

**Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa, ON**  
**May 10, 2020 – Elizabeth Bryce**

**Readings: John 14:1-7**  
**Acts 7: 55-60**

**Sermon: Chosen Family**

What is your image of Jesus?

There's an old joke about a thief who heard that a family were away on vacation, so he decided to rob their house. He broke a window on the back door, opened it, and made his way into the house. Suddenly, he heard a voice call out, "I can see you! Jesus can see you, too!"

The burglar froze in his tracks. He didn't move a muscle for several minutes. Then as soon as he took a step, the voice called out again, "I can see you! Jesus can see you, too!"

Very slowly the burglar took out his flashlight, switched it on and looked around the room. In one corner he could see a birdcage with a parrot in it. "Did you say that?" the burglar asked the parrot.

The parrot said again, "I can see you! Jesus can see you, too!"

"Hah! So what?" says the burglar. "You're just a parrot!"

"I may be just a parrot," replied the bird, "but Jesus is a pitbull and he's right behind you!"

Is Jesus the one who watches you? Is your image of Jesus one where Jesus follows your every move and watches for every little mistake?

Or maybe it's an image of Jesus watching you protectively – the Jesus who listens to the prayers of the faithful and then keeps burglars and viruses and bankruptcy at bay. What is YOUR image of Jesus? Is it Jesus the judge, Jesus the friend, Jesus the revolutionary, Jesus the king?

When we first called out for folks to participate in our worship by sending in recordings of music, Derrick sent me the song The Outlaw, which we have woven together with all the visual images of Jesus from different historical periods and cultures. In the Bible, in art, in theology, throughout history and the world's many cultures we have a great variety in the images of Jesus we draw on.

Who is Jesus? Is he an outlaw, a poet, a politician, a god? Larry Norman, who wrote the song in 1972, was well-known for pushing the limits of conservative Christian imagery. An evangelical Christian himself, Norman was at first expelled for mixing the gospel

story with the satanic influence of rock and roll. Then – once Christian rock became more acceptable in the evangelical Christian community – he was rejected again for expanding images of Jesus, for imagining how street people and drug addicts and hippies and un-churched youth might re-imagine a Jesus whom they could actually relate to.

What is your image of Jesus?

Today in our reading from John, we have one of the most widely read passages in the gospels, mostly because of its widespread use at funerals.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled...”

John 14 is known as a farewell discourse, the final teaching of Jesus to his friends. John weaves together all the tensions in that upper room, Jesus’ final commandments, his friends’ questions and Jesus’ own prayers for the future.

Even with Jesus standing right in front of them, his closest friends were confused and questioning. And if they were confused, imagine how hard it is for us – when there are so many images of Jesus out there.

Karoline Lewis, one of my favourite biblical scholars, has called this moment our first hint of the “post-incarnational” Christ. We talk a lot about Jesus’ incarnation at Christmas, when we can all imagine a baby, maybe his skin tone is just darker than the European artists painted him. We can also imagine Jesus in the flesh when he is “suffering in the flesh” incarnate in Holy Week. But after his resurrection, the gospels tell us that sometimes even his own friends didn’t recognize him. According to that tradition, after the ascension there was no human form, no incarnation to define or limit our image of Jesus.

We are used to seeing Jesus portrayed with a beard and long brown hair – instantly recognizable in the Bobble head Jesus – because he has the Jesus look. In early Christian art, Jesus didn’t even grow a beard until the late 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> century. Most often Jesus was portrayed as a young shepherd, caring for the lost sheep.

In our story from Acts today, the new believer, Stephen, was persecuted because of his image of Jesus as the son of God. Look,” Stephen said, “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” Jesus in all his glory, bright with heaven’s holy light, standing at God’s right hand no less. Jesus, bathed in victory and redemption, one who is with God, one who is next to God, one who IS God.

But some were so shocked and upset by this awesome holy image of Jesus, they called it blasphemy. The book of Acts tells us that “they (actually) covered their ears” it was so distasteful to them. Then they dragged him outside the city walls and stoned him, for he had blasphemed against the only “correct” image of God.

There have been times when I too have felt like covering my ears too, because people have portrayed Jesus in a way that is disturbing or challenging to me. Usually it is when Jesus is portrayed as a King or carrying a sword. I also disagree when I have seen Jesus portrayed as a judge, turning people away from the gates of heaven.

At those times I want to cover not just my ears, but my eyes, and my heart too. Those images of Jesus are the very opposite of what inspires ME to be a follower of Jesus. Like the popular campaign in social media of some years ago, saying “I’m not THAT kind of Christian.” Many churches find themselves pushing back against the popular view that Christians are judgmental, exclusive, or narrow-minded. They wish the world was better acquainted with Christians who choose to love like Jesus - regardless of their questions or abilities or gender identity or sexual orientation or doubts.

In this “post-incarnation” confusion about who Jesus is and was, we draw on the stories of scripture, or historical and archeological research, we draw on our own ethnic culture and traditions, we draw on our own unique dreams and visions.

One thing we don’t want to do, however, is be like the enemies who approached Stephen, not just with closed ears, but with hard hearts and stones raised to kill him. It is good to be deeply committed to our faith. It is not good to grip that faith so tightly that we cannot open our hands to receive a stranger or to be challenged by someone who has very different images of Jesus from our own.

Last week on a Zoom call we talked about how to be the church in the midst of building closures and distancing. One of the ideas I threw into the discussion was the possibility of having a Zoom coffee time Sunday morning after the livestream service to connect people who are missing the social side of church and of our faith community.

Well, the response was kind of lukewarm – not that people don’t want to connect. Just some of the people I was talking to like to use Sunday morning not just to tune in to this livestream, but also to cruise other churches’ virtual worship services, now that we are not limited by one physical location.

I guess I could feel offended by that, but instead I think it’s wonderful. Perhaps this is an opportunity for all of us to go to church and to appreciate the wideness and diversity of God’s people. Maybe we are learning to be “post incarnational” in our image of what it means to be Christ’s church. We are becoming more aware of our neighbours, more aware of their gifts and blessings, more likely to identify and share their challenges. We are becoming more likely to partner together in the future, because now we are not so physically limited – perhaps we can celebrate being spiritually connected instead.

In our liturgical calendar, we call this Sunday “Christian Family Sunday”. It’s a name that sometimes confuses people. Is it a time when we celebrate “Christian families” that come to church? Or is it a time when we celebrate how this congregation is like a chosen family? Or is it a time when we talk about the whole church, the wider church, the small c catholic church?

The answer is yes. We are families. We are chosen family. We are a family of faith large and generous and diverse. And sometimes we fight about who has the better room in that Father's mansion. Just like a family. Sometimes we feel pride or envy or despair. Just like a family. And sometimes we need forgiveness, or help, and sometimes we leave one place in search of another home. Just like a family. Just like a family we choose many rich and meaningful images of Jesus, but like a family we will choose differently.

With our choices, and our respect for one another, we make Jesus truly universal, truly incarnational in the rich diversity of our living. For he does not belong to any, but to all.

We become the body of Christ when we honour Jesus' inclusive, loving, welcoming ministry. We become the body of Christ when we identify with the servant saviour who first showed us the way to God. We become the body of Christ when we see holiness incarnate in the just community that he proclaimed. Based on the many diverse images of Jesus we know in scripture, in community and in love – we will find the way, the truth and the life that is Christ. Amen