

This is a continuation of a series I’ve been preaching on the significance of God becoming human in Jesus, the Christ. Today I’m focusing on both Jesus’ gender and his ethnicity. As I stated last week, Jesus being Jewish makes sense in light of the fact that the One who sent him was none other than YHWH - the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob. The God who when Moses, by the burning bush, asked for a name, said “I Am Who I Am. So say to the Israelites, ‘I Am has sent me to you.’”. It seems like a no-brainer that Jesus was Jewish. And yet, we get glimpses in the gospels that he moves farther and farther away from that being his most important characteristic. I’ll explore that idea in a bit.

The other obvious characteristic of Jesus, that most people take for granted, is that he was male. Don’t worry, I’m not going to try to dispute that fact! Luke makes it pretty clear in the second chapter when he tells us that “(a)fter eight days (from Jesus’ birth) had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.” (21)

The fact that Jesus was male had implications for his relationships with his contemporaries, and it also has implications in the way the Church has understood him. I’ve always taken Jesus’ maleness for granted.

Unfortunately it is not a hard leap from thinking “of course Jesus is male, he is the “son” of God the “Father.” Plenty of people have attributed male qualities to the Holy Spirit, as well. And when the trinitarian godhead is completely male, trouble comes. It’s as simple as looking at the Roman

Catholic Church and observing that only men are able to become priests. Priests, then bishops; bishops then cardinals; cardinals then popes. Each of these figures representing a great amount of power over their respective jurisdictions. I'm sorry, but no matter matter how "open-minded" or "liberated" a male, decisions cannot be made that takes into account the experiences, needs, gifts, abilities, faiths, etc. of everyone. Roman Catholicism is but one example. Plenty of other church denominations have taken the notion of a male Godhead and used it to give power and privilege to men since the earliest days of the Church. And somewhere along the way, Jesus went from being a Jew to becoming lighter, and more European looking, and folks have begun to take on the notion that Jesus was a White man, and whether you're talking about the subjugation of Africans or Native Americans or other non-Anglo peoples (whomever Europeans wanted to colonize), White Jesus has been used as a weapon. I cannot believe the number of people who are surprised or offended when they hear that Jesus was Jewish. I don't know from where they thought he originated, but it's a fact that people think this way. We not only need to understand that people think this way, we need to excise the image and perception of Jesus as White from our own minds. I will admit that growing up, along with other assumed privileges as an American white boy/man, I was under the false understanding that the United States was the new "Chosen Land." God was on "our" side, and Jesus was right there with "him." There is no doubt that there are plenty

of people who wrap their God up in an American Flag - and there are dangerous consequences that occur when that thinking takes root.

Jesus thought himself called to serve the people of Israel. Not more than once did he proclaim that to people. One of the most noted times in scripture when he was challenged on that notion was when he was confronted by a woman who “was Greek, Syrophenician by birth. She begged Jesus to throw (a) demon out of her daughter. Jesus replied, ‘I’ve been sent only to the lost sheep, the people of Israel.’ But she knelt before him and said, ‘Lord, help me.’ He replied, ‘It is not good to take the children’s bread and toss it to dogs.’ She said, ‘Yes, Lord. But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall off their masters’ table.’” (Mark 7:26-28, Matthew 15:24-27, underline added)

At this response, Jesus praises the woman for her faith and heals her daughter.

I’ve always taken this story as a sign that Jesus was constantly broadening his understanding of to whom he’d “been sent.”

The story of Jesus’ encounter with the woman at the well, is another such example. As we hear in the truncated dialogue I had Sharon read, the two had already drawn lines between their “people” - Jesus, a Jew, the woman, a Samaritan. In verse 9 the Samaritan woman asked, “Why do you, a Jewish man, ask for something to drink from me, a Samaritan woman?” John’s narrator then adds, “(Jews and Samaritans didn’t associate with each other.)” Not only did Jews and Samaritans not associate with one

another, isn't it interesting that this friend Jesus meets at the well even mentions their respective genders? Many experts claim that it was socially unacceptable for the two of them to be meeting in public like that. But Jesus didn't care...and as the story unfolds we see that he doesn't care about any of the cultural divides that cast a shadow over their meeting. By the time the story ends, the woman has gone back to her people, bid them to meet Jesus, and brought them back to him. And they see and hear for themselves that he is more than just a Jewish man. And the two of them, have brought together these communities into the wonderfully hospitable kin-dom of God.

And this is the point I want to drive home today: even though Jesus' body presented as a Jewish male, he did not allow it to be a barrier to ANYONE who sought to "turn their hearts and lives toward God." The bible is filled with encounters that Jesus had with those who had been disaffected by God, or didn't even know God, who through him were able to "see." It also contains stories of those who had suckled on the milk of the Word who had become drunk on power and privilege and had become "blind" to God's desires for the world.

In the epistles, we see Paul dealing with body language quite a bit. There are his well-known verses about how

12 "Christ is just like the human body—a body is a unit and has many parts; and all the parts of the body are one body, even though there are many. 13 We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body, whether Jew or Greek, or slave or free, and we all were given one

Spirit to drink. 14 Certainly the body isn't one part but many. ... 26 If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part gets the glory, all the parts celebrate with it. 27 You are the body of Christ and parts of each other." (1 Corinthians 12)

As Paul explores the unique parts that each person brings to the body, he comes to a summary conclusion in his letter to the Galatians (ch. 3), when he says, "26 You are all God's children through faith in Christ Jesus. 27 All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

We live in a world of such diversity. If Paul's world was mostly of Jews, Greeks, and Romans, ours is much more diverse. People's capacity to move from place to place, whether freely, by coercion, or to escape persecution, causes us to deal with our understandings of "difference." And there are differences of culture and background, and these shouldn't be ignored. Indeed, they should be celebrated. We also live in a time when bodies are being more and more fluidly identified. This is why I had us name all of those terms related to gender- and sexual-orientation. Paul identified with the binary understanding of "male and female." But we're coming to understand that varieties of people identify in a variety of ways - and even if we don't understand it, we must expand our understandings to "see" people for whom they claim to be. And just as we see Jesus adapting to his "call" throughout his public ministry, we too

must come to understand that the body of Christ reflects what God intended from the very beginning - a humanity “created in God’s own image, in the divine image God created them, male and female God created them.” The ancient Jews who understood God in this way, invite us to think a bit deeper on how we understand God’s “gender,” and what it means for all of humanity to be created in the wonderful breadth of a God who just claimed to be “I Am,” with no more definition needed than that.

This is the same identity Jesus would claim at the conclusion of his conversation with his friend at the well. She said to him: “I know that the Messiah is coming, the one who is called the Christ. When he comes, he will teach everything to us.” Jesus said to her, “I Am—the one who speaks with you.”

In that moment, “Jesus” transformed from the Jewish man, to the un-describable Christ (fully God) for whom she, and many, many others were longing. She was taken into the Kin-dom.

Move to the table

We still long for the Christ. As I have given this expanded understanding of God's presence indwelled in Jesus, I have found deeper meaning in the ritual of this sacrament. When the Christ sat at the table with his friends, he proclaimed to them "This is my body given for you..." This is "I Am" speaking. "All that I Am," Jesus concludes, "you are. And all that you are I welcome at my feast."

Sisters and brothers - we are welcome. There are no prerequisites here, except perhaps the need, the want, the desire to be included. God's greatest desire is for us to want to be here...to be with God...not just in this place, and at this table, but to be at home with God --- for all who we are.

Move into the Communion liturgy