

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
October 31, 2010
Luke 19:1-10

“Dressing Up As Jesus”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

Of the four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—only Luke tells the story of Jesus entering Jericho, spotting the chief tax collector Zacchaeus in a tree, and then inviting himself to Zacchaeus’ house. Luke is generally rough on the rich so it is surprising that it is in Luke that we find the sole report in the Gospels of Jesus going to Jericho and staying at the home of a rich man.

Jesus would have been offered hospitality at anyone’s home in Jericho....the crowd presses in on him when he arrives and any number of people would have loved to have Jesus come to their home. But Jesus chooses to stay with Zacchaeus, who is hated by the people.

Zacchaeus is not only a tax collector, which is bad enough, but he is a CHIEF tax collector. That means he makes his living by visiting the homes of poor people and demanding they pay taxes to Rome, the imperial power under which they live. He sends a percentage of the collected income to Rome and then keeps the rest for himself. And he oversees others who do the same and who are obliged to pass on a share of their earnings to him. It is an awful way to make a living—not only are you complicit with the empire but you are like a predator in your own village, always stalking your prey. And your prey is your neighbors.

In Luke, we are told that Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. Zacchaeus was trying to see Jesus but he could not because the crowd was so dense. So Zacchaeus climbed a sycamore tree. It is under that tree that Jesus stopped and said, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay your house today.”

This is a well known and much loved story in which Jesus yet again chooses an unlikely person as his host and eventual friend.

The story is usually told that wee little Zacchaeus could not see Jesus because Zacchaeus was so short and so he had to climb a tree in order to get a glimpse of the messiah.

Listen to the wording in the Bible:

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature.

Now everyone who reads and re-tells this story assumes that Zacchaeus is short in stature—we even sang a children’s song about that today, “Zacchaeus Was a Wee, Little Man.” But if you listen to the text, the person who is short COULD just as well be Jesus. In fact, in the original Greek (in which the story was written), it is clear that “he was small of stature” could apply to Jesus. Listen once again:

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature.

Zacchaeus might have been unusually tall for all we know. But he could not see Jesus passing by because the crowd was thick and conceivably, Jesus was short.

So why does this matter?

It matters because we have grown up with clear visual images of Jesus in our minds, although there is no physical description of Jesus in the Bible. The image of Jesus we carry in our heads is largely derived from paintings and artwork created through the ages. We have been imprinted with these images, unconsciously, so that we think we know what Jesus looked like. Indeed, images of Jesus were etched in our minds at a very early age. In Bible storybooks, and in drawings and paintings of Jesus that we saw as children, we developed a precise visual image of what Jesus looked like. In our own world, in North America in years past, most Sunday School classrooms had pictures or paintings of Jesus that depicted him as taller than his disciples, lean, with long, flowing, light brown hair, fair skin, and light-colored eyes.

I can picture with complete clarity the Jesus I saw in the painting on the wall of my Sunday School classroom in Leonia, New Jersey, when I was young.

I stared at the picture of Jesus a lot. He was so handsome—he had light skin and blue-green eyes that were looking up to heaven, and wavy, golden blonde hair with rays of light radiating out from his face and hair. He looked Norwegian.

What I realize now is that I was an olive-skinned Armenian girl sitting in a Sunday School classroom in New Jersey, and I looked more Jewish than the King of the Jews.

Because of racism and the over-valuing of European art and culture, we all have been influenced by the images of Jesus created by those referred to as “the great masters” of centuries ago. Images of Jesus from the 11th century in stained glass windows, Byzantine mosaics of the 13th century, Renaissance paintings of the 16th century, and MGM films of the 20th century, all depict Jesus as Europeanized, Anglicized, almost Nordic, in his looks.

But this is probably not what Jesus looked like at all.

All the images of Jesus ever created are fabricated from some artist’s mind. No actual authentic drawings of Jesus have ever been uncovered. There is no skeleton, no bodily remains, no samples of his DNA. And the Bible does not help us picture what Jesus looked like. There are no descriptions of Jesus in the Bible. In the absence of descriptions and evidence, our images of Jesus have been left to the imagination of artists.

And so the tall, lanky, fair-skinned Jesus that has been imprinted on our minds is probably all wrong. After all, Jesus was a Semite—the Semitic people are Jews and Arabs. Jesus was probably a smallish man, with curly brown hair, olive colored skin, and dark eyes. He probably looked like the young Bob Dylan. He probably looked like a little rabbi. He probably looked like his disciples. Jesus was so nondescript that when he was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane before the Crucifixion, Judas Iscariot had to identify who Jesus was to the Roman soldiers with a kiss because Jesus blended right in with the rest of his followers.

So again I ask: Why does this matter?

It matters because Jesus was a true historical figure—a man who lived in the ancient world, walked by the Sea of Galilee, preached, touched and healed people. He was a real figure with real, distinguishing features. BUT Jesus is also a figurehead...a person who has inspired people around the world for millennia to follow his example as being justice-seeking, radically inclusive, loving and compassionate Christians.

And because people around the world claim Jesus as their teacher, savior and friend, he has been transformed in and by different cultures to look like the people who follow him—with their features and dress.

In China and Japan, Christians worship images of Jesus with Asian features. It is quite beautiful to see Jesus depicted in Chinese artwork with distinctly Asian features and clothed in robes that have an Asian quality.

In the African American community, Jesus is depicted as Black. There are many beautiful and moving images of a Black baby Jesus with Mary who is in African dress, as well as depictions of the adult Jesus and the twelve, all Black, in African clothing gathered around a large drum rather than a table.

There are also images of Jesus as a Native American in Native clothing with beads and turquoise jewelry around his neck.

Jesus is both a specific individual who lived and breathed and moved among us, AND he is a universal being who we emulate, follow and make our own.

The European masters had every right to make Jesus in their image. The problem is that due to European dominance in history and Euro-centrism around the world, the images of a very Anglo, European Jesus stuck and those images were lifted up, elevated as THE correct depiction of Jesus. The Western images of Jesus became the standard that was lauded, valued and considered accurate.

But we need to let Jesus be Jesus—he was probably a short, darkish skinned, dark-haired Semitic man who did not stand out physically in any way from those around him.

AND at the same time, we need to let Jesus be transformed in and by different cultures around the globe so that people who worship him see themselves in him.

A colleague of mine told me this story. Years ago in the church this pastor served in Connecticut there was a tradition that every year the oldest girl in Sunday School got to be Mary in the Christmas pageant. The church was in an urban area and the congregation was diverse. One year, the oldest girl in Sunday School was an African American girl named Georgia. When the Sunday School teacher told Georgia that she was the oldest girl and she would be Mary in the pageant, Georgia said immediately, “Oh no, I can’t be Mary. Ask Elise to be Mary.” Elise was a younger, white girl.

We need to reject this way of thinking and see ourselves AND all our brothers and sisters as Jesus, Mary, and Joseph—the entire Holy Family.

We need to be able to see Jesus in all of us, and see all of us in Jesus.

We need to let Jesus be short and stout, African American and Asian, Native American and white, heavy and lean.

We need to be able to see Jesus in all of us, and see all of us in Jesus.

As many of you know, I served as Dean of Religious Life at Mount Holyoke College for ten years before coming to the Haydenville Congregational Church. While on the Mount Holyoke campus, I happily served the students and the faculty at the college but I realized early on that my people, MY real people, my flock, were the folks in Facilities Management. The janitors and electricians, housekeepers and groundskeepers, air conditioner technicians and painters—these were my people. These were the people who were overlooked, invisible, underpaid and underappreciated—my people. And so I spent lots of time with my people (Kathy, our Sexton, who was with me at MHC knows this story well). I had meals with them, I had services for them, I baptized their babies and buried their family members, I included them in leadership roles in major college ceremonies—they processed with me and sang in a choir I created. These were my people, in every way. I loved them and they loved me.

When I left Mount Holyoke, the college planned to throw me a big good-bye party. When I got wind of the plans, I insisted the party be at the Facilities Management building, which is a ways off the main campus. I asked that a tent be put up in their parking lot and that we have my party there. There was considerable grumbling from the powers that be, but I insisted and that's the way it happened.

During the party, four people were asked to go to the mic, toast me and say good-bye to me. One of those people was Jimmy Moynihan, a plumber. With his work clothes on and his callous hands holding a glass of champagne, Jimmy went to the mic. His words were simple and profound.

“Andrea,” he said, “you are the face of Jesus to us.”

When it was my turn to go to the mic and speak, I went up and said, “Jimmy, you and your colleagues are the face of Jesus to me.”

And it is true. Jesus looks like Jimmy Moynihan.

And Marcelle Walters, and Sally Lemaire, and Will Hathaway, and Wyatt Myers, and Emily Dines, and Jesse Sky, and Jessie Molina, and Norma Kellogg, and Donique McIntosh, and Sue Carbin and Rick Turner.

We must recognize that Jesus is in us and see ourselves in Jesus.

And we must continue his legacy. We have work to do.

Jesus did not say, "Worship me," he said "Follow me." Which means we continue to love extravagantly, give generously, dream wildly, teach endlessly, heal boldly, and live faithfully.

Like Jesus, WE are made in the image of God.

We must recognize God within us, and see ourselves in God.

And so that brings us to today. Halloween.

Weeks ago I thought of telling you all to come to church today dressed up as Jesus.

I thought it would be fun to see who came to church in costume looking like Jesus.

I thought about telling you: let's do it! On Halloween, come dressed up as Jesus!

And here it is. Halloween. And I did **not** tell you to come dressed up as Jesus.

But look! You did anyway! You came dressed up as yourselves.

Amen.