

Who is Jesus for me?

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Growing up in the Anglican mission church in South America, “low church” in Venezuela, “high church” in Argentina, I was taught and did not question that Jesus was the Son of God sent to save us by sacrificing his life on the cross. I stopped believing in this Trinitarian, atonement-based Christology early in my adult life. These don’t appear to be concepts Jesus taught, as a practicing and devout Jew. Many of traditional Christianity’s tenets seem immoral to me, such as the idea that Jesus had to die on the cross for us to be forgiven for our sins, that the death of one eliminates the sins of many. Much evil has resulted from this perversion of his message. It has led me to call myself a Christian in the sense of “primitive Christianity”.

I believe in a spirit, an essence, a god who/which is experienced as within us and apart. This God moves us toward love, kindness and fairness, and can be experienced as a sense of unity or as a sense of disunity, of “ill-ease”, with ourselves and others.

I believe every moment I have a choice of what to do or say in the next moment, arising from the situation in which chance and my prior choices have placed me. The right choice in any moment will move toward love, kindness, and justice, and with it a sense of peace in myself and with others – “happiness”. I believe Jesus was “sent” by God in the sense that he walked fully with God – acted out of that place of love at all times, fully lived as we are meant to live. He was our model for all we are capable of being and doing. George Fox, the “founder” of the Religious Society of Friends, understood this and was said to preach for “perfection,” claiming we could in fact live as Jesus taught. Our sense of ill-ease comes from not living from that place. We humans are designed to live from that core of love and justice, and we feel unity with God when we are living that way. When I pray or meditate, trying to reach that core/center, I am more likely to recognize and act according to God’s design, so in that sense God is a personal God.

I think Jesus had the impact he did because he was showing us what kind of attitude and behavior makes us right with the world, how the world and we really work.

- He taught that God can be known by experience more than by intellect.
- He taught that God, the sacred, the spiritual dimension, is accessible without the mediation of priests and institutions.
- He taught that God is compassionate and that relationship with God does not depend on our meeting particular requirements. He tried to open his listeners to unconventional, radical ways of seeing life and God.

Jesus used the metaphor of the heart a great deal in his teaching. He said we have “hard hearts”. For ancient Hebrews, heart was associated with the whole human psyche, not just emotion. It was like a level of self “below” feeling, thinking or willing. It is the condition of the heart that matters. A hard heart is associated with not hearing, not seeing, not understanding. It has no sense of awe, lacks compassion. It is as though we have a thick layer of crud around the deepest part of our self. We need to make our hearts soft, open and receptive.

Our celebration of Christmas at its core is the recognizing Jesus in the birth of a baby. Babies awaken the sweetness in most of us, cause our hearts to soften, to open. Watching many of the faces at our pageant last week made that evident!

Perhaps there is another element worth mentioning in this, as Barbara Brown Taylor so eloquently describes in her book *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith* .

In her words:

“I think I finally heard the gospel. The good news of God in Christ is, ‘You have everything you need to be human.’ There is nothing outside of you that you still need—no approval from the authorities, no attendance at temple, no key truth hidden in the tenth chapter of some sacred book. In your life right now, God has given you everything that you need to be human.’... While there are clearly many different ways to be human, and not all of them praiseworthy, it remains possible to see Jesus not as the founder of a new religion but as the exemplar of a new way of being human—a new Adam, in the language of the apostle Paul—who lived and died with such authentic faith in God that he gave his followers the courage to try to do the same thing. For obvious reasons, they could not sustain this alarming freedom for long, so they turned the faith of Jesus into the religion about Jesus and the rest is history. In a quip that makes the rounds, Jesus preached the coming of the kingdom, but it was the church that came.” (p. 219)

Finding the Religious Society of Friends in my 20’s was a miracle for me. Given the trajectory of my spiritual journey, after visiting just about every faith congregation in Greater Boston, I found this Meeting. And here I am 46 years later.