WHAT ABOUT JESUS?

A sermon preached by the Reverend John H. Nichols to the First Parish in Wayland in March 3, 2013.

Once there was a minister who thought very highly of his "children's sermons," although some of the children might have held a different opinion. Every Sunday he gathered them before him and began with a few questions that were designed to elicit cute answers – but in the end his message always always was that they should have a closer relationship to Jesus.

Jesus was the bottom line for every one of their minister's stories. And the children had their own strategy for getting to this bottom line as quickly as possible so that they could be done. They informally designated Timothy to raise his hand and answer most of the minister's questions for them.

One Sunday when this minister gathered the children at his feet, he asked them, "Now children. What is small, furry, has a long tail, gathers nuts in the fall and jumps from tree to tree." The children looked genuinely confused but then all eyes moved to Timothy. He reluctantly and dutifully raised his hand. He said, "Well, it sounds like a squirrel, but I guess it must be Jesus?"

Many people grew up with ministers like this. The Jesus of this minister's sermons was pounded home to children. He was the boy you would want your child to model after if you wanted your child to grow up without any ambition or competitive spirit whatsoever. This Jesus never troubles anyone and always agrees with everyone.

This Jesus has impeccable manners, always says "please" and "thank you" and probably comes across to children as a bit unreal. Many people still carry this Jesus around in their heads, because a well-meaning adult taught it to them. Perhaps some of us do as well.

Many years ago I was convening a meeting of the Wellesley Clergy Association in the Methodist Church in Wellesley. We met in a parlor that was dominated by a large portrait of Christ. It was a very traditional Nineteenth Century likeness. Jesus had blue eyes, long blonde hair and looked like a Scandinavian flower child.

As we were waiting for the meeting to begin, our rabbi stared silently at that portrait for a long time. We became curious as to what he was thinking and so we asked. Eventually, he sighed and said, "That is just not a Jewish boy." Indeed it wasn't. This was not the image of a Jewish man, who was born in the Middle East. This was the image of a man who was being presented as the savior of the Christians of Northern Europe. Perhaps that is the image of Jesus that you learned and rejected.

Very few of people come to the subject of Jesus fresh and unbiased. That is why in a UU church many ministers get to deliver only two sermons on Jesus a year if they are lucky. We have all been conditioned in one-way or another. Many have rightly rejected Jesus who is the impossibly good boy. Many have rightly rejected Jesus who is the savior only of Christians and Jesus, the scourge of the Jews. Many have rightly rejected the Jesus who is the only hope for admission to Heaven.

What's left? Actually a great deal. What's left – and what contemporaray scholarship is revealing more and more – is a man who lived and powerfully taught what many adults learn about life only after years of surviving failures and dead ends. What's left is a man whose profound integrity has proven to be a basis for our Western conviction of human dignity and the importance of the democratic spirit. And increasingly in our congregation there are men and women who are hoping to hear something more about all of this from us. So, this is one of your two Jesus sermons. The next one I preach at Easter.

What do we know about Jesus for a factual certainty? He lived, and gathered a following and he was believed to perform miracles. He died on the cross. Beyond this the specific details of his life may be historically lost or at least they are lost for now. But the impressions and stories we have about his life tell us more than we know about most famous men and women who lived at that same time.

We have images that are based on the deep faith of those who knew Jesus and upon the scriptures, which are inextricably a part of the moral and ethical life of the Western world. They inspired Albert Schweitzer and the Social Gospel movement and Martin Luther King. They inspired many of the founders and reformers of American democracy and most of the early Unitarian Universalists. They change lives. They have become a motivating force of history. It's fair to say Jesus is one of the most powerful, transformative personalities of Western history.

It is also true that our personal impressions of what Jesus meant can be misleading or harmful. Some translations of the Gospel of Matthew report that Jesus said, "Be ye perfect even as God is perfect. The image of Jesus as the scourge of the imperfect has dogged the days of millions of people, urging them on to attempt impossibility by trying to achieve perfection.

Perfection was never what Jesus meant. The Gospel of Luke understands the same teaching to mean, "Be compassionate even as God is compassionate." Most particularly the word he uses connotes generosity. Eugene Peterson translates this same passage "In a word, Grow up…. Live generously and graciously toward others as God has lived toward you."

Living generously is the core of what Jesus taught – not perfection. In a word, Grow up and live generously. What else, what more importantly has the life that has given us so much taught us about our relationships with others?. As Life pours out gifts for us, do we not have a responsibility to give ourselves out for others?

In another example, Jesus frequently talks about the Kingdom of God. He means a quality of living with kindness and with a continuing attitude of appreciation for all of the gifts of life that others reflect. He is talking about what is possible for each person and for the community to whom he speaks. In Luke, Jesus is talking about a change, a transformation that can happen right now or soon. Right here among us. "The kingdom of God" means when God is in more important in our world than Caesar.

However Matthew's Gospel has Jesus using the phrase "Kingdom of Heaven because, unlike Luke, Matthew is profoundly Jewish. He cannot use the word "God" in common speech. So he has Jesus talking about the "Kingdom of Heaven" where Luke speaks of "Kingdom of God." This, to our ears, casts Jesus as peddling exclusive tickets to a cushy afterlife in the sky – not talking about bringing justice and mercy to bear on earth. This misunderstanding is at the heart of how many receive Christianity. On the contrary, it is not heaven but life between us now on earth -- that concerns Jesus.

Most misleading and most destructive has been the image of Jesus as the prophet against his own people. To understand this image it is important to recognize that the gospels were written long after Jesus died. Gentiles wrote some of them at a time when Jewish and gentile followers of Jesus were in tension with one another. The gospel writers reflected that tension toward the Jewish community by using the words of Jesus against his own people – words that in all likelihood he never uttered. Jesus was not at war with the Pharisees. Jesus was a Jew and a Pharisee.

We have to dismiss these misleading images before we can know anything. Then a whole new world begins to open up. Jesus did not care if people had messy houses or if they made mistakes. Jesus was not the scourge of imperfection. Jesus wanted people to live fully and generously with one another. Jesus was not selling real estate in the life hereafter.

He wanted to establish a just society grounded in our desire to emulate our appreciation for God's generosity to everyone in our own actions. Imagine if you can demonstrating generosity in your own actions. Finally, Jesus was not at war with his own people. He was, in everything he did and said, profoundly Jewish.

So what I want to do with my time left is draw you closer to my own image of who Jesus was by looking at several of the parables he told. They and certain core sayings come closest to the real voice of Jesus.

A parable is a teaching story. The Judaic and Christian traditions understand that we learn best when we can draw an idea into our own lives, and we remember stories better than anything else. Here is the first of Jesus' parables.

Once there was a man who planned a dinner party and invited guests. All of those who received his invitations sent back excuses. One said, "I have bought a farm and I must go out to see it." Another said, "I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I need to go and examine them. And the third said "I have just gotten married." Everyone begged off.

The story deals with an anxiety that everyone feels – what if we offered to give a party and nobody came? My guess is that most people – in the same circumstance -- would respond in one of two ways. Either they would rent a movie and sit home rehearsing their resentment or they would go quickly to the "B" list of potential guests and work their way down through "C" and "D" until they finally had a functioning party.

The man in question did neither of those two things. Instead, he told his servant to throw open the doors, go out into the street and invite everyone in. The point of the story is the man had wanted to have a party, but his first attempts were frustrated. He could have been resentful. He could have been wounded. He could have decided that people just weren't worthy of his kindness. Instead he refused to allow other people to curb his own desire to be generous. He transcended the normal reactions most of us would have had –acting only on what he determined to be the right thing to do.

Here is the second story. There was a man who was going down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho when he fell among robbers. They accosted him and beat him and stole his clothing and left him naked and wounded by the side of the road. Now there were several fairly prominent leaders of society who passed by, but seeing the wounded man they crossed over to the other side of the road and ignored him.

People listening to this story would have realized that there may have been reasons why these community leaders passed on by. It was not that they necessarily lacked compassion, but they also had obligations to other people – as we do -- obligations that were of greater importance to them than helping this possibly dying man.

Now, a Samaritan comes along. The Samaritans were a despised group of people to Jesus audience but this Samaritan binds up the man's wounds, puts

him on his donkey and takes him to an inn. He tells the inn keeper, “Take care of this man, and when I return in a few days, I will pay you whatever it costs”

It is interesting what the Samaritan does not do. He does not wait around to be thanked. He does not wait around to be repaid in any way. He does not even wait around to find out if the beaten traveler survives. He is not what we would call a “do gooder.”

Throughout the entire episode he does not think about the dangers for him or the applause for him. He responds compassionately, because that is what he believes he should do. These parables always leave us wondering if we could do the same.

Once there was a man who had two sons. One day the younger son came to him and said, in effect, Father I’m not getting any younger, and you’re not dead yet. Why don’t you give me my share of the inheritance now, so that I can go off and make my fortune in the world? Despite the insulting manner in which this request is made the father complies and gives his son the money.

The younger son goes off and thoroughly wastes his father’s money in riotous living. And when he had spent all of his inheritance, it turned out that a famine swept the land and he was now both penniless and starving. So the young son decides to go back to his father, and the story tells us how he rehearses the insincere apology he will make in order to get back into his father’s good graces.

As soon as the prodigal son appears over the horizon – and before he has had a chance to give his contrition speech – the father rushes out and embraces him. He then orders up a huge banquet and invites all of the neighbors to join in. Now the older son who has been working dutifully at his father’s side for many years apparently did not hear about the party. He’s trudging back from the fields when he sees there is a party going on, and it is in his wastrel brother’s honor.

He reproaches his father. He says, “Father here I have been at your side – the paragon of faithfulness – for lo these many years, but when this worthless jerk of a younger brother arrives you kill the fatted calf and have a party. And the father says to him, “Son, you are always with me and all that is mine is yours. It is fitting to make merry for this your brother was dead and is now alive.”

This is a story that gets to all of us in one way or another. Those of us who are older brothers or sisters hear it and we say, “Yes that’s just the way it always is and has been.” And most of us would agree that the father’s solution – to reward the undeserving and at best ignore the deserving – may not be good parenting in that it does not accord with our sense of justice.

We can tell from reading the gospels that the disciples were also very concerned with justice. It appears that they argued over every little thing. But, it's very significant that the father in this story does not wait to hear his son's arguments for wanting his inheritance early or his tale of contrition after he has lost it all. He is not interested in adjudicating the fairness of what is he about to do. Perhaps he knows there is no ultimate fairness. Perhaps there is only love and death.

The father is determined to live out his love for his sons regardless of what happens. Like the man who gave a party that no one attended he is living generously no matter how much provocation he may be given to do otherwise. Like the Samaritan he will serve life over death at any cost.

Whatever else we know or think we know about Jesus, we know he followed this particular path – celebrating Life's gifts for the rest of his days. Whatever his disciples may have misunderstood or misconstrued about him they understood and remembered perfectly this teaching, "Grow up and live generously toward others, as Life has been generous toward you." Do not allow oppression to harden your hearts, narrow your minds or to make you cowards. Do not hold on to life so tightly that you never actually have it or live it.