anger that can cause such devastation to us.

After the early service, someone told me they once heard a very interesting remark about forgiveness – *I know I have forgiven when the first thing I think about when I see the offender is something other than what they did to me.* I don't think we have to get to that point in order to know that we have offered forgiveness, but it does demonstrate the release that is offered to us.

And, certainly, we have the powerful words of Jesus on the cross, *Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing* (Luke 23:34). That is an incredible example to us. I have to be honest and say, especially when I think about what Jesus experienced, that forgiveness would probably not be my first impulse. That is why I need the example of Jesus, to remind me that anger and bitterness, a desire for revenge, and holding on to my hurt are not helpful in the long run.

The most powerful example of forgiveness that I have known personally took place when I saw a friend forgive someone of a horrific crime. The devastation the family suffered was unimaginable, and though it took time to arrive at the point of offering forgiveness – and understandable so – forgiveness was offered to the perpetrator. I have wondered over the years if I could offer forgiveness in such a circumstance. I hope that I could, and though I know it would not be easy, I also know it would be necessary for me to do so, for my own spiritual good.

What is it about Jesus? Well, there are so many things about Jesus that make him such a compelling figure, but most certainly it is his love, which was offered in the form of mercy, grace, and forgiveness.