

“A Better Story—Jesus and Us”
Matthew 11:1-6

Today, we focus on our relationship with Jesus. While he is the central figure of our faith, Jesus is rarely easy to define. Throughout two thousand years of history, humanity has viewed him through a kaleidoscope of lenses: Prophet, Divine Being, Priest, Sacrificial Lamb, Teacher, and Healer.

Years ago, I took a course at Drew University titled “*American Jesus*.” One assignment seemed ridiculous at first: we were told to look around our own church buildings to see what images of Jesus were present. The goal was to identify the congregation’s “dominant understanding” of Christ. Initially, I thought we had no images at all. But when I paid closer attention, I found them everywhere. I discovered several in the children’s chapel, including multiple copies of Warner Sallman’s famous 1941 *Head of Christ* (image). These images—often subtle and tucked away—shape how we imagine God more than we realize.

In our modern culture, Jesus is a controversial and divisive figure, even among those who claim his name. In his book *Jesus*, scholar Marcus Borg notes that American Christians are deeply divided on what it means to actually follow him:

- Many followers oppose evolution and defend a literal-factual reading of Genesis; yet, other followers were the first to reconcile evolution with faith by understanding those stories symbolically.
- Followers of Jesus are among the strongest opponents of marriage equality; yet, other followers are among its strongest advocates.

The way we view Jesus defines the very DNA of our faith. So, how do we sort through the clutter? Which image is the “correct” one? Does our salvation depend on finding the single, perfect definition of Jesus?

This struggle is not new. The early church councils fought for centuries to define the nature of Christ, and the first disciples struggled just as much. Even Jesus’ own cousin, John the Baptist, had his doubts.

John knew Jesus. He had baptized him in the Jordan. Now, John sat in a prison cell, likely kept informed by his disciples who brought him food. He had all the information, yet he sent word to ask: “*Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?*”

John’s problem was that the **reality** of Jesus didn’t match the **mental image** John had of the Messiah. John expected a Messiah of vengeance—one who would destroy the wicked to bring justice. He expected a winnowing fork and a fire that consumes. He didn’t expect a cousin who spent his time at dinner parties with “sinners.”

Let us listen to **Matthew 11:1-6**:

When Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and proclaim his message in their cities. When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

<https://youtu.be/ldrW5XyhhVo>

Jesus doesn't give a simple "yes" or "no." Instead, he quotes the prophet Isaiah—but he does so selectively. He mentions the healing and the good news, but he pointedly leaves out the phrase from Isaiah 61:2 regarding "*the day of vengeance of our God.*" Jesus was reinterpreting the script. He was showing John that the mission was about **restoration, not retribution**. He wasn't a military leader or a violent revolutionary. He was a "slap in the face" to those who wanted blood. He taught that justice comes through love, and the evidence of his identity was found in the healing of the broken.

We struggle with this today because we still want a God who judges the people we judge. We want a God who belongs to our political party and rights wrongs through "righteous" power.

In *The Powers That Be*, Walter Wink writes:

"Jesus understood judgment not as an end, but as a beginning... The river of fire was not to consume but to purify... He did not wait for them to repent to offer forgiveness. Everything is reversed: you are forgiven; now you can repent!"

This is the "Better Story." Salvation isn't about gaining a special status; it's about healing our brokenness so we can finally see how sacred everyone else is.

Following Jesus isn't a checklist of beliefs; it is a decision to live with love as the primary focus. This is hard. Our ego wants "upward mobility," but Jesus offers "downward mobility"—a life of letting go of power and standing in solidarity with the powerless.

The late Rachel Held Evans once shared stories from a conference called "*Why Christian?*" She asked people why they stayed in a faith that is so often misused. The answers were beautiful:

- **Episcopal priest Kerlin Richter:** "I am a Christian because having a body wasn't always good news for me, but then I met Good News that had a body... I am a messy and embodied person, and this is a messy and embodied faith."
- **Author Austin Channing Brown:** "I am a Christian because God knows my pain, not in an abstract way, but in a real, bloody, enfleshed way."

Rachel looked at the room—a mix of "crunchy dreadlocked mamas, tattooed priests, and fashionistas"—and realized that despite their differences, they were all caught up in the same resurrection story.

She concluded with a line that should be our prayer today: **“I am a Christian because the story of Jesus is still the story I’m willing to risk being wrong about.”**
Amen.