

## Five Steps to a Faith that Works Step 3 - Jesus and Faith

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### Talking Point

- **Growing up we all had "heroes and heroines! They were just what we wanted to be when we grew up! Think of someone who was "near and dear to your heart"? What about them was special to you? How did the way they lived their life let you know them?**
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Who was Jesus? And who is Jesus Christ today for you and me, our church community and the world?

Chris Glaser, at a retreat he lead for Church of the Trinity MCC, asked attendees to spend some time thinking about how we were first introduced to Jesus as children.

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### Talking Point

- **Do you remember when you first learned about Jesus (or if you did)?**
  - **What was your image or concept of him then?**
  - **How do you see Jesus today, and, what are the differences?**
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Christianity is a mix of the faith of Jesus, the faith about Jesus and the faith in Jesus. Marcus Borg, in The Heart of Christianity says that the centrality of Jesus is critical for our faith. But what does that mean?

Borg says that Jesus, for us, is the "Heart of God." Jesus' birth, life, ministry, conflicts, struggles, words, deeds, crucifixion and resurrection are all very powerful clues to the nature of God. We believe that in some mysterious, amazing way, "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to God's self." (2 Corinthians 5:19).

Jesus has also always been controversial! In every age, theologians, and teachers and ordinary Christians have struggled with what it means to follow him.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, there was a movement that focused on the "Quest for the Historical Jesus," as archeologists and historians tried to get closer to the mystery. In the 1920's, one bestseller proclaimed Jesus to be the "Greatest Salesman Ever," and Peter Marshall wrote his classic working "man's" spiritual book, "Mister Jones, Meet the Master." In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the "Jesus Seminar" was born, that tried to use literary and technical means to distill which were Jesus' precise, actual, original words in the gospels. Another author wrote, Jesus, CEO. In recent years Philip Yancey wrote, "The Jesus I Never Knew," and Marcus Borg also wrote a book, "Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time." More books have been written about this

person, who never lived to be 40 and who never wrote a book himself, than about anyone else before or since!

Traditional Christian thought and doctrine has always struggled with Jesus' nature – that he was fully divine and fully human. What often happens, is that the tension collapses: Most Christians see Jesus as primarily divine, while non-Christians, and less orthodox Christians, see him as “only human.” Both view points are incomplete!

I think it would be good for those of us who see God in Jesus to spend a long time really imagining Jesus as fully human. I think it is hard for many people to really imagine Jesus living an ordinary, embodied life. We have a stained glass image of Jesus. Jesus did not want us to see him as so different from us! He wanted us to identify with him, make his cause our own, and be willing to do “even greater things” than he did! When I think of Jesus as having a real life, real relationships with other people; when I think that he needed food and rest and comfort and friends, it makes an amazing difference. Jesus laughed and cried, got angry and loved deeply.

Jesus, for Christians, is not merely a “divine figure” from the past: he is a living, active presence in those who love and follow him and in the community/ movement called the “church” that he founded. It was the Risen Christ, alive and in their midst that inspired the early church to risk and experience explosive growth. That Living Christ is available, ready and waiting for us, today.

William Sloan Coffin (author, former Chaplain of Yale University) said that for Christians, “God is defined by Jesus, but not confined by Jesus.” Krister Stendahl, theologian, said, “We Christians can sing our love songs to Jesus with wild abandon without needing to demean other religions.” In a pluralistic world, sometimes it is hard for Christians to claim Jesus' unique role in revealing God, without being perceived as exclusivist.

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### **Talking Point**

- **Share with the group:**

- 1. Which do you struggle to embrace the most? Jesus' divinity or humanity? Why?**

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Marcus Borg offers us 5 roles that were essential to Jesus' self-understanding:

1) **Jesus as Jewish Mystic:** a mystic is one whose life is radically centered on God. Jesus knew God on intimate terms, and he was a Jew, steeped in the Jewish scriptures and traditions, while being a loving critic of his own religious leaders and their interpretation of “the law.” Jesus was a person of prayer and communion with God who was beyond him, beside him and so obviously within him.

2) **Jesus as Healer:** Jesus' healing ministry was remarkable and outstanding. Jesus healed the

body, mind and spirit, dispensing forgiveness with physical miracles. He saw the interconnections. He also healed many who were “outcasts,” sometimes healing their social status as well as their bodies and minds. He healed relationships. As Christians, we trust that the Risen Jesus is available today, this very minute, to offer healing through us and in us. Have you ever been healed? Do you know someone who has experienced healing?

3) **Jesus as Storyteller and Teacher:** As a preacher, I love this one. As a child, I loved “The Stories of Jesus.” Jesus offered an “alternative wisdom” says Marcus Borg, he would say “You have heard it said. . . but I say to you!” Jesus taught with “authority” which means he sounded like he knew what he was talking about. When he taught, he was not arrogant, but he was confident. He could communicate, beautifully, the heart of God, God’s deepest longings for connection to us. His parables (The Prodigal Son, The Good Samaritan, the Pearl of Great Price) are as alive and relevant today as 2,000 years ago. The stories about him continue to give hope to so many. The Sermon on the Mount is a work of art – still waiting for us to live up to its uncompromising ideals.

4) **Jesus as Social Prophet:** Jesus was a friend of the poor, of sinners, of those whom other people thought were not good enough to be “religious.” Jesus challenged people about their narrow definitions of “neighbor.” He understood all too well the “structures of domination” that oppressed so many people. He practiced an “open table fellowship” that drew intense criticism, as he “ate and drank with sinners.” Jesus was conscious of social and political injustice, and spoke up against it. He reached out to women in extraordinary ways, having theological conversations with them. He conversed with Samaritans, healed lepers, went to the homes of notorious tax collectors, allowed prostitutes to follow him. He preached about a vision of a “kingdom/realm” of God that would be a time and place where God’s love and justice would be the only rule.

5) **Jesus as Movement Initiator/Founder:** Jesus, more than anything, sought to create a “beloved community” that would out-live him in his earthly life, and would turn the world and the structures of domination upside down. Sometimes today, the church actually embodies and lives up to that ideal. All too often, the church itself has become just another “structure of domination” that upholds the power structures that are in place. Sometimes the church has joined the ranks of the oppressors. Sometimes the church has betrayed its calling and its founder. But, in every age, God seems to raise up new followers of Jesus who see his Movement with new clarity and conviction. On our best days, I think this is what MCC can be.

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### **Talking Point**

- **Share with the group:**
  1. Which of these "Jesus roles" have been most relevant in your faith experience?
  2. Which role seems less familiar?
  3. Which of these roles have been part of your church experience?

Marcus Borg tells this story that illustrates the struggles and alienation many have with competing views of Jesus:

In her recent book about the working poor in America (Nickled and Dimed), Barbara Ehrenreich writes about going to a tent revival meeting in Portland, Maine. (Barbara, who has a PhD, was doing a social experiment by trying to work a minimum wage job and see if she could survive and keep a roof over her head. After three months, she found she could not.) The preacher's theme was "Jesus on the cross" and the importance of believing in him in order to go to heaven. As she listened to him, and looked around at the mostly very impoverished audience, she thought:

*It would be nice if someone would read this sad-eyed crowd the Sermon on the Mount, accompanied by a rousing commentary on income inequality and the need for a hike in the minimum wage. But Jesus makes his appearance here only as a corpse; the living man, the wine-drinking vagrant and precocious socialist, is never once mentioned, nor anything he ever had to say. Christ crucified rules, and it may be that the true business of modern Christianity is to crucify him again and again so that he can never get a word out of his mouth.*

She concludes:

*I get up to leave, timing my exit for when the preacher's metronomic head movements have him looking the other way, and walk out to search for my car, half expecting to find Jesus out there in the dark, gagged and tethered to a tent pole.*

Those are shocking, powerful words, that may even offend us, but express well my discomfort for what passes as Christian preaching and teaching. So many who come to MCC have been subjected to versions of Jesus and Christianity that have filled them with guilt and shame, and ultimately alienated them from God and from community.

What would it mean to see Jesus with new eyes and to hear him with new ears today? What would Jesus do and what would he say to you? To us?

For me, Jesus is that amazing Friend. From the time I was very young, something about his embodiment of love and justice just captured my heart and my imagination. There have been times I have not been as faithful to that relationship, or as aware of Jesus' presence. But the older I get, the more I am challenged by his words, his healing power and his courage to let God be visible in him!

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**Talking Point**

- **Share with the group:**

**1. If you could spend a day "hanging out" with Jesus, in what way would this affect how you see him?**

**2. How could this deepen your faith?**

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**SHARING FAITH:**

**Briefly share prayer needs and concerns and pray for the one on your right. (Remember to say amen if you are praying silently)**