Text Introduction:
In our reading today from Matthew’s Gospel, we find Jesus and the disciples at Caesarea Philippi, a city located near the modern border of Israel and Syria and built by Herod the Great. In the city were temples to Pan and the Roman emperor, Augustus (whose favorite title was also “Son of God.”)

This text is about the disciples making sense of who Jesus was (using ideas and terms familiar to them) and is also about the cost of discipleship. Here we learn of the future path Jesus will take and the disciples’ resistance to this way of suffering that is so very different from what they had hoped for in the One who would deliver them from Roman rule.

Matthew 16:13-17; 20-26 (NRSV)

13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’ 14 And they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ 15 He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ 16 Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’ 17 And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.

21 From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. 22 And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.’ 23 But he turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’

24 Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. 26 For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?’

As you know, this summer you all were asked to submit your most pressing faith questions so that we, your hard-working pastoral staff, could attempt to engage with those questions in our sermons.

This week’s question: “Which Jesus are we talking about?” is a doozy. Next week, Catherine is tackling “What was Jesus up to?” Also a great question.
There are SO many different ideas out there about who Jesus was and what he was up to. For Christians, how we answer these questions profoundly shapes how we live in the world.

I think I have the perfect movie scene to illustrate our struggle.

Has anybody seen Talladega Nights? I am NOT endorsing the movie, OK? But there is this one scene in Talladega Nights -- the story of #1 NASCAR driver Ricky Bobby—where family and friends are gathered around the dinner table and Ricky Bobby is saying grace.

He starts out:
“Dear 6 pound 4 ounce Baby Jesus, or as our brothers to the south call you Jésus…we thank you so much for this bountiful harvest of Domino’s, KFC, and the always delicious Taco Bell. Dear Tiny, Infant, Jesus…”

Then Ricky Bobby’s wife interrupts him:
“Hey, um... you know sweetie, Jesus did grow up. You don't always have to call him baby. It's a bit odd and off puttin' to pray to a baby.”

Ricky Bobby:
“Well look, I like the Christmas Jesus best, and I'm sayin' grace. When you say grace, you can say it to grown up Jesus, or teenage Jesus, or bearded Jesus, or whoever you want.”

(he continues) “Dear little baby Jesus, who's sittin' in his crib watchin' the Baby Einstein videos, learnin' 'bout shapes and colors. “

His friend Cal Naughton, Jr. jumps in:
“I like to think of Jesus as a mischievous badger.”

Ricky Bobby goes on: “Dear Tiny Jesus, in your golden fleece diapers with your tiny, little fat balled up fists …”

Cal Naughton, Jr. (with further religious reflections): “I like to picture Jesus in a tuxedo T-Shirt because it says: ‘I want to be formal, but I'm here to party.’”

Ricky Bobby undeterred, continues:

“Dear Eight Pound, Six Ounce, Newborn Baby Jesus, don’t even know a word yet, just a little infant, so cuddly, but still omnipotent.”

Then one of the Kids adds: “I like to pray to the Ninja Jesus!” And it goes on from there…

I will leave you all to unpack the deep theology contained in the film.

I spent most of my life in conservative Christian churches that held to the view of Jesus as Lord and Savior, human and divine, sacrifice for our sins, the one who saves us from hell, the only way to God.
Over a long, terrifying, difficult and ongoing process, I have come to understand Jesus differently. As much, much more than that.

But as limited and misguided as I now believe that old version of the story to be, the fact remains that it was the means through which I met, experienced, and came to love Jesus. It was a different version of Jesus, yes. But through all phases and forms of clarity and confusion, I would say that I have genuinely encountered God in Jesus throughout my lifetime.

Today I read the Scriptures differently than I used to. I hear God speaking in all kinds of surprising places. I am less sure about how to define Jesus or God.

But I think I am OK with that.

Catherine said to me just this morning: “Saying we don’t know is a radical stepping into grace.” YES! Perhaps defining someone is not as important as seeking deep connection and relationship with them. As a wise person once said, “If you think you have completely understood God, it probably isn’t God.”

We search and stretch to understand, but ultimately, a lot is just mystery. Which might be why it is called “faith” and not “absolutely definite empirically verifiable knowledge.”

Even Jesus’ disciples seemed confused about who he was and what he was up to. One moment Peter is proclaiming that Jesus is “the Messiah, the Son of the Living God” and being praised by Jesus for understanding. The next moment Peter is being called “Satan” and a “stumbling block” because he has shown that he really doesn’t understand at all who Jesus is and what it means to follow him.

Peter was expecting a Messiah (an “anointed one”) who would deliver his people from oppression and occupation. What he got was a Messiah who talked about loving enemies, being peacemakers, giving to the poor, and living with humility...who then ended up on a cross.

I used to look down my nose at poor clueless Peter. Now I just identify with him.

What are some of the images we have held about Jesus?

Most of us don’t pray to the baby Jesus. We may not believe it is appropriate to pray to Jesus at all. What DO we think and/or believe about Jesus?

Author, pastor, and emerging church leader Brian McLaren was in town a year or two ago talking about his book “Everything Must Change.”
In one talk, he ran through a list of the various Jesuses he has encountered. I have taken his list titles and elaborated a bit. Listen and see if any of these sound familiar to you:

We have The Baby Jesus

The Prize-Fighter Warrior Jesus
– This Jesus says, “That first time I came--meek, mild, dying? That was totally a fake out. I’m a manly man and next time I show up I am going to kick some rears and RULE!!”

The Second-Coming Killer Jesus
– This one is closely related to warrior Jesus, but more violent. You can find this Jesus starring in a popular book series where he revels in the bloody death of his enemies.

The Private Personal Make Me Feel Good Jesus
– “Draw me close. Let the world around me fade away…. I’m OK, You’re OK. Well, I don’t know about you, but at least I’m OK.”

The Prosperity Help Me Get Rich Jesus
– “All that money just shows that God likes ya! God is blessin’ ya! That stuff I said about giving to the poor and camels and needles…just caught me on a bad day.”

The Fire Escape Get Me Out of Hell Jesus –
I have to quote McLaren here because he says it so beautifully: This Jesus says, “If you want to be among those specifically qualified to escape being forever punished for your sins in hell, you must repent of your individual sins and believe that my Father punished me on the cross so he won’t have to punish you in hell. Only if you believe this will you go to heaven when the earth is destroyed and everyone else is banished to hell. This is the good news.” (Brian McLaren, Everything Must Change.)

The Evacuation Leave This World Behind Jesus –
“Who cares about the poor or the environment? You’re going to heaven!”

The Institutional Organ and Stained Glass Jesus
Ah….this is a nice safe Jesus. He says, “Within these walls, for one hour each week, your traditions, confessions, buildings, programs, music, and meetings provide all that is needed to keep God happy with you and make you a good person.”

I came up with a few more…

How about the Made-up-story Fairy-tale Jesus?
He says, “Listen, I didn’t actually do any of that stuff you read about in the Gospels. No need to bother reading about me. It was just a superstitious time.”

Or maybe Back-Burner Jesus?
He says, “Hey, you have other things to do that are more important than seeking the Kingdom of God? No worries. Go ahead…have fun! I’ll be here!”
Or maybe you know Crazy Uncle Jesus?  
We don’t talk about him too much or too loudly because…you know…he can be a little extreme.  
It’s kind of embarrassing.

We wonder, are we dealing with a resurrected, body out of the grave, ascended to heaven Jesus?

If we follow the Jesus Seminar Crowd, we might ask about
What Marcus Borg calls the “Pre-Easter Jesus” and the “Post-Easter Jesus.”

This is kind of a big question among progressive Christians:
“Are we talking about the Jesus of history, or the Christ of our present experience?”

And my answer to that is: YES! I’m that generation that likes the “both/and.”

In both the historical Jesus that has been studied and sought after by so many scholars in recent years AND in the evolving reflections of the early Christian community upon the meaning and life of Jesus contained in Scripture we find things that are “real” and important.

Whether or not you believe that Jesus actually was resurrected from the dead, it seems clear that his followers had life-altering encounters with the post-Easter Jesus.  Somehow after Jesus’ death they experienced the Spirit of Jesus even MORE than they had before the crucifixion.

The enduring testimony of the Christian community is of transformative encounter with this living Christ…encounters that are like coming into direct communion with God.  So eventually we ended up with the doctrine of the Trinity: Three in one.  Creator, Christ, Holy Spirit.

Is that actually the way God is?  I don’t know.  
Maybe if we had a God-meter, we could check it and get a scientific reading.  
Or maybe that isn’t the way to go at all.  
Perhaps we are asking the wrong questions in trying to figure out Jesus.

Eric Elnes, Author of Asphalt Jesus, posted a blog last week (just in time for this sermon!!) where he says that the Historical Jesus/Living Christ question for him is not so much, “Was Jesus God?” but rather, “Is God like Jesus?”
To which he says, Yes!

Eric says, “If the word ‘Christ’ refers to an aspect of Jesus that continues to live on beyond his mortal death, I can wholeheartedly affirm that Jesus is Christ…his story has become central in my story.  Why has Jesus become central?  Because I meet God in Jesus…(and) these experiences look like the Jesus I regularly encounter in the gospels.  This fact has led me to conclude that Jesus is one who was “full of God.” Or in the Apostle Paul’s words, “God was in Christ.” (asphaltjesus.wordpress.com)
Jesus was a God-filled, Spirit-filled person.
And there are as many ways to understand him as there are people on this earth.

Are all of those ways equally accurate or even helpful?
I don’t think so.

I think there were certain things that were key to the message and work of Jesus:
Love God, love your neighbor.
The Kingdom of God is here, now, among you, within you.
Be compassionate as God is compassionate.
Follow me.

But I also know that I am limited in my understanding.
I am constrained by my own cultural biases and presuppositions.

I bought a shirt at an “Off the Map” conference last year that says “Save Jesus.” To me, this speaks of setting Jesus free from the boxes made for him by the Church and letting Jesus go public again. Maybe Jesus needs to be saved from us as well.

Ultimately, we all need to hold our views about Jesus with humility and generosity towards those who see things differently. This does not mean we have to agree, or be silent about what we believe. It does mean that we don’t get to look down our noses at people who don’t “Get it” the way we “Get it.” That just isn’t what a follower of Jesus does.

I wonder: what if all the domesticated Jesuses we have held onto are just silly personal puppets we use to amuse ourselves. But the Real Jesus, the Enduring Christ, was and is something much more.

I invite you to continue to look for and really engage with Jesus.
On your own, in community, in the Scriptures, in everyday life.
I bet we will all find more than we thought was possible.

Amen.

Further Reading:

Brian McLaren, *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crisis, and a Revolution of Hope.*

Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith.*