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Date: July 14 2019
Sermon Title: "And You Shall Call His Name Jesus"
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Philippians 2:5-11;

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*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.*

*Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

This popped up from Fox News on my iPhone on July 9th: "Country singer Jo Dee Messina said she got a visit from Jesus on her front porch that changed her life." The article reported, "Country singer Jo Dee Messina said she got a visit from Jesus on her front porch just as she was hitting an all-time low in her life. She was battling cancer at the time, and "Jesus Christ walked onto my front porch and argued with me all day long, as real as I'm sitting here now," she stated."

On the same page was a story about a rock 'n' roll singer, Avril Lavigne, who has a new song about a lousy boyfriend. She sings, "I fell in love with the devil. Someone send me an angel." Some Christian critics of her told her, "You need Jesus."

I'm not making light of either story. Jesus is surely the most long-lasting, fascinating person to have ever walked the face of this earth. And I'm about to write a book about him, as if there is anything new to say. In 1997, there were 65,571 books about Jesus, certainly more than 100,000 by today, and four new books are added every day. Make that five on the day my book comes out. You folks are very kind and tolerant with all my writing. Every two years I come out with some new writing project, and you buy them, read them, give them as gifts; you respond to them, use them, take them to heart. Countless books, endless "white papers," long essays, and a bottomless pit of poems. And still you humor me. Thank you for that!

So, onto Jesus. Who is he? What is he? Why does he matter to us in the 21st century in our little corner of the world? I can shorten the debate, this sermon, and whatever the new book is by going with the classic answer: Jesus is the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, the Savior of the world. And in the language of the Apostles' Creed, "Jesus Christ, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried. He descended into hell. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven and sitteth at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty. From thence he shall come to judge the living and dead."

There. End of discussion. Or, maybe there's more. And different. Truth is, everything changes, even the most important things. Perspectives change, approaches change, emphases change, comprehension changes. Even if we forget for a moment that Jesus was divine, the Son of God, and think of him as a man from the Middle East who lived 2,000 years ago, we would still agree that Jesus had different phases in his life. We all do. We don't present ourselves the same way now as we did in our 50s or 40s or 20s or teens. We are the same people, but different.

I recently saw two photos of myself that you will never see. One, from sophomore year of college. My roommate had had it up to here with me, and it looks as though he beat the daylights out of me. I am disheveled, humiliated, defeated and covered with who knows what. That's David Johnson Rowe. In the second photo (by then I'm an ordained Baptist pastor and a high school wrestling coach), there I am, in a gaudy green large plaid three-piece suit with a Paul McCartney bowl cut hairstyle kneeling next to a wrestling mat, yelling at one of my wrestlers. That's David Johnson Rowe. The same person you've entrusted this Church to for 22 years; you've entrusted your children, your faith, your loved ones, your

Sunday mornings, your million-dollar Church budget, your hundreds of thousands of mission giving, you allow this David Johnson Rowe in all of that, the same guy who's in the photos. We all have phases. Jesus too.

Jesus had a private phase, and a public phase. He could be outspoken or gentle. He could be clear as day or obtuse. He was patient and impatient. He was popular and executed. He was demanding, ill tempered, insulting, and angry. He was thoughtful, generous, sacrificial, and loving. The same Jesus who cursed an unproductive fig tree and mocked a worried mother, touched untouchables and praised the virtues of gentleness. It's all Jesus. Jesus presents in different ways. We perceive Jesus in different ways.

For today's Scripture I chose two popular mentions of Jesus's name. The first comes from the Christmas story, when an angel goes to Mary and tells her she's going to have a miraculous baby who will save the world from our sins. "And you shall call him 'Jesus,'" the angel told her. Then we jump ahead about 60 years, when Christianity was getting established and structured and organized and thought out. What started out as a small movement by a few friends who thought Jesus was really amazing, now saw itself as a life-saving, world-changing religion for the ages, every age; and for the people, all people.

And that's reflected in the second part of today's Scripture. It starts with unusual but very telling praise. "Jesus," St. Paul writes, "Jesus, who was equal to God and knew it, humbled himself, we might even say lowered himself. Not only to *be* like us but to be *one* of us. Therefore (and here's the key point), therefore, since God has exalted Jesus, and given him a name above every name, then at the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow, every tongue confess, that Jesus Christ is Lord."

In other words, "Hey, Mary, you're going to have a baby. In a little stable. He'll be hunted and hounded as a baby. He'll be crucified as a young man. But don't worry. Some day, at the mere mention of his name, every knee shall bow, every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord." So even in the Bible, people experience, we experience Jesus in fresh ways, day to day, place to place, person to person. That's what I'm going off to write about.

Now, the decent thing to do at this point would be for me to say, "Gee, I'm going to miss you while I'm away." But, I don't know, Alida and I leave tonight for Paris. Then Kraków, then Vienna, then she leaves me in Bratislava and Prague, where I'll be toiling, suffering, really, in European cafés on the Danube River. I hope you appreciate the sacrifices I make for you.

Part of what I'll be grappling with (and if you've ever see me writing in a coffee house, I am grappling, writing furiously, crossing out, crumpling pages, literally talking to myself) is the age-old question: Who is Jesus? And more urgently, who

is Jesus for us, now, here? He has been the poster boy for causes, movements, politics of every kind. A few weeks ago I told our Bible Study about a course I took with the legendary Harvey Cox at Harvard. He began the year with a slideshow of images of Jesus from across Latin America, and later he and I swapped other Jesus images we'd seen around the world. Some are familiar and comforting. Jesus as the captain of the ship, Jesus with children on his lap or a little lamb in his arms. Jesus praying, teaching. Some are provocative, disturbing: Jesus in an electric chair. Jesus suffering a dread disease. Jesus standing up against injustice, tyranny, evil.

My last Church up in Massachusetts had a large poster of Jesus in the hallway, a gigantic 500-foot-tall Jesus, looming over the United Nations building, knocking on the door, hoping to get invited in. I see Jesus black, Korean, African, Arab, Latin American, female, pacifist, militant, labor organizer. Jesus has been appropriated by the religious right, the religious left, by death penalty opponents, and, believe it or not, death penalty supporters. And, yes, Jesus is very much present in the many immigration crises, not only on our Mexican border, but also across Europe, around the Mediterranean and Africa, in editorials, cartoons, images. And, Jesus has often been prominent in liberation struggles, independence movements, civil wars. Try singing "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," all four stanzas without Jesus. He's everywhere, good, bad . . . but never indifferent.

But there are limits. That class I took at Harvard, Dr. Cox showed one image of Jesus dressed as a guerrilla fighter, holding his AK-47 assault rifle, wearing crossed bandoliers of bullets, staring menacingly ahead. This was the revolutionaries' attempt to convince the masses, the "Campesinos," the peasants, that Jesus was on their side. It didn't work. As fast as the revolutionaries plastered up their posters, the people tore them down. Jesus may have come to change the world, to save the world, even to die for the world. But the people were saying he did not come to kill anybody.

That's a good cautionary tale for me as I sit down to write what I think Jesus is. It's a cautionary tale for all of us. There is a thin line between making Jesus into us and seeing in Jesus what we need. To put it another way, there is a thin line between making Jesus into us and seeing in Jesus what we need. To put it another way, is Jesus meant to be a mirror image of us, or are we meant to be a mirror image of Jesus?

Here's a simple example: let's say I'm a pacifist. So I'll push Jesus as a pacifist. Or, let's say we see our world is full of conflict, hostility, anger everywhere. Yet, the Bible says Jesus is our Peace, yes, even the Prince of Peace. So we start emulating Christ, following Christ. In short, do we use him? Or try to be like him?

I'll close with this. For me, this business about Jesus is personal. I'll probably dig deeper into this in whatever I write, but the quick story is for now.

I am a serious student of world religions. My boarding school had required religion courses every year, so there I was, 14 years old, learning about religions I'd never heard of: Jainism, Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism. I became an adult, and my commitment to missions and my work with Habitat for Humanity and the ministry we started in India, Friends of Christ in India, gave me a front-row seat, literally a front-row seat for religious/worship experiences I could barely imagine: voodoo, Hindu temples, Muslim mosques, gigantic gold Buddhas, prayer wheels as big as a house in Nepal, traditional religions, native religions, nature worship, idol worship, ancestor worship, all kinds of religious cults. These first-hand eyeball experiences made me want to know more, to understand what I was seeing. So that led me to my doctoral studies and a doctoral thesis on "African Traditional Religion."

And later, three years of study at Harvard, especially the Harvard School of World Religions. I studied with the best. I read the sacred texts. I met with the believers and practitioners of so many religions. And then one day, on a long, long run up in the Berkshires, around Tanglewood, actually, I asked God for permission. Permission for two things: No. 1, to spend the rest of my Church life with a ministry that errs on the side of loving too much rather than too little. No. 2, and this is the one for today, I told God flat out I can't figure it all out.

All the religions, all the ideas of God, all the Holy Books, all the practices. Gee, I'd met good people in all of them; I'd found wisdom in all of them. There was hunger for God in all of them. But it was too much. And I wasn't done talking to God. I said, God, I can't even grasp the whole Bible. I've been through it every which way. I've sat under the best of teachers. I've heard and met and read the Biblical giants of our day. It was still all too much. Even St. Paul flummoxed me.

I'm not saying I don't know stuff or don't believe stuff or can't explain stuff. I'm a fairly boring, straight-up Christian. What I was saying to God was it's all too much. Will you allow me to focus on Jesus? Let me master one thing: Jesus. Let me understand. Let me explain. Let me concentrate on, let me focus on Jesus.

However we slice it theologically, the one general agreement is that Jesus is about as good a representation of God as we can get, about as close as we can get conceptually, personally, practically.

We do that in college. We major in something, not everything. We do that in sports. We concentrate on one thing, not everything. We do that in business. We find a focus, a niche, and master it. I asked God to let me zero in on Jesus.

So far, so good.

Our final hymn, and you'll notice that all our hymns today have to do with Jesus, is "Jesus Calls Us O'er the Tumult," No. 337 in your Hymnal:

*Jesus calls us o'er the tumult
of our life's wild restless sea,
day by day his sweet voice soundeth,
saying, "Christian, follow me";*

*Long ago apostles heard it
by the Galilean lake,
turned from home, and toil, and kindred,
leaving all for his dear sake.*

*Jesus calls us from the worship
of the vain world's golden store;
from each idol that would keep us,
saying, "Christian, love me more."*

*In our joys and in our sorrows,
days of toil and hours of ease,
still he calls, in cares and pleasures,
"Christian, love me more than these."*

*Jesus calls us! By thy mercies,
Savior, may we hear thy call,
give our hearts to thine obedience,
serve and love thee best of all.*