

A Sermon for DaySpring

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“What’s Jesus Like?”

John 4:1-42

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What’s Jesus like? What do you picture? What’s he like? That’s one of the real big questions John wants to answer. **“What’s the founder of our faith like?”**

And those of us who grew up with Jesus on a flannel board do have some answers. And some good ones... Because we can see him there decked out in flannel with his flannel fishes and loaves, feeding the flannelled five thousand. **“What’s Jesus like? He’s very powerful.”**

We think back in our flannel graph files and there he is again... sitting in a boat on a flannel seashore... teaching... **“What’s Jesus like? Well, he’s insightful.”**

We got some good answers back in VBS about what Jesus was like and what he was here to do.

It seems to me, the older we get

and the farther away from the flannel graph we get...

where seeing and imagining aren’t as important,

we tend to emphasize the latter,

what Jesus was here to do.

In the story of Jesus we tend to make a mad rush to Calvary, where Jesus is on the cross. God, in Christ is on the cross, and we have, most of us, tended to go there and sing of it and proclaim it... in all of its dimensions... personal and cosmic...

Sometimes... sliding past this very important question, **“What is Jesus like?”** And in the process, not forgetting necessarily, but de-emphasizing that Jesus is a human being. God in the flesh to show us what God is like... for sure... But also God in the flesh to show us what we can be... and will be.

We get captivated by these questions and theories about what God accomplishes in Jesus... forgiveness... and salvation... These BIG THINGS. And in the process forget what this human one was among us... how he was.

At best... we sort of see him as “the best” human ever... But, we say, **“He is God, after all... and as God, he has a “get-out-of-humanity-free card.”**

He’s smart and all... so wise... but I’d bet my paycheck, were I a betting pastor... that in your mind’s eye Jesus gets it by divine download... all that wisdom and goodness and power.

Like there’s a program he bought... Messiah for Macs... Savior of the World for Windows. And the Holy Spirit puts the program in and a little button comes up on the screen of his soul that says install... it gets clicked and a few minutes later you have perfection.

A human being who can walk about saying smart things...

healing people...

and turning lots of water into wine.

(which would have made him very popular in high school)

Aaaannnnnggggg... wrong... Jesus isn’t lying in the manger... looking up at Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds saying, **“If you people only knew what I know.”**

He’s not playing stick ball in the streets of Nazareth, thinking... **“some day, on the other side of this round planet which is orbiting the sun, folks will gather in large stadiums and pay to watch grown men play this.”**

He’s not sitting in school listening to the Torah being taught and thinking, **“Man, I sure wish there was someone here who could discuss Quantum Physics with me.”**

He was a baby... a boy... a teenager... And, even in the temple as a 12 year old, Luke says he's sitting... listening... and asking questions. He's not up on stage schooling the rabbis... bright and impressive as he was.

He grew up, Luke says, **"In submission and grew in wisdom..."** Someone taught him... someone showed him... he listened, he learned... he became. And now he's all grown up and John is answering this question, **"What is he like?"** There is, in John's gospel, picture after picture and none better than the one in chapter four, where he meets the often-preached "woman at the well."

The Lectionary pairs this gospel reading with the passage from Exodus we just read... in part because you have the whole "water theme" going. But also, when it's juxtaposed with John's telling of this story... we not only get a picture of what Jesus is like... but what we're like.

Here's Jesus... this one who has grown in wisdom... and here are the rest of us.

That scene in Exodus is so full of anxious humanity isn't it? **"We're gonna die out here... no water."** They're panicked and so full of fear. And so full of complaint... just over and over, **"Moses, what in the world have you done to us? Moses... why'd you drag us out here? ... Nice going, Moses... great idea leaving Egypt for the desert."**

It's quarreling and complaint.

No trust... always testing God... **"Prove it... again."**

They're ready to stone Moses, in chapter 17... It's the same song 100th verse out there in the desert.

And it's the same song many of us sing... Words might be a bit different, but it's the same "I don't have enough" tune.

It's an anxious melody...

with a worried rhythm.

And there are millions of verses.

"Nice going God... bring me into this world and stick me with this life."

"Thanks a lot."

"I'm thirsty for this... hungry for that."

We, all of us, to some extent... get stuck at the level of our appetites. Some of them physical, right? Which one of us here isn't somewhat a slave to some sort of food? Any married couple here not had an argument over sex? Any young person not dealt seriously with sexual temptation?

We're living at a certain level. Have you not instinctively gazed into the Jones' backyard, wishing for what you don't have? Have you not run up a credit card to get what you don't need? Ever fought over money out there in that desert of consumption?

We live at the level of our thirsts... not simply content with "bread alone" ... but addicted to it,

Have you not longed for approval...

and more of it...

and more of it?

Control...

and more of it?

Esteem...

and more of it?

For pleasure...

And more of it?

"I'm dying down here, God... you aren't taking care of me." Life at this level usually gives birth to anxiety and then to moaning and whining and blaming... and somebody gets stoned.

Maybe, by God's grace and the spiritual work we do... we stop singing that song. We don't live at the "gimme, gimme" level... At least not like these bratty little children of Israel out in the desert.

But on this Sunday... we see some other folks through John's telling of this story. We still get a picture that causes us to say, **"Well... there's Jesus and there's the rest of us."** We see a picture that is full of lines and comparisons and defenses and division.

The woman articulates so much of who we are. **"What are you doing asking me for a drink? ... Jews don't come through Samaria, much less drink our water... Men don't talk to women much less women like me."**

Lines... differences...

you and me...

us and them.

"Do you think you're better than our father, Jacob?" Comparison.

"You Jews worship down there in Jerusalem... we prefer it up here on this mountain." Separation. **I am not you... I'm different than you are.**

Is that not a picture of humanity? Is it not revealing of the inner dialogue that goes on within you? It is... you may or may not hear it... but it's there. **"That person is smarter than I am... don't I feel small?"**

"That one over there is more conservative... sure glad I've outgrown that."

"She's on the other side of this issue... wwhhew... don't have to love her. I think I can even justify avoiding her and perhaps even disliking her."

"They're worshipping wrong over there."

"Those folks are sure stuck on themselves... they all are, I know."

"Boy, she sure is _____" (fill in the blank).

You think I'm overstating this? Try going through one day without making a single judgment upon yourself or anyone else. We are stuck at this level revealed in John's writing. It is the Label Level.

Did you notice John's clever little aside after the disciples returned? He says they were surprised... to find him talking with a woman. Lines... that's what they saw... always lines... good enough, not good enough. Life at this level, lived from this small false self, is always calculating. Richard Rohr and others say it's life driven by meritocracy. Am I enough? ... have I earned the right to be? Have they? Have you?

It is the result of sin... Remember in the garden? Post forbidden fruit? They're seeing one another? And seeing themselves? Separate... different... and they're filled with shame.

That's what we're like? What's Jesus like?

Jesus is amazing. He is so present to where he is. He didn't wake up on this day, check his palm pilot and say, **"O, I've got to meet that woman at the well."** He's making a trip... there's a well, he's thirsty... there's a woman, she's thirsty. He talks with her.

He's not calculating...

He isn't scripted...

He's not driven by prejudice or fear.

He isn't planning his next line or comeback.

He is there... with her. When we live at these lower levels as we do, we can't be present. Can't be loving. We'll always have an agenda... know it or not.

What's he like? He sees. Surely, he is gifted but his visionary capacity is not something unique to him. Other saints who've advanced have this ability. He sees into her heart and life with different sort of eyes. When we live at these lower levels, we do not have that kind of vision... we can't see others... or ourselves very well at all, much less see visions.

What is Jesus like? He speaks the truth. **“You aren’t living with your husband.”** When we live at lower levels, with divided hearts... we tend to speak with forked tongues. With Jesus, there is this clarity... and a capacity to be truthful.

What’s he like? He’s compelled. Life at this level is vocational. Did you notice John’s language, **“He had to go through Samaria.”** When we live in God’s presence... we have no choice but to do what God would do. And God’s going through Samaria. Everyone else would go around it, when going from Judea to Galilee. No Jew sets foot on Samaritan soil... But Jesus has to. He has to do the will of God and he cannot abide hatred... or injustice... or separation.

At the end of the story, John says, **“He stayed two more days in Sychar.”** He not only goes through Samaria... he spent the night (probably in her home)... How could he not? He had to. **“My food...”** he says, **“My sustenance... is to do the will of the One who sent me.”** That’s life at another level.

His disciples had brought back some groceries from town, **“Eat some lunch, Jesus”** ... **“Fellas, I have food to eat you know nothing about.”**

Well... that’s what Jesus is like. He is living at another level and John tells us so... not to make us feel bad about where we are but to invite us into that realm and way of being. We’re to be like Christ... what the early church called the Theosis of Man. He said to his disciples **“You’ll even do greater things than I.”** That’s Christ-likeness.

I know, you’ve heard that... even back when you were doing flannel graphs and some of you wore little WWJD bracelets in high school... I know... You’ve tried. And it’s not a matter of saying “okay” and gritting your teeth, is it, being like Jesus? THIS... IS... HARD.

And I wish it wasn’t but that’s the way it is... It takes learning and discipline and struggle... Just like it took Jesus, remember... no downloads... that’s a heresy. We grow in wisdom as he did. And that’s why Doyle Young’s on staff here doing Spiritual Formation... we’re trying to make it easier to do your part.

But know this... your part is small compared to God’s. Really... you just have to get thirsty enough. Just tired enough of whining in the desert... Weary enough of living your life in comparison and judgment. What you have to do is be thirsty enough to sit down at the well with Jesus and having seen what he is like* say, **“Um, I’ll have what he’s having.”**

There is a divine spring bubbling forth in Jesus. He is offering you a swallow of it and when you taste of it... it’s like priming the pump on an infinitely deep well... and this one drink becomes... becomes... most likely along the way... becomes like a spring in your life.

And so now, you have hope of being like Jesus.

You’ll be living at another level... you’ll be different... folks will notice and maybe even ask. They’ll say, **“What’s she like?”** And someone will say...

“When she’s with you... she’s just so “with you”... so at peace with herself.”

“Well... I don’t know... it’s like she knows me... just sees me clearly.”

“What’s she like? She always speaks the truth to me so lovingly... She’s more concerned with being honest than being liked.”

“I tell you what she’s like... she’s called. She lives her life, knowing it is a gift from God and she is giving it back to Him.”

That really can happen. John says it’s our destiny... and everyone will be unique in the way they express it but we’re headed somewhere, John says later in his epistle. **“It’s not yet revealed... just what we’ll be... but one thing we know, we will be like him for we shall see him as he is.”**

Beyond the flannel graph... beyond our projections... when we see the Divine in Jesus... when we see what he is like... we will be like him. Amen.