

Have you ever wondered what other people say when they describe you to someone else?

Well I do!

I'd like to think they'd say "oh yeh, I know him!, he's funny and caring

A bit sarcastic but goodhearted!..... that Gary Mitchell, He keeps it real!

Or in my most insecure times I think: maybe they describe me as a "know it all", too sure of myself, abrasive, pushy or aloof!

I think pondering the answer to this question is not only normal, it's a very human thing!

In fact, as I read and re-read the text for today I began to relate to the humanity I see in Jesus, who we are taught is fully human and fully divine.

When Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do **people** say that I am? And more pointedly, who do **YOU** say that I am? I hear that human part of Jesus that's just like me.

Tonight at sun down begins Rosh Hashanah and if I passed Jesus on the street this afternoon we would greet each other with "Shanah Tova" Tikatevu ve Techatemu" which is the standard greeting for this holiday. *It means, I wish for you a good yr, may you be written and confirmed.* On Rosh Hashanah your name is written in the book of life and on Yom Kippur is it sealed.

Who do I say Jesus was? Well, First and foremost, Jesus was A Jew! more than that, an observant Jew. I have no doubt he attended services in synagogue, studied Torah, I'm sure he kept the traditional holidays of the Jewish year, and would not have been

welcome in the Biltmore Forest Country Club in the 60's. In all my growing up years of Sunday school this one most important fact was always skirted around, minimized, or totally left out.

I grew up thinking Jesus was a Christian!.....And that his mission was to help all the Jews become Christians too so they could die and go to heaven.

And that when he stopped being a Jew and became a Christian some other Jews got mad at him and he tricked them into killing him cause that's what God, his father needed to happen so I could go to heaven..... are ya with me?

Isn't it interesting, when most of the religious concepts we hold on to **come from 2nd hand knowledge**.

Most of my life I was satisfied to believe what people told me ABOUT God, ABOUT the Bible, ABOUT Jesus, ABOUT faith, because I guess I was just too busy, or too lazy, or too absolutely **sure!** about what I believed to seek out the info firsthand for myself.

And then came the UCC! Oy Veh! And I became exposed to scholars like John Shelby Spong, and Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, Richard Watts, Brian McLaren and Nada Bolz-Weber.

And my whole world got turned upside down, because faith and beliefs are like dominos. When one falls, they all begin to fall which is probably why we hold on so tight, even when our beliefs aren't working, cause what will we have if we let them go?

Then I began reading for myself, and opening my mind to the knowledge of these scholars and present day disciples of this first century Jesus. At first I was more than a little freaked out, after all:

What do you mean “Jesus didn’t died just so I could be ok and go to heaven! Why John 3:16 was the first verse I was taught! (recite)

What do you mean God’s not a MAN!..... On come on now!!!! Its common knowledge that he looks like Moses, with long white hair and a beard.....oh and he’s white! He looks just like me!!!

What do you mean “Heavens not up yonder” and “Hells not down there”! why that’s crazy talk! Why everybody knows these simple truths.

Then the more I read and learned and questioned the more it dawned on me that many of those “truths” that I was taught everybody understood and accepted would all be news to Jesus!

Jesus.....,the Jew!, who spent his time talking to, preaching to and teaching other Jews about changes that needed to happen in the way life was being lived at that moment. Not because he wanted to start a new religion.

Jesus wasn’t trying to get folks ready for that far off “somewhere” called Heaven!

I don’t believe that Jesus subscribed to the belief that this life was supposed to be crappie and filled with pain and that if we kept the faith we’d get the gold Cadillac and be rich and happy in the next life.

Who do people say that I am!

In our text, his disciples when asked said: ²⁸And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” ²⁹He asked them, “**But who do you say that I am?**” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” ³⁰And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him

It might help you to know that Jesus and the disciples are having this conversation while standing in Caesarea Philippi: where Jesus and the disciples went after the murder of John The Baptist.

I stood in this very spot back in January and saw what they saw as this discussion was happening. Dr. Monti Luker, a Bible scholar from Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbia SC describes this scene for us: Caesarea Philippi is in the territory of Herod Philip. *There among the temples to Caesar, “god” of political and military power, and Pan, god of life and fertility, and this Huge cave known as the entranceway to Hades and the powers of death, In fact the cave was so deep that many believed that the river Styxx lay at the bottom. Peter gets it right! While they are standing in basically the cradle of the most powerful forces and institutions of their time, Jesus is identified as the Messiah!, the chosen one of God!*

All of the Gospels have this same story, with basically the same answers.

As I think about the Jewishness of Jesus I’m drawn to John’s telling of the story. In chapter one of John’s gospel we read...

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as they watched Jesus walk by, he said, “Look, here is the Lamb of God”

---This phrase, Lamb of God, ties Jesus' identity to the Temple scapegoat of Yom Kippur and later the Passover lamb who was sacrificed and Whose blood was smeared on the door posts of Israelite homes so that the angel of death would pass over and the first born children would be spared.

These images were things a Jewish audience would easily understand and could relate to. They could now see this Jesus as the Lamb of God, a man of compassion, an example of selflessness.

Who do YOU say that I am?..... How do we understand this first century Jew, this Jesus? Unfortunately those early years in Sunday school and my second hand knowledge of faith didn't really prepare me to answer this question.

I went back this week and re-read Marcus Borg's book "Meeting Jesus for the First Time." He describes for us what seemed to be most important to Jesus, which was Spirit and Compassion. Borg says "for Jesus, compassion was not simply an individual virtue, but a sociopolitical paradigm expressing his alternative vision of human life in community, a vision of life embodied in the movement that came into existence around him."

In Luke 6.36 Jesus tells us to "*Be compassionate as God is compassionate.*"

Jesus' message speaks of a way of life grounded in the Image of God and what God is like and how we are to be God-like.

Borg says In Hebrew, the word compassion in it's singular noun form means "womb," In the Torah, compassion is used both as a feeling and a way of being that flows out of that feeling. He suggests that as a feeling, compassion is located in a low part of the body, in the area of the female womb or the male loins. This bowl area is associated with deep feelings.

Borg goes on to say that Jesus' statement about compassion is deeply rooted in Jewish tradition and is striking as a central image for God.

To say that God is womb-like infers that God, like a mother, gives birth to us and as a mother loves the children from her womb and feels for the children from her womb so God loves and feels for us.

Like Mother God we too should feel the suffering of somebody else and be moved by that suffering to DO something, thus, the feeling of compassion leads us to be compassionate.

Compassion is life giving, nourishing, caring, perhaps embracing and surrounding. Maybe like the Germans this week who were moved to action by feeling the suffering of their Syrian neighbors. Their feelings moved them on to Doing. For Jesus, **this** is what God is like.

Jesus' understanding of compassion became the lens through which his alternative vision of an inclusive community came from.

He chose to ignore the letter of "purity laws" that kept people separated and in their place.

Instead he chose the spirit of the law, which was seen by his fellow Jews as a direct challenge to the purity laws known and strongly supported, no doubt by the top 1% of the community.

After all it kept the poor, the sick, the female, the dirty! In their place and the folks at the top had no problem with this. (sound familiar)?

The compassionate, inclusive vision of the Jesus movement eliminated the boundaries of the purity system.

It included women, untouchables, the poor, the maimed and the marginalized as well as a few people of position who found his vision exciting and life giving.

Unfortunately in a culture whose order and balance was maintained by the purity system, the **inclusiveness** of Jesus' movement was too radical an alternative social vision.

It made the comfortable uncomfortable. It annoyed those good pious Jews who had come to "an arrangement" with their Roman occupiers and who were quite happy with the way things were.

Who do people say I am? In my mind no one answer will suffice!

In the time of Jesus some would say: apocalyptic preacher, The Holy One, Rabble Rouser, Lamb of God, Rabbi, Healer, Prophet, Wisdom teacher, Messiah, Savior, Son of God!

I can't tell you if he saw himself as any of these things. But I can tell you that His focus on the compassion of God motivated him to be the man he became.

No matter what the **socially** understood and accepted rules of his Jewish society were, his desire to be compassionate, as God is compassionate, motivated him to envision a new social order.

Both Jesus and his critics stayed in the tradition of Judaism and tried to be faithful to it. The 1% with all the power read

scripture through the lens of **holiness** as **purity**, and Jesus read it through the lens of compassion.

I believe Jesus fully understood that if the letter of the law was followed there would be no chance for compassion.

In last weeks children's sermon, we talked about the spirit of a rule and blindly following a bad rule, sometimes a choice has to be made.

In visioning a new social order Jesus chose to abandon the letter of the law in favor of the spirit of compassion and in the end this choice led him to the cross of Calvary. Not so I could go to a place called heaven, but so I could see compassion in practice.

Who do YOU say that I am?

I can only answer for myself, I say, Jesus is the lens through whom I understand that thing I call God. Through the actions of Jesus I better understand the compassion of God.

Through the persistence of Jesus I understand that there will be consequences and a price to pay when I go against the established and accepted social order of my world in pursuit of inclusion and equality.

I hope you will let this question from Jesus linger in your mind this week. Give your answer some serious thought. Google the question and see what others may have to say, pose the question to your spouse.

And yes David and I do have these kinds of discussions, in between the Walking Dead and Masters of Sex.

What do you want your children to know about this Jew, this Jesus. You heard my wild memories of my childhood Jesus, please do a better job with your children!

Brothers and sister of First Congregational United Church of Christ, in 2015 Jesus is still asking!

Who DO YOU say that I am???? Amen