

By Rev. Kate Stevens

Micah 6:6-8

Matthew 5: 1-10

How does one define a Christian? When someone says they are a Christian, what do they mean?

Some people proclaim that Jesus Christ is their personal Lord and Savior. Does that make them a Christian? Is it about Worshipping Jesus? is that it?

Some say they are saved or have been reborn; does that make them a Christian?

Some people go to church every Sunday. Does that make them a Christian?

Some never enter a church but live their lives trying to follow in Jesus' footsteps

Will the true Christian please stand up?

Let us pray: may the words . . .

This book we read from every Sunday both does and doesn't say much about how to be a Christian or even what a Christian is. (mentioned three times in the whole bible, usually derisively.)

It doesn't say much about worship. For instance, Jesus never asked anyone to worship him. He never said anything about setting up a church or going to church.

There don't seem to be rules or a definition. He didn't say call me lord and savior. He did talk to the disciples - he spoke in parables and often told stories. he delivered his longest "sermon" on the mountain, the beginning of which we read this morning - called the beatitudes. This 'is called the 'sermon on the mount' and continues through chapters 5,6,7. in the gospel of Matthew.

Mostly, more than lecturing, Jesus went about his life and when the disciples questioned what he did, he sometimes explained. In other words, mostly he taught by his actions and behavior. And the disciples sort of understood; they tried to live their lives as they remembered his teaching - simply - sharing what they had; healing, caring for the lost

and outcaste and the poor. Speaking the good news even to those who did not belong to their tribe.

But some 300 years later, when “the way” of this small sect of disciples and followers became the official religion of the Roman Empire – things changed; I mean things really changed.

Emperor Constantine brought Christianity to the whole Roman Empire. And the empire, as empires do – used this religion for its own ends; They began to say our way is the only way. and thus it gives the empire the excuse to attack, defeat, convert others, “We’re right; you are wrong. Your religion is heresy – and we need to get rid of it; so the empire attacks – militarily – but also culturally - trying to wipe out all other religions and beliefs. The empire’s religion also tells people what to do and how to worship and where to worship and what to say and what to eat, how to live, It was the Christianity of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries that condoned the settlers in these lands to conquer, kill and steal from the native peoples here on these lands.

So, the humble, peaceful way of Jesus and his early disciples got kind of lost when it came into power. Jesus’ simple upside- down message - like the first shall be last and blessed be the poor, got completely turned upside down by the empire – which was the base of power at that time. And it was this empire kind of rigid thinking that Jesus was critical about in the first place; it was exactly what he had protested, about the Roman Empire and the Jewish Hierarchy. This was why he tried to teach in a new way. This is why he was killed. He tried to turn the world upside down and they, the empire, the power structures, flipped it back over.

Because Jesus spoke of non-violence and turning the other cheek and judging not and loving enemy. He lived simply; his guiding scriptures were passages like the Micah one we read this morning – do justice love kindness walk humbly with your God

These 3 chapters in Matthew kind of summarize Jesus’ theology. Do not judge, turn the other cheek; do not worry, live simply, share what you have with others; do not store up treasures on earth; you cannot serve God and money; serve God; give to the one who asks; if someone asks you for your shirt give them your coat also. And pray in private, do not exalt yourself. Etc. etc. If we do all these things – which we know

to be difficult, if not impossible, are we then Christian? what if we can't do all these things, are we then not Christian?

Mahatma Gandhi, a devoted Hindu, the man at the center of India's fight for independence from Britain, studied the Bible at the request of a friend of his; and apparently, Gandhi liked much of what he read. Jesus became one of his teachers. He struggled with some aspects of the religion; for instance he rejected the "dogmatic claims of Christianity" while at the same time "he embraced the ethical teachings of Jesus;" so though remaining a committed Hindu Gandhi was captivated by the true message of Jesus. He said "If I could have just the Sermon on the Mount I would gladly call myself a Christian" He also said: I like your Christ, but I do not always like your Christians. They are very unlike your Christ."

What Gandhi read in the sermon on the mount he heard as the true message of Jesus', with its emphasis on love and non-violence and radical inclusivity. Like Jesus, Gandhi fought his own non-violent campaign. And like Jesus, he was also killed for it. Was Gandhi a Christian?

Pete Seeger, who died 9 years ago, did not define himself as a Christian though it was part of his background and he would often find himself reading the Bible. The God he knew he knew mostly in the natural world. Like Gandhi, Pete Seeger did not relate easily to Christianity but he seemed to follow the teachings of Jesus. He lived quite simply. he practiced a kind of inclusivity we see in Jesus. - all are invited - there is always room at the table.

He sang - his way of preaching - the good news everywhere/ anywhere to everyone - to students and to workers deep down in the mines, and to unions, and politicians - to crowds of 100,000s and groups of 5 to 10 grade school students. He was an advocate of non-violence and practiced it in his own life; he spoke out against violence and war. He did not discriminate; he equally cared for and respected young and old; black and white, gay and straight, rich and poor; He confronted authority figures when he saw that they were doing wrong. He did this for 94 years. He lived an authentic life of doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with his God. But he didn't go to church. Was Pete Seeger a Christian?

Pete didn't refer to himself as a Christian but he lived a Christ-like life.

Gandhi didn't refer to himself as a Christian but he lived a Christ-like life

For that matter Jesus didn't call himself a Christian but he led a Christ-like life.

The sermon on the Mount – Chapters 5,6,7 of Matthew are a guide, not to what we call ourselves but about how we act. Not about what we say but about what we do. Not about how to be a Christian but how to be a good, honest, fair, compassionate human being. We don't know for certain these are exactly the words that Jesus spoke but it's as close as we have to a description of his own personal theology.

What we do have in this book, are the stories – stories of Jesus life. We learn about who he talks to; who he dines with; we hear stories of his inclusion of those who others consider 'outsiders' or heathens. We didn't just hear him say love your enemy we saw him do it; we didn't just hear him say turn the other cheek, we witnessed him doing it. We didn't just hear him say "do not judge others, but rather heard the stories of his protecting others who were being judged.

If this sermon on the Mount were our only scripture, we would learn so much about "how to be a Christian" though it never mentions the word. But we learn even more through the stories - The stories we love about this humble man who travels by foot and eats with the "Unclean" and talks with the 'enemy' and defends the leper and the downtrodden, who heals the rich and the poor, who breaks rules because of his compassion for others.

So when someone suggests that if us that if are not saved, we are not really be a Christian; or if Jesus is not our personal lord and savior we must not be Christians. Or I don't see you in church every week you must not be a Christian. I read just this morning a definition of Christian. A Christian is "someone whose behavior and heart reflects Jesus Christ."

So if any of us are challenged about who we are and who we aren't, I suggest we just remember this humble man from Nazareth and smile and go on and live our lives as the best human beings we can – doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with our God.

Amen