**Living the Questions** Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake
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Jesus asked his disciples—and by inference, us: *“Who do you say that I am?”*

Truth be told, there are as many Jesuses as there are disciples of this remarkable first-century figure. Regardless of how faithful one is to the portrayals of Jesus by any particular denomination or tradition, no two people understand or relate to Jesus in exactly the same way. This is one of the reasons the Bible includes four different versions of the story of Jesus’s life and *why the proverbial Second and Third Presbyterian Churches spun off from First Presbyterian Church.*

From apocalyptic firebrand to mystical faith healer to political insurrectionist, the various images of Jesus are celebrated and defended by true believers of every theological and political stripe. Walk into the narthex of any number of Protestant churches and you’re likely to find the sentimental blue-eyed, pink skinned Jesus of artist *Warner Sallman* gazing beatifically upon your comings and goings. [This image is actually one of my earliest childhood memories of going to church with my grandparents and seeing it above the door of a Sunday School classroom. I was absolutely convinced that it was the image of God]. Enter the neighboring Catholic church and you’ll probably find the image of a beaten, bleeding, emaciated man suffering on a cross.

Beginning with the Gospels themselves, Jesus has been the subject of considerable spin over the ages. Each tradition puts its own emphasis on this remarkable figure. For example, for many middle-class Americans the ideal Jesus is the gentle, upstanding, right -thinking (and often somewhat androgynous) suburbanite with good posture. The notion that Jesus was likely a short, dark, Middle-Eastern peasant rabble rouser is beyond comprehension. A blond-haired, blue-eyed Jesus, meek and mild, is such a stalwart icon of Western culture that to suggest anything contrary or corrective to that image is tantamount to heresy.

For example, a *Discovery Channel* special utilizing the latest in forensic technology—mosaic representations and actual skulls of first-century Jews—reconstructed what Jesus might have looked like. The result fomented an outcry from commentators far and wide with accusations of revisionism and political correctness run amuck. Columnist Kathleen Parker, for instance, was so distraught that she fretted that the Jesus she knew as a child was being replaced by *“the kind of guy who wouldn’t make it through airport security.”*

In reality, non-white Christians have long been dissatisfied with the white Jesus. Be it Asian, African, South American, or Native American, cultures all over the world have represented Jesus metaphorically as one of them.

The point is that the portrayal of Jesus as some sort of sweet guy next door is a sentimental misreading of the Bible. In truth, Jesus didn’t attract everyone he met, certainly not the wealthy and powerful. He was a peasant who likely attracted peasants. The Gospels tell us he was radical enough to make even the liberals of his day, the Pharisees, uncomfortable.

And so, uncovering the *“real”* Jesus is no small task. It might not even be possible. Marcus Borg notes that *“except for one or two sentences in a late first century Roman source written by the Jewish historian Josephus, our only sources for knowing about Jesus are basically the Christian Gospels. So, we don’t have a lot of information about him.”* In other words, we know what we know about Jesus through the four Gospel narratives: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. But even these narratives do little to give us a comprehensive picture of Jesus. They differ from one another in both major and minor ways, leaving the reader to wonder just what we can really know about Jesus. So, for those looking for *one* picture of Jesus, the Gospels can be incredibly frustrating.

John Dominic Crossan likes to say that there’s really only one Gospel in the Bible and four *“according tos.”* Crossan believes that the life of Jesus has too much meaning to be limited to only one telling that followers would be tempted to literalize and venerate. The four *“according tos”* give us four very different glimpses of Jesus. And despite efforts to the contrary, they defy synthesis.

However, all is not lost—there are certain things we can know about Jesus even if much of it is found in images and metaphors. For example, in *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography,* John Dominic Crossan shares a hypothetical statue of Abraham Lincoln. Crossan imagines a sculpture of Lincoln standing in front of a large tree stump. On the other side of the stump, kneels an African-American slave, eyes looking up in hope and expectation. The slave’s arms are stretched wide so that the chains linking his wrists rest on top of the stump. Feet planted firmly, lumberjack Lincoln stands poised with an ax above his head ready to come down and shatter the chains of the slave. Crossan suggests that while this is not a depiction of a literally true event, we recognize it as truth just the same. *The language of metaphor, parable, and artistic representations often express profound truths better than the raw historical data*—a reality that the evangelist authors of the Gospels knew well.

For example, *Matthew, Mark, and Luke* portray Jesus going to those who were hated and despised and declaring God’s love for the outcast and the negatively stereotyped. *John* attests to God having *“so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son”* (John 3:16). And while theologians have long debated Jesus’s true mission, that of *apocalyptic prophet, sage teacher of wisdom, or sacrificial lamb,* the variety of images and stories of Jesus seems to point to one reality: *an experience of someone who is beyond all description while at the same time being the embodiment of that for which the deepest human yearnings strive.*

Amy-Jill Levine put it this way:

*“Even though there are discrepancies among the gospels, for the most part if we read through Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, we can get a good picture of what Jesus was trying to promote. [We get] the personality of Jesus himself, this individual who gathered disciples, who attracted crowds by means of healing and provocative teaching, who was sufficiently testy, sufficiently edgy, that some people wanted to kill him, and others wanted to make him king. So although we have differences, we also have similarities. And I don’t think that the differences should outweigh the overall picture we get of an individual who’s dedicated toward healing, toward seeking how best to live in conformity to God’s will, and toward his own sense that he is instrumental in God’s plan.”*

That charisma led people to call Jesus by many names: *Messiah, Christ, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, true God of true God.* And yet, from the multitude of possibilities, *“Son of God”* language became one of the dominant metaphors for describing who Jesus was. Throughout the history of Israel all sorts of persons were referred to as “sons of God” in order to speak of their intimacy of relationship with the Divine.

Bishop Yvette Flunder has a different take on what she perceives are muddled and misguided contemporary understandings of Jesus:

*“[I see Jesus] walking around as a horribly oppressed person with a whole lot of clothes on, pressing him—just layers and layers. We’ve taken 2,000 years to turn Jesus into someone very different than that person who got in the water with John for baptism. There’s political stuff, there’s economic stuff, there’s church stuff. Jesus is even a plank on many political platforms. Jesus is the reason we go to war; Jesus is the reason we oppress the immigrant. Jesus is even mad at Mickey Mouse or the Teletubbies. But there comes a point when we have to undress Jesus, we have to take all the stuff, all the crap we have put on Jesus, all of these layers and layers of tradition and all of our different ideas and theologies and get back to the Jesus that stood in the water with John.”*

But one thing most New Testament scholars agree on is that Jesus’s main aim was the kingdom of God—not some saccharine vision of a future heaven—but a clear statement about the here and now. As John Dominic Crossan says:

*“Basically, it’s awfully simple. It means [asking ourselves] what this world would look like if God sat on Caesar’s throne. What would a divine instead of an imperial program look like? What would a divine budget look like? So “kingdom of God” is a way of saying Rome is not the kingdom of God. Rome thought (since Caesar was divine and it had a kingdom) that it must be the kingdom of God. What Jesus is really saying, sort of in your face is, “Rome, you are not the kingdom of God, You’re not even the will of God.”*

Over and over again, the Gospels ask us to choose our allegiance. *Whose kingdom?*

Which brings us back to Jesus’s original question: *“Who do you say that I am?”*

Friends, the evidence that we have about the *identity, actions, mission, and vision* of Jesus varies widely and wildly depending on the source and theological filter. At best, one can speak of the *“lives”* of Jesus rather than the life of Jesus. Our awareness of the origins of the Gospels, the traditions that have formed our image of Jesus, and the continuing struggle of faithful people to understand the complexity and radical nature of Jesus’ message for the world, are critical in understanding how we might live as followers of Jesus today.