The Many Faces of Jesus

Mark 10 2-16

On World Wide Communion Sunday we come together with churches all over the world around the table of Jesus Christ. But who is the Jesus that we commemorate in our sacrament?

Brian McLaren shares that he is a Christian “because I have a sustained and sustaining confidence in Jesus Christ. I’ve lost and rediscovered that confidence a few times, which is a long and messy story.” (p 49) He continues: “I know my original attraction to Jesus came as a young child.” Like McLaren I grew up reading stories about Jesus. I gazed upon Warner Sallman’s blond haired blue eyed Jesus every Sunday in the sanctuary of our tiny church. I heard stories in Sunday School class using one of the early forms of multimedia “flannel graph,” the figures pressed to the background board to tell the story visually to maintain the rapt attention of the children.

In my teenage years we had a devoted couple who led the senior Sunday School class at the same time as worship which meant that we didn’t have to sit through the “boring” church service but which also meant (I discovered much later) that they sacrificed being in worship themselves which they found, not boring, but life-giving. In my late teens and early 20’s I wandered away from church life until I rediscovered the joy of being in relationship with Jesus in my mid twenties.

In my time of following Jesus I have discovered that there are many faces of Jesus out there in the Christian community and even if we are gathered around one table on a day like today, the one who invited us presents a very different face to each of us. McLaren identifies seven different faces of Jesus in his book.

The first is the conservative Protestant Jesus which focuses on the crucifixion of Jesus. “Jesus saves us by dying on the cross. Jesus was born to die, I heard again and again,” McLaren says. Eventually over time, he had a sense something was missing which opened his heart to search for
other ways of seeing Jesus. He shared the poignant story of how that dissatisfaction grew when he talked to his son who was home for the Christmas holidays and McLaren asked him how he was doing spiritually.

“I’m struggling Dad,” he said.

“Tell me about that” I said.

He replied, “Well Dad, if Christianity is true, then nearly everyone I love is going to be tortured in the fires of hell forever. And if it’s not true, then life has no meaning.” He was silent for a moment and then added, “I just wish there were a better option.”

My heart was broken. I asked, “Is that the understanding of Christianity you got from me?”

He replied, “No, but that’s the way most Christians think. They just kind of bottom-line everything to heaven or hell, and that makes life feel kind of cheap.” p. 56

The second face of Jesus is the Pentecostal/Charismatic Jesus. This is the feel good Jesus who comes through ecstatic experiences of the Holy Ghost. The “Holy Rollers” as we called them, had crusades on the edge of town in the community I attended high school in and we used to go out there at night and peek through the gaps in the tent to watch what happened in there. People spoke in tongues, were slain in the spirit and would collapse to the ground gently lowered by a brother or sister on either side. The fruits of the spirit were gifted from a loving Jesus.

The Catholic Jesus, as McLaren views him, saves the church by rising from the dead. Through the resurrection, God has defeated death and all that comes with it — fear (when will death come?), hurry (how much time do I have in this short, terminal life?), greed (you only go around once in life, so you have to grab for all the gusto you can get), envy (why does her short life go better than mine?), injustice (the evil often prosper and live long while the good often suffer and die young), materialism (the one who dies with most toys wins), despair (life is full of pain and then you die), and selfishness
(in the end all you have is you). By entering life's worst —suffering and death—and breaking through it, Jesus opens the way to heaven to life with God beyond this life.

The Eastern Orthodox Jesus saves simply by being born, by showing up, by coming among us. In Jesus birth, God takes the human life of Jesus into God's own eternal life, and all of creation is taken up into God's own life. God's life, love, joy, and power are so great that all our death, hate, pain and failures are eradicated, swallowed up, cancelled, extinguished, and overcome by being take up into God. In this way Jesus will ultimately bring blessing to the whole world, to all of creation.

The liberal protestant Jesus,(the Jesus a large portion of the United Church would claim to know) centres in the words and deeds of Jesus Christ—the story of his life between his birth and his death and resurrection. His teachings and acts of love, healing justice, and compassion offer a way of life that, if practised, brings blessing to the whole world.

The Anabaptist Jesus, like the liberal protestant’s Jesus, saves through his teaching and example. But in addition, Anabaptists uniquely emphasize Jesus’ role in convening and leading a community of disciples. For them the church is not at heart an institution with hierarchies and policies, headquarters, and bureaucracy. Above all, the church is a continuation and extension of the original band of disciples, a group of people learning the ways of Jesus as a voluntary community.

The seventh and final face of Jesus, is the face that was popularized way back in the 1980's when I was in seminary, Jesus of the Oppressed, who sprang from the soil of the non violent liberation theology of Latin America. This Jesus leads a band of disciples, but the liberation mind-set gives special attention to the activism of this band of disciples in relation to systems of oppression. Through them, with them, Jesus works for liberation of all oppressed people. Jesus death on the cross is seen in a unique way from this vantage point: in his dying Jesus confronts the corrupt, compromised religious system and violent, unjust political and economic powers of his day through...
nonviolent resistance. He does not inflict suffering but willingly suffers. In the process, the corrupt systems show themselves for what they are, sowing the seeds for their own destruction and making way for the peace and justice of God to replace them—not just beyond history in heaven but here in history on planet Earth.

There you have it, seven different faces of who Jesus is. The question is: how do we choose which Jesus we follow? Or do we have to pick just one? What if we enjoy them all, the way we enjoy foods from differing cultures? Aren’t we glad we can enjoy Thai food this week, Chinese next, Italian the following week, Mexican next month, and East Indian after that. What do we gain by saying that Chinese food is permissible, but Mexican food is poison? Isn’t there nourishment and joy (and pleasure) to be had from each tradition?

As we gather around the table of Jesus Christ today let us acknowledge that the face the Christians of each tradition brings to us, also brings some distinctive and wonderful gifts to the table, so that we all might enjoy the feast of a generous orthodoxy—and spread that same feast for the whole world. Thanks be to God. Amen.