"The Jesus Movement"
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We are focused on Jesus this month. My sermons this month have been exploring various qualities we see in Jesus of Nazareth. My hope is that this close look at Jesus also helps us understand the impact Jesus Christ continues to have in the lives of Christians today – and especially the impact Jesus Christ has on you and me.

I hope this sermon series will get you thinking and talking about who Jesus is to you. Because if you listen in on the public conversation about who this Jesus is and what it means to be Christian – the conversation as it plays out in the public sphere in the U.S. – if you listen to what is being said in the wider culture, you will hear a whole range competing or conflicting understandings of Jesus and the Christian faith. In the face of these varied understandings of Jesus and Christianity, I want to be able to say who Jesus Christ is to me and why I call myself a follower of Jesus. I want you to be able to explain confidently who Jesus Christ is to you, and why you call yourself a follower of Jesus.

All the aspects of Jesus I am highlighting are heavily influenced by the work of scholar Marcus Borg.

Marcus Borg died this week. It is impossible to measure how much Marcus Borg has done to help contemporary Christians think deeply about Jesus and the Christian life. His work blends academic scholarship with a genuine care for the individual Christian’s faith and spiritual life. I care so much about each one of us being able to clarify for ourselves and express for others what we believe and why, and Marcus Borg is a most helpful teacher and conversation partner in this effort. I hope I draw upon his work in ways that pay forward the enormous debt I owe him for how his work has enriched my faith.

Marcus Borg illustrated four prominent characteristics of Jesus – four things that made Jesus the unique presence he was. We have talked about two of these. Jesus was a teacher of alternative wisdom – he had a way of looking at things that turned conventional wisdom on its head – that challenged the status quo. We have also talked about Jesus as a social prophet. As a prophet, Jesus took a good hard look at the world around him, at his society and culture. He saw the barriers that kept people segregated by social categories like religion and ethnic group and gender. And he offered alternatives, ways to live that broke down the barriers that kept people separated.

I mentioned that one of Marcus Borg’s gifts was a genuine care for the individual Christian’s spiritual life. That’s where we will turn our attention next week. Next week’s sermon will focus on Jesus’ spiritual life, and the spiritual life Jesus invites us to.
Marcus Borg also talks about Jesus as a movement founder. I alluded to that last week, when we talked about the ways Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was a movement leader whose path was faithful to the movement Jesus established. We talk more about the Jesus movement today.

In Jesus’ own lifetime, people were drawn to what Jesus had to offer. Jesus developed a certain following, which was probably pretty small. But the continuing, eternal presence of Christ-spirit stirred a full-fledged movement that continued beyond the years of Jesus’ human life, and gained momentum. This movement would eventually become a religion. But before it was a religion, it was a movement of people who were drawn to the vision Jesus offered – a vision of alternative wisdom and a society marked by compassion and inclusiveness.

We get a bit of a sense of how the Jesus-movement might have grown from our scripture readings this morning. Our readings come from Luke’s gospel and the book of Acts. Luke and Acts are understood to be written by the same author – really they are one book in two parts.

In our first reading we meet Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth, where he had been brought up. The scripture tells us that word was getting around – some people, at least, were paying attention to this guy Jesus. Jesus goes into the synagogue and Jesus reads scripture. He reads the words of Isaiah, where Isaiah says “God anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captive and recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free.” Then Jesus tells the people in the temple that those words are as true about Jesus as they were about Isaiah. God called Jesus to bring good news to the poor, and to let the oppressed go free. In other words, God called Jesus to work for justice – to do his part to bring about social change.

Then we pick up the story a little bit later in Luke’s gospel. In all the gospels Jesus invited people to follow him. Jesus invited people to be his collaborators, to be a part of the work he was about, to be a part of his movement. His invitations to follow reinforced the nature of his call. Even in saying “follow me,” Jesus broke down the barriers of social categories. He called tax collectors and others who were seen as sinners, which challenged the judgments that separated and diminished people.

We continue on into the book of Acts. Here the writer presents the resurrected Jesus, talking to his disciples. These are the ones who have already answered the call to follow him. And now Jesus says: be my witnesses.

This role of witness is just what it would be in a courtroom. The witness is called upon to tell what he or she has seen, or heard. But Jesus elaborates on this request to carry out the responsibility of a witness. He asks his followers to be his witnesses in ever-widening geographic circles. He tells them to be his witnesses at home, in the familiar context of Jerusalem – but not to stop there. He tells them to be his witnesses in all of Judea, reaching out to the community around them. Okay. A bit more demanding, but still doable. But then he tells them to be his witnesses in Samaria. This is essentially asking them to move into hostile territory. Jesus asks his followers to talk about what he taught and showed them, in places where they have no credibility whatsoever – where there is no reason to think their message will be well-received. So Jesus challenges these first members of the Jesus movement, to spread his work into places that
may not be receptive – to spread his challenges to the status quo, and his vision for a compassionate and inclusive society.

And finally Jesus seems to say that there is no end to where this movement can go, no limits on how God’s vision can shape the world. Jesus tells them to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth.

Because this movement that is faithful to Jesus’ life and ministry – this movement that challenges the status quo of oppression and poverty and captivity – this movement is meant to shape the whole world.

Christians often focus on God’s power and action – and rightly so. But part of seeing Jesus as a movement-founder is remembering how Jesus empowers us, how Jesus calls us to action. We see this over and over in the gospels.

When Jesus’ friend Lazarus dies, Jesus goes – though he shows up much later than Mary and Martha would have wished. Jesus calls Lazarus out of the tomb. But then he turns over the work, to those who have gathered there. “Unbind him,” Jesus says. He is referring to the grave-cloths wrapped around Lazarus’ body. In other words: “you do it.” “You unbind him.” Jesus passes the mantle, calling those who would follow him to get their hands dirty in the same work Jesus was engaged in.

On another occasion, a large crowd gathers to hear Jesus teach or preach. The disciples get worried as the day goes on. They go to Jesus and point out that it is getting late. It is getting late, and people will be getting hungry. The disciples point out that they are in a remote place – nowhere near a market. They ask Jesus to send everyone away, to the nearest villages, so the people can buy something to eat. But instead Jesus says, “you do it.” “You give them something to eat.”

Jesus had a God-given vision for our world – a vision for a world free from rigid social categories. A world free from oppressive structures and repressive conventional values. His followers listened to Jesus, and watched how he acted, and were drawn to the hope his message offered. And still today we are drawn to that hope. But instead of being the sole bearer of that hope, Jesus entrusted the vision to his disciples. Jesus entrusts the vision to us. This is what makes him a movement founder. And if we are faithful, this is also what makes Christianity as much a movement as a religion.

Jesus involves us – as collaborators, even as activists. And just as the resurrected Christ called his disciples to be his witnesses “to the ends of the earth,” Christ calls us to carry out the work of his movement to the ends of the earth. We know that the ministries of this church are not contained by the four walls around us. Of course we invite people in – hosting the homeless through the Interfaith Rotating Winter shelter or hosting immigrants through the Justice for Our Neighbors legal clinic. But we also move outward. We join with Muslims and Jews through the Celebration of Abraham. We read with schoolchildren who are struggling to keep up. We reach out into a community in India to support education through mission trips and raising fund. We seek to tend the earth by participating in interfaith efforts to avert catastrophic climate change.
Jesus began a movement to right that which is wrong in our world – socially, and structurally. The Jesus movement was, and is, a movement for social change.

Jesus invites us to follow him. Jesus asks us to be his witnesses.

Are you drawn to this Jesus – this Jesus who was wisdom teacher, prophet, and movement founder? Because his invitation is still there, and it is an invitation addressed to us. Will you say yes to being a part of this movement today? Amen.