

### “Close To You”

When I was a teenager all of my friends were into the music of The Beatles, Led Zeppelin, and Frank Zappa. Nerd alert, I was a fan of Burt Bacharach. I was listening to and playing on the piano songs such as “What the World Needs Now,” “This Guys in Love,” and my favorite “Raindrops Keep Fallin’ on My Head.” There was something about Bacharach’s mix of classical instrumentation, pop sensibility, and Bossa Nova rhythms that captured my ear. Honestly, it still does.

My summer before my senior year in high school I learned that Bacharach was going to be giving a concert at Merriweather Post Pavilion in Columbia. I begged my parents to go. That begging resulted in a family outing to hear him conduct and play his music. I was so transported by the experience that I asked that we hang around the stage gate to see if we could meet him. Sure enough after a short wait a van pulled up and Bacharach got out. He autographed several books of music for me, and chatted with all of us.

In today’s scripture reading from John, two men ask Phillip if they can meet Jesus. The men are identified as Greeks, which is first-century speak for a gentile, a non-Jew. They had come to Jerusalem for the celebration of the Passover, and hoped to meet the famous preacher, teacher and healer Jesus of Nazareth. I wonder what they expected they would experience by meeting him. The gospel does not tell us their motivations or the outcome.

What would you and I expect if we were to meet Jesus? If I was a tongue-tied fan meeting Burt Bacharach think how overwhelmed I would be to meet the Son of God. I wonder how any of us would feel to meet Jesus of Nazareth in the flesh today. Imagine meeting him after he had given a sermon at the National Cathedral or more likely in a field on the side of a mountain. Take a minute of silence to think about that.

I expect many of us have a mental picture of what Jesus would look like. I would be willing to bet that our mental image would be nothing like his actual appearance. Indeed, I think some people would turn away if he didn’t look like their mental image. Others might find something else about his deportment or voice off putting. Even if we had an iron clad guarantee that he was Jesus Christ, the disconnect between our image and the reality might be too great.

Oh, and his preaching and teaching. I expect when we heard him we might feel convicted. Perhaps more likely we would be put off in the same ways as many religious people were during his lifetime. Two thousand years of church have softened the edges of his sermons and parables. From the comfort of our pews we think the hard parts are aimed at others. Perhaps that caustic remark was meant for the Jewish religious leaders, or the self-righteous, or the egregious sinners in the other pew. His parables fresh in our ears might hit too close to home.

Certainly there would be the softer side of Jesus that we can get close to, but the real Jesus would be far from the sentimentalized Jesus of greeting cards, Sunday School books, and the movies. If the soft Jesus were all there was no one would have bothered to kill him. A soft Jesus would not have been a threat to the Roman or religious powers of his day. He would have been more like a motivational speaker who makes everyone feel empowered to have their best life. No one is going to crucify Tony Robbins, Suze Orman, or Deepak Chopra. You might find them helpful or annoying, but they are not a threat to anyone's power.

Jesus wants us to have our best lives too, but he challenges us way beyond any motivational speaker. He challenges us to see the world through the eyes of God. He challenges us to see the world and all of its people as beloved of God. We in the church feel all snugly with Jesus, like he belongs to us; we often act as if he shares our opinions and biases. We forget that he angered the religious establishment of his time, and that we are part of the religious establishment of our time. I do not believe he would be any easier on us just because we believe in him. I expect his first question of me would be why I do not live the Good News more fully. I expect he would want to know why we are so unforgiving of others.

There is no better time than Lent to reflect on what it would mean to meet Jesus. There is no better time to be asking ourselves how we can live more closely to Jesus' teaching. There is no better time to wonder how we would respond to his difficult teachings if they were directed at us.

To follow Jesus is not to wonder what he would look like if he walked in here today. To follow Jesus is to see him in every single person in the world. That is what Jesus looks like. Jesus looks like you and me and every other person of every nationality, rich or poor, well-groomed or slovenly, of African, Asian, Indian, or European descent. All of us look like Jesus because we all contain that spark of God in our hearts.

If someone asks us have we met Jesus, our response is, "Yes I have. I have met him in you, you have met him in me, and we have met him in all those people out there." That is the Good News of Jesus. We are all included in God's love, and no one, not a single person, gets left out, ever.