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**Who is Jesus? A Spirit Person**

Isaiah 42:1-10

John 15:1-12

I no longer remember the first time I tasted ice-cream. I do, however, remember the first time my daughter tasted ice-cream. Erica was over a year old. Michele and I had held off introducing sweets, thinking a taste for sweets will come soon enough. I had made myself a bowl of ice-cream and partially on impulse I put some on a spoon for Erica. She opened her mouth to receive what was being presented. The moment the ice-cream touched her tongue you could see her eyes light up and grow wide. Although, she had yet to develop a vocabulary, you knew exactly what she was thinking, “where has this been and why haven’t I see it before?” With her mouth wide opened she waited for another delivery.

Although, Erica was unaware at the time, I would consider ice-cream one of her earliest spiritual experiences. Biblical scholar Marcus Borg speaks about a spiritual experience in this way, a spiritual experience “is a strong sense of their being more to reality than the tangible world of our ordinary experience.” It provides a “compelling sense of having experienced something ‘real’”, an awareness that you “know something you did not know before.” Borg goes on to say, “it is experiences such as these that have led the religious traditions of the world to speak of “the sacred”. My daughter Erica had one of her earliest spiritual experiences, a taste of the real, an awareness of something more, when as a child in her high-chair, she got her first taste of ice-cream.

All of us have had these experiences. We may have failed to recognize them as spiritual, as momentary openings to the sacred, a brief awareness that there is more to reality than the material, an experience of the real. Perhaps it was a first kiss or the first kiss of one you came to love, a sunset, the fall leaves in their brilliance, a star lit night, a work of art, lake superior as still as glass or lake superior with all its ferocity, a fresh fallen snow, a dinner with family or friends when you look around the table and know these are people who you deeply love, a melody or song that causes you to let go of every stray thought and be fully present to the moment.

In his book Living Buddha, Living Christ, Budhist Monk, Thich Nhat Hanh says this, “Really hearing a bird song or really seeing a blue sky, we touch the seed of the Holy Spirit within us. Children have little difficulty recognizing the presence of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said that in order to enter the Kingdom of God, we must become like a child.” p. 21. Or to put it a little differently to enter the Realm of God, we must approach life as a child who is receiving her first taste of ice-cream, open to new awareness, in touch with the moreness of life, ready to encounter that which is real, the ground of our existence, and which we call sacred.

We are now in our 6th week focusing on the question of “Who Is Jesus?” We began by reflecting on our stained glass Jesus and what it might suggest about who Jesus is for us. In subsequent Sundays we have reflected upon portraits of Jesus given to us by the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Today, our master artist is John or the author of the Gospel of John. In many ways, John is the least likely of the Gospel writers to provide a portrait of the human Jesus. John has no birth story about Jesus, providing that most intimate of connection we find in Matthew and Luke. Instead John begins his portrayal of Jesus by saying “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” And then fourteen verses later John says, “And the Word became flesh and lived among us and we have seen his glory…” When John’s Gospel enters the crucifixion, there is no human questioning, “my God, my God, why have you forsaken me”? Instead Jesus dies as one in control, fully confident, saying simply, “it is finished.”

John portrays Jesus so full of the glory of God, that anyone desiring to encounter the humanity of Jesus can be left wondering “where is the human Jesus in this story?” It is helpful to remember these Gospel writers each have a different intent, a different audience, and lived at a different time when they create their picture of Jesus. John is the oldest of the Gospels, written some 70 to 80 years after Jesus has been killed. By this time, Christians have become aware their belief that resurrection meant an immediate and radical transformation of the world needed to be reconsidered. Instead, the Christians to whom John’s Gospel is written know that to be a Christian, to follow Jesus is to be in it for the long haul. Nothing is more crucial, more central for this long haul faith than an appreciation for how the spirit of God, revealed in Jesus, is still at work in our world today. John’s Gospel is written to people who more than ever need to live with an openness of a child who is getting her first taste of ice-cream.

It is from this perspective that John looks back at the life of Jesus and sees more clearly than perhaps early Gospel writers had seen that Jesus is a Spirit Person. Jesus is a human being who is particularly attuned to the sacred in every-day life, one who looks at the a mustard seed and recognizes the Realm of God, who looks at a sparrow and knows how much God cares for each of us. Jesus lives with an awareness that the Realm of God, the presence of God is found in the here and now. Thich Nhat Hahn refers to this spirit awareness of Jesus as mindfulness, being fully present to the moment. Marcus Borg says “the most crucial fact about Jesus was that he was a “spirit person”, one of those people who is fully open to the experience of reality, the taste of ice-cream, the beauty of fall leaves, the love in community. Because of Jesus openness he becomes a mediator of the sacred, one in whose presence others encounter the real, the sacred, an awareness of more to come.

If Jesus is a spirit person, one open to the sacred of here and now, than following the Way of Jesus, the path of Jesus, is an invitation for us to also embrace this same path, this same way of living, this same mindfulness, which is why the Apostle Paul writing to the Philippians says, “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.”

It is with this spirit filled awareness of how Jesus mediates the sacred that John gives us a portrait of Jesus in which relationship is central. To be connected to the sacred, to be connected to the moreness in life, is to live in relationship with one another and all that exists. Our entry point may be a taste of ice-cream, an awareness of intimacy with friends, family, community, or a brilliant sumac bush in all its red glory. But, whatever the entry point, if we are open to the sacredness of the moment, what we discover is how deeply and richly we are connected with all that exists. This is why early Celtic Christians so deeply love the Gospel of John. In John they encounter a portrait of Jesus who shares the orientation of many indigenous people whose hearts and spirits are open to the reality of the sacred in life.

It is with this relational understanding of the sacred that we hear the Jesus of John’s Gospel say, “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing”.  This human Jesus invites us into a relational spirit filled life.

You know, of course, as well as I do, it is no easy thing to abide in Jesus and the love Jesus reveals. On the contrary, on any given day we can find ourselves abiding in anger. Someone has said or done something that offends us or hurt us and all day long we abide in the anger we feel. On other days we abide in feelings of our own lack of self-worth. Perhaps we have suffered some major disappoint or failed relationship and all day long we abide in feelings of our own inadequacy. Then again, we can find ourselves abiding in pride. Maybe things have gone exceptionally well and we find ourselves dwelling on how important we are and how no one could manage without us. You know as well as I do that on any given day we can abide in prejudice or selfishly thinking only about our own desires. I have spent more time than I would wish to admit abiding in unpleasant thoughts and feelings about “Tea Party” folks who seem intent on driving our country into the ground. But, Jesus says, “abide in me,…abide in my love.”

To abide in the love of Jesus is to be drawn into deep relationship with all that is, Tea Party folks included, in the here and now. This is why Salvadoran Liberation theologian, Jon Sobrino says that a true spirit filled life is one that is fully in touch with human life and history, for this is the Realm in which the spirit of God is present and at work. According to Jon Sobrino one who is truly spirit filled can never turn his or her back on the suffering of the poor, the economic injustices in our world, the plight of refugees, or the systems of oppression standing in opposition to the Realm of God. In this country a spirit filled life is one that fully engages the historical and on-going reality of racism, including in Minnesota our historical efforts to destroy the rich spiritual tradition of our Dakota and Ojibwe brothers and sisters. In a spirit filled life there is no turning away from the real in history or the here and now, for this is where we encounter the holy. To be filled with the spirit means we are more attuned than ever to the needs all around us, which is why Jesus says, “those who abide in me bear much fruit.”

You might want to think twice about giving your young child that first taste of ice-cream. It could lead her on a dangerous path, one that is constantly bumping up against all the spirit denying, life denying forces in our world. As Jon Sobrino reminds us, a spirit filled life is one in which we become participants in “steering our secular reality in the direction of the Realm of God.” (p. 2 Spirituality of Libration) The spiritual life offered by Jesus offers no escape from the challenges of life. On the other hand the spiritual life Jesus offers can put your young child on a path of rich relationship with God and all that exists.

 John gives us a picture of Jesus as a Spirit filled person. The question we have been asking is what does it mean for a congregation committed to antiracism to also have a white stained glass Jesus at the center of our worship? I want to be clear; there is no foregone conclusion about an answer to this question, either for our stained glass window taskforce or our Church Council. We are truly and sincerely seeking the guidance of God’s spirit in relationship and conversation as a community of faith. Yet, as the conversation continues it will be important to remember that when we open ourselves to the reality of the Spirit in the here and now, we are, as liberation theologian Jon Sobrino says, opening ourselves to a “Spirit of God that continues to pronounce new words and make new demands. We can set no prior limits to the will of the Spirit.” (P. 5 Spirituality of Liberation). Or as the United Church of Christ reminds us “God is still speaking.”

**Isaiah 42:1-10**

*In our first lesson the prophet Isaiah reminds us that to be open to the spirit of God is to be open to and committed to the ongoing work of the spirit in bringing about justice for the oppressed and seeking the new thing that God is doing in our lives and in our world.*

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. 2 He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; 3 a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. 4 He will not grow faint or be crushed  until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching. 5 Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out,  who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: 6 I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people,\*
a light to the nations, 7   to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. 8 I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. 9 See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth,  I tell you of them. 10 Sing to the Lord a new song  his praise from the end of the earth!

**John 15:1-12**

*In our Gospel lesson today the Jesus of John’s gospel gives us a powerful metaphor for a truly spirit filled life when Jesus says, “I am the vine, you are the branches.” Jesus goes onto tell us that to be part of the vine is to abide in the love that Jesus reveals.*

 ‘I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

 ‘This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.