

Who He Was, What He Was – VIRTUAL EDITION
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Westminster Presbyterian Church - Ontario, CA
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Year B - Second Sunday after Epiphany
John 1:43-51

Back when I was in that awkward developmental stage known as “adolescence,” I had the good fortune to be part of a congregation that had a truly exceptional man as its pastor.

The Reverend Albert Edwin Jansen was the kind of man who could inspire great admiration from a boy stumbling his way toward adulthood. He was very intelligent. He was empathetic and personable. He spoke softly but with great authority. He seemed to know everything there was to know about God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

For quite a while, Reverend Jansen was second only to my father as an adult male role model. In big ways and small ways, he helped shape who I am today.

Reverend Jansen, unfortunately, is no longer here for me or anyone to thank in person. He died in 2014 and I understand that his passing was peaceful and painless.

Now, notice that I keep referring to him as “Reverend Jansen.” Even after I grew into adulthood, been ordained and was serving my own church, he was still “Reverend Jansen” to me.

I’m sure that many of you have been around the world of churches long enough to remember when all pastors were referred to as “Reverend So and So.” When I was a kid, I cannot remember a single instance in which any minister I knew was referred to as “Pastor Al” or “Pastor Bob” or “Pastor Curtis.” To use even the most down-to-earth and personable minister’s first name was unthinkable. At least in my memory, back then, no one was referred to as a “pastor.” They were all “ministers.”

I bring all of this history up not as a lament that no one calls me “Reverend Webster.” To tell you the truth, I think that would make me a little uncomfortable. “Pastor Curtis” is just fine. I bring all of it up as an illustration of how the titles we use and the ways people are addressed tell us something about the societal and cultural perceptions of their roles.

In the fifties and sixties (and I’m sure for many decades before then), ordained church leaders stood in somewhat more exalted positions than we do today. Think about it. The title “minister” carries a more authoritative sense than the title “pastor.” This is perhaps oversimplifying a little, but a “minister” leads from the front; a “pastor” walks alongside.

“Reverend Webster” sounds to me like someone who’d be difficult to approach. You really wouldn’t want to risk disturbing “Reverend Webster.” “Pastor Curtis,” on the other hand, is a guy who’s approachable. You can talk to “Pastor Curtis” about pretty much almost anything.

Whether you agree or disagree with the ways that perceptions about pastoral authority have changed over the past several decades, there’s no denying that changes in titles and ways of addressing us reflects that change.

And, if you read the Gospels carefully, as I’m sure you do, you can’t help but notice the differences in the ways that people addressed Jesus. “Son of God.” “Son of Man.” “Messiah.” “Prince of Peace.” There are so many others.

Sometimes today, I think we have a tendency to use all of those titles interchangeably, as if they were all just different ways of saying the same thing. That’s really not the correct analysis. Each of those titles meant different things to different people. The titles that a person used to address Jesus often can tell us a lot about his or her understanding of Jesus.

In today’s passage, a man named Nathanael becomes the first person, at least in John’s

Gospel, to express skepticism that Jesus was anyone or anything special or holy. Nathanael can't get past the fact that Jesus hailed from Nazareth, and Nazareth did not have a really positive reputation in those times. Prejudice and pre-conceived notions were as much a problem back then as they are today.

Jesus convinces Nathanael by telling him something that Jesus could not have known except by divine insight. How does Nathanael officially signal his 180 degree shift in attitude? Nathanael uses three titles to address Jesus, "Rabbi," "Son of God" and "King of Israel." Nathanael thus identifies Jesus by His wisdom, His divinity and His authority. That certainly does not exhaust all of the many titles appropriate for Jesus but covers a pretty wide range.

And this brings up something a little distinctive about John's Gospel. All four Gospels see people using many different titles for Jesus but John places a particular emphasis on them. For John, nobody was a disciple until he or she has declared a title or titles for Jesus. For John, it was very important that you get straight who you thought Jesus was.

All of which is a great caution for us today. Instead of spewing out a string of titles for Jesus, we would do well to think a little harder about who WE think Jesus was (and is). Those titles are there for a reason and that reason is to deepen our understanding of Jesus and, thereby, deepen our faith.

Seriously, "Pastor Curtis" is just fine. I feel completely respected by all of you. And, more importantly, I feel that you are comfortable with me and know that you should never hesitate to get in touch with me if you are in need of pastoral care or just have a question about the Bible or any other aspect of your faith. I really like being "Pastor Curtis." And I hope that you really like having me as your pastor.