

## LIKE JESUS?

We never talk enough about Jesus. Part of it, I think, is that some people get so caught up in the foolishness of scholarly technicalities that their minds stop working. Maybe we don't know *exactly* what Jesus said or did. Scholarship is often a game of "How much can you actually know with absolutely positive certainty, without any possibility whatsoever of any error, down to the last detail?" Many Christian liberals are frustrated fundamentalists, so they generate their own brand of literalist aberrations, except from the opposite end of the spectrum. Either way, on the basis of absolute certainty, I couldn't talk about my own wife or children. There is a difference between math and relationships. Relationships are messy, for instance, and meaningful. They change from minute to minute. "Bigamy" is a legal term, with a precise definition for one-dimensional people. But I am married to at least thirty different women. When I was young and dumb, I often got confused because they all had the same name and face of the woman I married, Mariana. Some men like variety, but I'm always grateful when I come home and discover that it's a Mariana I've already met before. Have you ever wondered why your husband doesn't like it when you come home with a new hair-do? He's confused enough already! At least you could have the consideration to keep the outside looking somewhat familiar. He tells you it looks nice, but you know he doesn't really mean it. (Just because he's confused doesn't mean he's stupid.)

Relationships and real people are not about precision.  $2 + 2$  is a different realm. Her eyes can actually go from soft to fire in less than a nanosecond. And if you think it's always going to add up to 4, you might as well just head for the door and be done with it. By the time we write a definition of a relationship, it has already transformed - and maybe even transcended - several layers of reality. But we are going to define and describe Jesus the Christ - the Messiah, the Savior, the Son of God - by the rules of some pathetic, precise pseudo-science? And if it doesn't add up to our satisfaction, claim it is all a mirage? Maybe if the priests had been married, they wouldn't have tried to write so many locked-down creeds, or at least they would have left room for the hair-styles to change. I have stopped trying to come up with excuses for why many modern scholars think it is their great intelligence that keeps them from faith. Truly brilliant people have usually been people of faith. Awareness and humility are our problems, not intelligence.

In any case, it doesn't matter what somebody else thinks Jesus is supposed to mean to you. It isn't going to be the same thing an hour from now, never mind a year from now. How many experiences will you have with the Risen Lord between now and tomorrow morning? Quite a few ... if you don't get mindless, or spend so much time reading The Book that you don't have any time left over for your own life. And every time life moves on, you will "hear and understand" through different ears and eyes the stories and encounters you find in the New Testament. That is why the Bible never gets boring, never goes out of style. You can study it all your life and only become more fascinated. But don't be surprised if scholars who think they're really educated and erudite come along claiming we can't know enough about Jesus to have any relationship with Him. They say brilliant things like, "Will the real Jesus please stand up (yuk, yuk, yuk)." All that really means is that they don't get it. They think Jesus is a math problem to be solved. For them it's not a relationship - not an invitation from God, in Christ Jesus, to walk into a whole new WAY of Life. For them it's only words on a page. If we keep it words on a page, we can keep it meaningless. But that's not because we're so smart; that's because we are still in denial, determined to keep the Living God far away from our own motives and purposes and decisions. Sin is alienation, separation, aloneness, pride, rebellion, fear. Ph.D.s don't help with that stuff. Trust in God helps with that stuff. It is called "faith," and it has always required surrender.

It is Lent, and many of us use Lent to be more reflective than usual. In this church, we never give up anything for Lent as a punishment or discipline - as if discipline by itself carries some kind of value. Right discipline always has a desired goal in mind. An athlete goes into training not because training itself is the purpose, but to improve performance. Always there are some who lose sight of the goal and start training for its own sake. Always there are religious people who lose sight of the goal too, and start doing the rituals and disciplines for their own sake. That's when we get institutionalized religion - the form and structure without the Spirit. That's not okay around here. We do not read the Bible, pray every day, tithe, or do any of our disciplines for their own sake. The disciplines are chosen so that we may keep improving our relationship with God, and keep drawing closer to God. And relationship is not  $2 + 2$ , something to solve or fix. There is always more. And in fact, the closer we get to God, the greater our awareness of how much rebelliousness, fear, lack of trust, and doubt of God's love still exist within us. And so we want even more to be closer.

And we realize God would be very pleased if we got closer too. So it's never the disciplines - it's the relationship we are after.

We make it so complicated, when it is merely difficult - and difficult in a way we wouldn't mind at all if we didn't keep making it so complicated. I had a date with Mariana once, years ago. But instead of that one date satisfying me for the rest of my life, I wanted more. There was more than a one-date possibility there. I don't know how I knew, but I could feel it. So I tried for a second date. Forty-eight years later, and countless dimensions beyond that first date, I'm still thinking that if I keep at it, I might get the hang of it after a while. But I no longer expect it to "work out" - whatever that phrase means - as if it were some kind of math problem, something to be "fixed" or solved.

Some of us have found ourselves on a date with God. *How* that happens is a whole different subject, but nevertheless, instead of that one date satisfying us for the rest of our lives, we wanted more. We started to realize that God was incredibly interesting beyond all words and definitions. So we started trying to figure out how to get a second date. Now here we are, years later, still fascinated and grateful for the relationship, which, we have long since discovered, isn't all sweetness and light - just like any real relationship. Nevertheless, as the saying goes, we wouldn't give it up for the world. And the longer we stay with it, the more we realize that the dimensions are endless and we have only barely begun.

Here's the point: When I started dating Mariana, I soon ran into a problem, an inescapable reality that I didn't even want to think about or deal with at the time. But there it was anyway. There was no escaping it. Fascinated with Mariana, I didn't want to pay attention to any problems, so for a while I tried to ignore it. But there was no help for it. I was forced to deal with the reality or lose Mariana.

It wasn't a really complicated problem, but neglecting reality was starting to *make* it complicated. You see, I didn't know I was going to meet Mariana, so I hadn't planned any space, money, effort, brooding time, gifts, travel time, conversation time, etc., into my life and schedule to make room for her. I was trying to make it through college, working five part-time jobs on the side. I was all used up. I had no room for her in my life. But there she was.

I want to suggest that all of us have this same problem with God. We are busy. We are all used up. Yet there God is, offering a relationship, suggesting we could be friends - closer even than lovers. An authentic Lenten discipline has nothing to do with "giving up something" because discipline is fun, or because depriving ourselves of something is holy or spiritual. A Lenten discipline is *the desire* to carve out more time and space for God. We do not have enough room for God, but there he is, willing and waiting.

Mariana came into my life at a very awkward time, pragmatically speaking. I ended up having to make a lot of changes and give up many things in order to have room in my life for a relationship with her. I gave them up gladly, but I did give them up. There was no other way. No one has time and room for everything and everyone in their life. I lost some other relationships; I had some big problems with my mother; it cost me some money I couldn't afford. And it has been doing that sort of thing ever since. Would I expect otherwise?! The great angst came not so much in having to give up those things; it came during the period of time when I was trying to keep it all the way it was before *and* add Mariana in - without making any changes, without making room for the new.

None of us get to have God in our lives, at least not enough to matter, unless we are willing to make the room. A relationship with God requires space, money, effort, brooding time, gifts, travel time, conversation time, and more. We may think for a while that it shouldn't, or that we can fake it, duck around it, or be fast enough to stuff it in along with everything else, relegating God to spare time and fleeting moments. But if you think God will require less of you than a woman, you are deluded and in denial. If you think you can have a really good relationship with a woman and never spend any time or money on her, you are mistaken. With God, you can carry that to the tenth power. Why is God so demanding? Ask it another way: Does God know how relationships really work?

Of course, a few encounters with God and we want the relationship more and more. As we come to love God, any sacrifice is truly more than worth it. The angst comes during the time when we try to add God into our lives without making any changes - without making any room for the new relationship. So I repeat: a Lenten discipline is *the desire* to carve out more time and space in your life for God.

I cannot make an appropriate Lenten discipline for any of you. Once made, I cannot keep it for you. No matter how strong our fellowship, some things we must each still do ourselves. Nevertheless, we have often found it helpful to share a common theme as a faith family during Lent. This year I'm suggesting that we focus on Jesus. That sounds so standard and obvious that we tend to assume it - take it for granted. And to be sure, many of us *have* taken it for granted from time to time, but it doesn't happen nearly as often in the church as an outsider would assume.

So this Lenten season, I'm suggesting that we focus on Jesus, and specifically on the ways in which Jesus is your role model or, in the old language, your hero. Theologically, our claim is that God reveals himself in Jesus Christ: God reveals what God is really like more and better in the life, character, teachings, encounters, decisions, behavior, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ than anywhere else on earth. God reveals himself in other ways and places and through other people as well, but never as clearly and powerfully and directly as in Jesus the Christ.

The standard formula is that God reveals himself in the Life, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus. That is what sets Christianity apart from other religions. That is our claim, the core of the core. But to be clear and straight with you (which I am a lot more than some of you realize), we have a different emphasis in this church than in most of Christendom. Certainly not from all of it, but from most of it. Here, we put a great deal of emphasis on the LIFE of Jesus. The majority of Christendom puts all of its emphasis on the Death and Resurrection, paying very little attention to the LIFE - the person of Jesus of Nazareth. You can be a Catholic all your life, for instance, and never ask or wonder much about who Jesus was as a person, as a human being. Despite the Catholic doctrine that Jesus is fully God *and* fully man, the divine part - the miracles and the eucharist and the crucifixion - gets all the attention. From my perspective, that is a terrible distortion. Without the LIFE, I have no way to identify very much with the Death and Resurrection. Without the LIFE, I maybe get theories about salvation and redemption and even grace, but I miss the love and passion and vision and struggle that make it real.

Without the LIFE, I get some hints about what God may be doing for us, but I don't know why or what it's really about. I know there is mystery, but this emphasis makes mystery the only thing there is. I get

no hints about how to live my own life, except, of course, for generic commandments. Not that they have no value, but commandments don't add up to a WAY of personal prayer, or to a Path of obedience, guidance, vocatio, individual purpose, or identity. Without the Path, God loves me as a digit, not as an individual.

To put attention on the LIFE means we think of Jesus as a unique and incredible individual: who was also on a pilgrimage of His own; who was brilliant, and incredibly aware; who lived in the midst of overwhelming challenges and forces in the world all around Him; who became aware of God's presence, followed God's guidance, and opened up for us principles and approaches to life that, on the one hand, were a summation of the best wisdom and experience of two thousand years of Judaism and, on the other hand, were so dynamically new and powerful that even Judaism could not tolerate Him. Jesus literally blew all human wisdom and understanding of the true meaning of LIFE clear out of the water - and most of Christendom has been scrambling madly ever since to gather up the pieces, put them in a box, and nail it all back down into something safe and familiar. One of the best ways to do that is to pay as little attention as possible to who Jesus was, how Jesus actually lived and thought and made decisions, and what His *life* was really like and about.

In short, there is a way to focus on the "Virgin Birth" and the Crucifixion and the Resurrection that keeps us standing apart in a kind of respectful, awe-filled, reverential attitude of passive appreciation, but has no direct impact on anything we do, decide, or try to accomplish - and in fact makes it feel like something crass and blasphemous to make any connection between religion and the challenges we are struggling with on a daily basis.

Jesus the man ends up crucified because of the way He lived, what He cared about, the way He prayed, what He was trying to accomplish. Jesus the man calls us to come live the way He lived, to pray the way He prayed, to care and make decisions and believe and trust God the way He did. He calls us into a movement, a fellowship, a WAY of LIFE that He was *actually living* - and that He knows will bring us into a relationship with God as vibrant and real and dangerous as the one He had.

The Christ, without Jesus, is a spectator sport, merely philosophically fascinating, in theoretical ways, if you study it long enough. Jesus, without the Christ, ends in tragedy - man's inhumanity and injustice to man - poignant, but hardly a surprising new theme. The two together become Jesus, Lord and Christ: the Messiah, backed by Almighty God, revealing a new WAY to claim our lives, our destinies, and our identities, each of us as a true child of a loving Creator who tracks, guides, supports, and nurtures us each individually through the pathos and confusion of this broken world - into awareness of His True Kingdom, and unto all eternity.

I'm not suggesting we take on all of that for one short Lenten season, just the LIFE part: Jesus the man. I'm suggesting that you each ask yourself afresh: In what ways is Jesus my role model, my hero? In what ways do I consciously emulate the sort of person I think He was? Your image of Jesus is a composite of what you have learned from the Bible and have experienced of His presence in your own life. And, unfortunately or fortunately, it is also much impacted by what you have learned from other people about what Jesus was like, whether or not they ever thought about it or studied the records.

All of this does not deter me from the assignment. Nor should it trouble you overmuch. What we get in the New Testament is a reflection of what Jesus meant to people who had experiences with Him. It is not about some creed or party line; it is not about some formula so we can "believe correctly." The real meaning for any of us comes when we connect what we get in the New Testament with our own lives. Does Jesus heal you? Scold you? Tease you? Teach you? What you are becoming is what matters to Him, and that is changing all the time. If you find an encounter with Nicodemus or a parable that Jesus told instructive and illuminating to your own pilgrimage, then it becomes for you the Living Word.

Of course, we will not all see Jesus in the same light. You don't all have the same opinion of me or of each other, and yet we're all right here, doing what we do, saying what we say. Is that some huge surprise or problem? It's just the way life is. The truth is, if we really want to know Jesus, our other learning and relationships will grow richer and more interesting and more profound all the time. It is when we come to admire, appreciate, and love who this man was, and what He was like, that He becomes our role model, and hero. Then He has incredible impact on our lives, and on how we try to live them.

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In what ways is Jesus your role model, your hero? It is a theme for our Lenten study and meditations. With whatever information you already have at your disposal, think about what kind of personality Jesus really had, what kind of character He had, what sort of person He really was. Don't just make Him into what you want Him to be, or think He ought to be. What was He *really* like: What did He say? And do? And think about? Imagine somebody like Him participating in conversations, meetings, and situations you are engaged in. Make some notes. Use pen and paper. Get it as clear and specific as you can.

We are saved by His Death and Resurrection. Just so. But we are won over by His LIFE. We come to admire Him, respect Him, wonder at Him, love Him - and follow Him - because of His LIFE.

### PRAYER

Lord Christ, we do thank You for all the grace and mercy and love and forgiveness that have brought us to this day. Life is short, and the world looks a little crazier every day - scary but beautiful too - so full of pathos and opportunity, so laced with sorrow and interlaced with the divine. Grant us then, we pray - despite all confusion and hesitation - grant us a clearer WAY to walk with You: humble yet valiant, meek yet unafraid, loving yet faithful. Most of all, we pray that we may find, in the common and ordinary days and tasks that You bring us, a way to please You ... to follow You ... to become, by Your Spirit, more like You. Afraid of our audacity, but thrilled by Your promise, we pray together in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.