

I. Intro.: I grew up in the '70s , the Jurassic Age of dinosaurs (phones with cords, TVs you have to get out of your chair to change the channel, only four or five channels before cable)

A. One of the shows my parents let me watch was *To Tell the Truth*, one of the longest running game shows in American history

1. There were always three contestants: one was a real-life character with an interesting story, and the other two were imposters, pretending to be the central character

a) A celebrity panel had to interview the contestants. The two imposters could lie, but the real character was sworn "to tell the truth."

b) The panelists voted on who they thought was telling the truth,

2. Then came the moment of suspense when the host asked the final question, "Will the real (John Smith) please stand up?"

B. I was reminded of this game show recently when I came across a great magazine article entitled "Will the real Jesus please stand up?"



1. *Relevant* is a Christian magazine for 20- and 30-somethings that deals with the intersection of faith, culture, and intentional living

a) Okay, I'm well past my 30s, and I don't have a smartphone to receive it on, but it's still well worth reading

b) Allow me to share the opening portion of the article that caught my eye, from the July/August 2012 issue of *Relevant* magazine

Text: Isa. 53:7-12; Matt. 27:11-31

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2. *Jesus waits for us outside the church door every Sunday morning – or with a slightly disapproving frown, on Saturday night. What, you can't make time on Sunday morning?*

He smells our breath for cigarettes. He checks to make sure we're carrying our Bibles. (Partial credit for having it on your smartphone.) [Guess that would exclude me.] He returns our hip flasks to us after sniffing its contents. He takes out a tape measure to make sure the hems of women's dresses aren't too far removed from their knees. He makes sure the men wear collared shirts.

Not certain that's the church for us, we head downtown to another church—one that meets in a pub and where Jesus leans against a wall, his hair in dreads, wearing an old, beat-up army jacket for ironic effect. This Jesus has a checklist, too. He checks ID cards at the door to make sure everyone's the right age (old enough to get into a pub, young enough to fit in). [Guess I wouldn't fit there, either.] He hands out pints and watches through narrowed eyes to make sure we're free enough in Christ to drink. He checks wrists and ankles to make sure there's some ink—a few Hebrew words, or a tiny fish or the blue outline of a dove.

The conceptions of Jesus vary wildly, but one thing is for sure: When Christians imagine Jesus, He is largely schizophrenic. He loves me enough to forgive me for sleeping with my girlfriend, but when I fail to have devotional time six days in a row, He'll likely punish me in some passive-aggressive way, like giving me a cold or making my tire blow out on the freeway. He doesn't care enough about my prayers to make Aunt Jodie's cancer go away, but he'll occasionally answer fervent prayers for a parking spot at the mall so I can make it to the movies on time—because Jesus desperately wants me to see The Dark Knight Rises and not miss the previews.

The Apostle John said, "When Christ appears, we will be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). This implies we don't see Jesus in his totality now. According to the Scriptures, we won't see Jesus in his entirety until we're in his presence. So, anyone who says they have Jesus all figured out is either dead or deceived.

3. With that I'll end the quote, but see me if you want to read the rest of it for yourself.
4. *"Will the real Jesus please stand up?"* You may wonder where this long intro. is going for a sermon drawing on one of the saddest stories in the Bible: the beginning of the day that Jesus was killed
5. All has to do with a surprising discovery I made this week in our text from Matthew 27, something not found in the other three Gospels

II. 1st, Let's recap today's story:

A. Right after daybreak, the Temple police had just taken Jesus, beaten and bound, from his travesty of a hearing before the Sanhedrin

1. The Jewish high court had just sentenced him to death, but Rome would not allow them to carry out capital punishment
2. So they dragged Jesus over to an early morning audience with the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, who just happened to be in town
 - a) Thousands of pilgrims were there for a big Jewish feast which, by the way, celebrated the liberation of the Jewish people from a hated foreign oppressor ... any wonder Pilate wanted to squelch riots before they began?
 - b) Anyway, some of the Sanhedrin leaders tagged along so they could stir up a crowd of supporters against Jesus and convince Pilate to confirm their death sentence

B. Pilate the ruler and politician was in a tough spot:

1. He was left scratching his head what to do with this trumped-up case without merits, yet he didn't want to upset a crowd led by the most important Jewish leaders
2. At this point that's told only in the Gospel of Matthew, Pilate got a message sent out to him by his wife from her inner chambers: Apparently she had a nasty dream about the innocent man they had brought before her husband, and she warned him not to get entangled in this affair
3. Then Pilate remembered a way out of the dilemma ... it was, pardon the expression, his "get out of jail free" card
 - a) It seems there was a custom of the governor releasing to the Jews at Passover a prisoner of their own choosing
 - b) And he knew just the one to suggest—a notorious prisoner, someone so obviously guilty that he couldn't possibly be released

III. And that's when I discovered it

A. The word just leaped off the page of my NRSV Bible, larger than life right there in vv. 16-17

1. According to my Bible, the criminal's name was not simply "Barabbas," it was "**Jesus Barabbas**"! Whoa!
2. How many of you had ever seen that? This is one of several details in the story that are unique in Matthew

B. I didn't see this one coming, so I had to check it out myself

1. Why doesn't "Jesus" show up as part of his name in most of our English Bibles?

- a) The simple answer is that the most reliable and largest number of Greek manuscripts of the Gospel of Matthew do not have this word in it
- b) And why would that be?

It is possible that over the first 1,000 years of Christianity, some pious scribes were repulsed by the thought of this criminal Barabbas sharing the same name as their Lord Jesus

Therefore they omitted that part of his name and so had Matthew agree with the other Gospels in simply calling him Barabbas

2. The real name of the criminal in this story may or may not be "Jesus Barabbas," but it's very possible, and it sure is intriguing!

C. What difference, you may wonder, would it make if the criminal shared the same name as our Lord?

1. We know that the name Jesus was fairly common at that time, but doesn't it sound different if the choice Pilate gave that crowd was between two men with the same name?

- a) Today, we look at it from viewpoint of 2,000 years of Christian history and dogma, and we see a very obvious choice:

Jesus the sinless Son of God Almighty? *or*

Barabbas a murderer who plotted against Rome?

- b) But try to imagine how it might have sounded to impoverished Jewish peasants of that day, struggling under heavy Roman taxes ...

The choice Pilate offered probably wasn't as stark as we think ...

(a) So if Jesus Barabbas was part of an insurrection plot against those hated Roman occupiers, wasn't that a noble cause?

(b) There's a good chance that if Jesus Barabbas was an insurrectionist, then the person he murdered was a Roman oppressor ... Many Jews would have secretly applauded that!

On the other hand, this traveling rabbi named Jesus certainly upset the Jewish religious leaders, and he made the Romans nervous with all his political language of "the kingdom" he was bringing

Text: Isa. 53:7-12; Matt. 27:11-31

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c) If you tried to take a Roman perspective, you might hear Pilate asking, "Do you want Jesus the violent revolutionary ... or Jesus the nonviolent revolutionary?"

2. In any case the similarity of their names reminds us sometimes the choice of who we should follow is not so black and white

IV. Which brings me back to opening question of which Jesus we see and which Jesus we follow

A. Right now in Lent we're focusing on Jesus of Nazareth, God's chosen Messiah, who rejected the use of violence for himself and his followers, and did not return abuse for abuse

1. People all over the world for 2,000 years have prayed to God's Son with the same name, yet in his name Crusades have been fought, and opposing armies have both claimed his blessing for their cause
2. Is this really the same Jesus we're praying to?
3. (Story of awkward prayer circle):

Ten years ago while pastoring in Kansas, I became convicted that there were too many abortions in our country, so I took a risk of joining an early morning ecumenical prayer gathering of Christians concerned about this issue. The second time I was with the group, the prayers that started out about sanctity of life and reducing abortions suddenly morphed into something else.

One of the local pastors, an evangelical guy with a heart as big as the Kansas prairies, began praying. He prayed for the thousands of American Christian soldiers in Iraq to have opportunities to witness for Christ in their interactions with Muslim Iraqis. He prayed that if they have to be there, that their mission would include bringing souls to Christ ...

My spirit was deeply disturbed, and I could no longer enter the prayers of this group, which I politely stopped attending. How does a Christian foreigner draw people to Christ, whose ancestors were killed by Christian Crusaders, all while carrying an AK-47 and forcibly occupying their land?

We were not praying to the same Jesus ...

B. This morning I'm highlighting Pilate's question: "Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who's called Christ?"

1. I hope this question prompts us to reflect on what kind of Jesus we're drawn to and why
 - a) Not every version of Jesus presents a choice between a true Jesus and a false Jesus
 - b) There are many different legitimate images we carry of who Jesus is and what he means to us, but I can't possibly name all of them.

2. Here are five of them, shortened and oversimplified this morning:

a) Jesus the sacrificial lamb

Probably the most common and familiar version of Jesus in Western World for past 900 years

This Jesus dutifully carries out God's preordained plan for salvation by becoming the substitute sacrifice before God for the sins of the whole world

b) Jesus the subversive revolutionary

This Jesus shakes things up, questions authority and pushes the boundaries in prophetic ways

This Jesus is a champion of peace and justice, one who always advocates for the poor and marginalized

c) Jesus the compassionate healer and friend

This is Jesus from the old campfire song, "Jesus is a friend, he's a friend next to ya"

This Jesus is drawn to helping hurting people in practical ways, and many people who have gone through the valley of dark times have called on this Jesus

d) Jesus the teacher of wisdom

This is the wise rabbi who by his teachings shows us the way God wants us to live

We are made right with God because we now have Jesus the supreme ethical model for our lives

e) Jesus the surprising warrior king

Here in Jesus is the ultimate power source for the world, cleverly disguised in packaging that rejects violence to achieve its aims

This Jesus is the conquering king who appears to be defeated but actually overpowers the evil forces of Satan by trusting in God's power rather than in violent ways

C. These five kinds of Jesus named are not mutually exclusive

1. We may be especially fond of several of them ... or be drawn to some at certain times more than others

2. So I invite you to give serious thought to "Who is Jesus to you?" remembering of course the wisdom from that article in Relevant magazine:

"Anyone who says they have Jesus all figured out is either dead or deceived."

V. Conclusion

A. As Christians, we believe God was revealed to us most fully and supremely in one particular human being—Jesus of Nazareth.

1. However, God uses multiple ways to help us understand and connect with that God-man Jesus
2. The God of the Bible is not confined to just one Jesus image ... Jesus can and does represent God to us in more than one way,

B. In the next few weeks, as we enter into the most dramatic portions of Jesus' story, I urge you to wrestle with two questions:

1. Which Jesus is calling you, stirring you the most?

a) (Our response song, *My song is love unknown*, contains several varied ways to describe who Jesus is and what he has done. Listen in this song for the Jesus who speaks most strongly to you)

2. Most importantly, *Have you made him the center of your life*, your focal point, your grounding for ultimate meaning?

- a) God invested so incredibly much just to enter your world in Jesus, that he does not wish to be just a marginal part of your life, merely one of several equal influences shaping you
- b) Exactly which of these authentic Jesus's you are drawn to matters much less than whether or not he is the center of your world.
- c) The God who came to us in this multi-faceted Jesus is big enough to handle all of our love, our trust and commitment