

GOSPEL OF JOHN: A STUDY OF CHARACTER

In many ways, when we think about who Jesus is and what the Bible says about Jesus, we tend to have a composite picture that points to one man, understood in one way. For many of us, we don't tend to qualify the way that we talk about Jesus. For example, we don't say, "John's Jesus," or "The Markan Jesus," or "Mary's Jesus." We think of one man, God Incarnate, and presume that in order for that one man to be the Real God Incarnate, his personality and description must match up across all Biblical references.

Even a short look at the Gospel of John tells us that's not the case. In the Gospel of John, Jesus is characterized in a special way. It stands out because this Jesus, and the episodes highlighted in his life and ministry, are so very different from the Jesus written about in the synoptic gospels (that is: Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which, taken together, provide a more cohesive telling of the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ). But the reality is that even in those accounts Jesus does not appear entirely the same. Let me make an even simpler statement: Jesus is a character in this *and every* gospel account.

Now, let's be clear about why it is that I say Jesus (and by extension, Martha and the Marys and Nicodemus and Peter and Thomas and the Samaritan Woman) is a character. Do I suggest that he's not the Real Incarnate God? No. Do I suggest that He's a figment of the writer's imagination? No. I suggest that, like any human, Jesus is being viewed by this writer, this person, in a special way: he's being characterized for a purpose.

In your own history, I bet you have a family story that everyone witnessed, participated in, or have heard about, but each from her or his own perspective. Let's say it's a story about the time that grandma dropped a whole watermelon at a family picnic and Aunt Sara's dogs came running to eat it and then Grandpa tried to help and slipped in the watermelon pieces and fell down and your sister started crying but your brother started laughing and everyone now remembers it as the "watermelon incident." In this imagined story, the players are themselves, they are not faked or made up, but neither does this episode relate the entirety of their lives or their personalities or their actions. Additionally,

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the way others tell the story—whether it’s Grandpa or your cousin who watched from the kitchen window and remembers hearing Grandma say “Dammit, dogs!” as she tumbled—are representing the truth of the experience from other angles. So, too, do the people in John’s Gospel function. In fact, that’s how every character in the Bible functions. They are themselves, and the related stories are true, but they are of a certain perspective, they are an episode in the life of the people being characterized, told by someone for a purpose and from a point of view. The telling of these points of view, the purposes of these stories, is not random. And thank God for that. Because we don’t read the Bible and discuss Jesus’s life for the sake of mapping His every move, like data collectors. We tell the story because it has meaning for us.

With that in mind, as we begin this Bible study, understand that I’m going to point you to a particular way of entering this gospel that is intended not to make you a scholar of John’s writing (but I promise you will learn things!), but is intended to give you a way to enter the story as a person of faith for whom the story gives you strength, gives you a sense of connection to other believers (and other doubters, hello, Thomas!), and deepens your experience of Jesus or enables you to keep walking on your faith journey.

To that end, we will largely be looking at the characters in this story and trying to understand what they teach us about our own orientation to Jesus. These characters include the people listed on the “Gospel of John Character Worksheet,” which is included with this handout and available on the Peace UCC web site (peaceucc.net). I’ve listed them with space for you to make your own reflections now and throughout our time looking at the Fourth Gospel, but feel free to use more paper if you need to. You can start with a baseline this week, that I’ll ask you to bring each Sunday and add to as new insights occur to you and we go deeper into this gospel. The goal is not to be “correct,” but to be aware of your own thoughts and feelings and recollections. Fill in what you can, do not feel obligated to provide a reflection on each character as you understand them.

Yours in Christ,

Pastor Nikki

