

LIKE JESUS - 2

Humans have a great fondness for being unique, and for discovering or inventing something new. We somehow long to know something that nobody else knows, or to do something better, or at least different. It is partly why our species adapts and survives as well as it does. It is also why we sometimes forget or neglect the basics, and often lose or destroy what we once valued most. Human history is full of both stories.

To follow Jesus, we have to be willing to go where He beckons. To be like Jesus, we have to know what Jesus was like. Simple logic - simply neglected.

We can make such truisms enormously complicated, or we can simplify them into mere slogans that mean nothing at all. Nevertheless, intentional pilgrims return to such basics again and again. We are making no progress unless we take steps ... steps must be taken one at a time ... and so forth. Simple logic - simply forgotten. Some of the most important steps have been hammered out - tried and tested - in every corner of our heritage for thousands of years. We neglect them at our peril, no matter how smart and independent we think we are.

This Lent we contemplate one of the foundations, one of the cornerstones, of our faith: What impact does Jesus have on the model for life that we carry in our heads? This irresistibly calls us to check again what we think Jesus was like. If the model is vague, it can only lead us to indecision. If the model is wrong, it can only lead us astray. And then we must add: If the model is absolutely clear and we are absolutely certain, it can only lead us into spiritual pride, arrogance, and evil. That leaves us with a pretty fine line to walk - something about "the straight and narrow." If the road cannot be walked in humility, it is not from God. If it does not require daily prayer and daily surrender, it is not of God, for we would not need God to be with us.

So we begin our efforts to refocus on Jesus with two admissions:

(1) The records of His life are not videotapes, and they are not precise enough to tempt any of us into absolutes or false pride. We have nothing, strictly speaking, that comes "out of the mouth of Jesus." Somebody says that "Jesus said"; that is as close as we ever come. Somebody remembers hearing that Jesus did "this or that"; this is as

close as we ever come. I happen to believe that Jesus set it up this way, and kept it this way, on purpose. He knew how to write, and chose not to. He knew the pitfalls of an overt, physical record. Always His emphasis was on the interior - the behavior must come from the inner relationship with God. He never compromised that principle, never gave us any other approach or way.

(2) The second admission is at least as hard as the first: What we do have is the record of what Jesus was like in the mind and heart of the early church. We do know what the earliest Christian communities told and believed about what Jesus said and did, and what He was like. Even though this often seems disappointing - not good enough for us - nevertheless it was good enough to change the world, and to convert many of us nearly seventy generations later. So the bad news is, the record is faulty. The good news is, the record is not very faulty. And on other days, the good news is that the record is faulty, and the bad news is that it's not very faulty. That's just my reminder to myself that often I wish the picture of Jesus were not as clear as it is. My real problem is not lack of information, though I love to pretend at times that it is. The truth is that I know more than enough about Jesus to keep me occupied, challenged, inspired, and amazed all of my life. This also leads me into prayer, and humility.

Among other things, this means that I cannot give you a few crisp and clear slogans, each wrapped up in a snappy illustration, and send you off to be "Good Christians." Others can, and do. They think I'm confused; I think they have no respect. I also know that you cannot live very adequately with *my* "picture of Jesus." You must find and live with your own. As you know, I believe we should study the Scriptures constantly, and that they are able to continually refresh and inspire our awareness of Jesus. I know that people can also benefit from sharing their "pictures of Jesus" with each other. But for just the next few weeks, let me suggest that you not concentrate on learning more or reading more about Jesus. Rather, ponder and meditate on what you already know. One way to increase knowledge is to get more information. Another way to increase knowledge is to think more deeply about the information we already have. Our culture is big on the first way, and frequently pathetic on the second. Most of us already have sufficient information about Jesus resting on the surface of our minds. The longing of the soul is not to get more data up on the surface, but to bring some of it down - down into the inner labyrinths of our being.

I suppose we should start each of these sermons with the simple but profound question: Do you love Jesus? If we take that question as a test of salvation or a test of good character, it will do us no good. But if we let our mind ask our heart the simple, honest question - Do you love Jesus? - then we get a reading on how the relationship stands, at least on this particular day. Remember, relationships are not math. This isn't $2 + 2 = 4$. Relationships are dynamic, and meaningful, and messy. Our loyalty and love for Jesus are not the same yesterday, today, and forever. Not unless it's a sham, something we tell others because that's what they want to hear.

I'm not talking here about the Christ, or about the Son of God, however inevitably they may loom in the background. Do you love Jesus the *man*? Do you admire Him, respect Him, care about Him? Do you wish you could have conversations with Him, spend time with Him, ask Him a favor, do something for Him? All of these questions have to be pondered and answered before we can deal very seriously with the notion of following Him.

Not counting bad days and ugly moods, most of us do have high regard for Jesus. On some level, on any normal day, we do love Him in our own way. This love may go all the way from intense personal affection to deep respect for all that He did and went through for the world. In any case, our levels of religious involvement and growth are inescapably linked to the bond of love and devotion we have for Jesus. But a great deal of our culture's pseudo-religious behavior reveals that there is no bond of love or affection or loyalty for Jesus. We don't put all our little hurts, opinions, feelings, and complaints ahead of those we truly love; we care and work and strive and give - joyfully - for those we truly love. It cannot be faked, not over time. Looking good on the surface can be faked for a little while, but not over time. Much of the religious establishment of our culture and time seems to be focused mostly on looking good on the surface.

What happens when instead of that, we start to get some actual regard and respect and admiration for Jesus? Quite a few of you are finding out, more and more, what that's like. Some people love the community first, and end up loving Jesus because they discover that He is its source and head. Others love Jesus first, and end up loving the community because they come to realize that He loves it too. Either way, and inevitably, the working end of our faith and growth as Christians

is dramatically linked to the bond of love we have with Jesus. I know many people who do not think this is so, and that perhaps I am in error. But it's fairly easy to check out: Spend some quality time thinking about Jesus - what He was like, and what He was about - and see what happens. If it has no impact on you or how you want to live, then what I'm telling you is wrong.

What follows is no substitute for your own Lenten meditations. It's just my way of trying to prime the pump.

What can we say about Jesus? He was a man of love. What others tried to acquire, He gave away: power, influence, long life, family, reputation, security. Yet in comparison to all other mystic, spiritual leaders, Jesus was very earthy. He loved to eat and drink with His friends. He was no ascetic, depriving Himself of available abundance or suggesting that anybody else deprive themselves - unless it was to get something better. There is a long spiritual tradition of negation: vows of poverty, vows of chastity, feelings that the physical realm is bad or wrong and we must separate ourselves from it to be spiritually alive. Jesus agreed with none of that and taught none of it. His life was not lived in deprivation. *"I came that you might have life, and have it abundantly."* (John 10:10) In comparison to the Buddha, Jesus is a raving optimist. In comparison to Muhammad, Jesus is too compassionate (that's not my prejudice; it's what Islam teaches). In comparison to Moses, Jesus is permissive, spoiling His followers shamelessly, accepting them before they deserve it. In comparison to you and me, Jesus is unimpressed by the toys and goals most of our society toils after.

And yet, every such statement leaves a misimpression. Now we have made Him sound easygoing, rather genial, perhaps rambling His way through life like a good-hearted friar. But no human ever lived with more single-minded purpose, with more intense devotion to His calling. From King Herod to the most learned scribes in the land, from Pilate to His own best friends - and to Satan himself - *nobody* could deflect Jesus from His chosen Path. Of all the people I have ever known or heard about, Jesus is the most uncompromising. Yet compromise is considered a "good" word in our language today.

Every statement we make about Jesus seems to need a string of qualifiers. I don't think Jesus ever meant to be elusive or obtuse - *except* when He was in verbal battle with Pharisees, or telling parables, or somebody was trying to make it all sound trite. But Jesus *is* elusive

because He does not fit into any of our handy, normal, expected categories. He doesn't *try* to keep out of them; He simply does not fit. So we call Him the "man of love," but that doesn't help much because half of us redefine love according to what Jesus Himself was like, and the other half try to fit Him into old definitions of love that don't fit at all - unless we refuse to pay any attention whatsoever to His story.

Much of Christianity, for instance, still tries to make "love" sound like something that makes everybody "like us," and something that keeps us out of serious trouble. "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself* - because then you will be successful and most people will like you." Clearly, if this is the case, Jesus knew nothing about love, since so many people hated Him so fiercely and He was always in serious trouble - from the very moment the Spirit, like a dove, descended upon Him at His baptism. "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself* - because it pleases God, and much of the world will hate you for it because the world is not at peace with God." Can you detect a difference between these two? So you see, if we bring the life of Jesus into the picture, it changes the way we hear everything.

While there are hints and fascinations in all of this, we need to grab hold of something we can work with, something we can measure against, and try to follow. Am I for LIFE? Are you for LIFE? If I see somebody do something wonderful, do I rejoice, or do I get jealous? Jesus was for LIFE! But having chosen a word, already we are in trouble. Some people define "life" as physical existence, and think that being "for life" means being for physical existence for as many people as possible, for as long as possible. Never mind *quality* of life; quantity is the only dimension, the only thing that matters. Never mind eternity or purpose or character or conversion, just get 'em here and keep 'em here as long as possible and maybe something good will happen. (Jesus would, and I believe does, shake His head in remorse: "*Leave the dead to bury the dead, but as for you, go and announce the Kingdom of God.*" (Luke 9:60))

Jesus died at thirty-three - not a very good emblem for longevity. He turned a thriving, swiftly growing, successful movement into a tiny, gasping handful of traumatized losers. Though that wasn't the end of it, nevertheless it is not a very good emblem for anybody interested in quantity. Yet one of the overriding impressions of Jesus is that He was for LIFE, only not "life" as we define it - and He was against DEATH, only not "death" as we define it.

There are no adequate words. We speak of spiritual life, of eternal life, of LIFE in the Kingdom. And yet we see Jesus despising disease in the physical realm. Almost every time He heals, there is the hint of anger. He is angry that people are being *thus bound*. He heals as if He's freeing people from shackles, from hidden chains - contesting some hidden enemy's right to thus harm and hold them. He is displeased wherever life is cut back, held down, twisted, shamed. If popular interpretations of the Law of Moses are preventing people from helping people, then He is angry. I don't mean confused, annoyed, sarcastic, or resentful - I mean *angry*. And when Jesus gets angry, He does not lose His temper; He walks straight into it, over and over: "How dare you treat my Father's children in this way!" But ... but ... we are following the Law of Moses! "Who told you that's what it means? I don't care what you say or think - I just healed him, so what are you going to do about it?" "*The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.*" (Mark 2:23-28; Luke 6:1-11)

In our Scripture passage today, Jesus is just as angry at this free-loading, lazy good-for-nothing He finds at the Pool of Bethesda. I'm sure there were extenuating circumstances. Who knows what complexes the poor man's mother or father may have bequeathed to him? Maybe somebody failed to appreciate his efforts at art in first or second grade. Jesus is nonetheless irate at what this man is *doing* with the life God has given him. Jesus heals the man against the man's own wishes, and He tries for the long shot - that the experience of healing might actually wake this man up. In the meantime, of course, the man returns the anger, and tries to get Jesus into as much trouble as possible. I doubt very much that Jesus was surprised. He circles back and lets the man have a second barrel, right in the face: "Give it up and get a life, or it will go worse for you than ever before - I have ruined your game for you." (That was verse 14, if you had trouble with the translation.)

Jesus challenged disease, fear, shame, and any structure, personal or nationwide, that held people away from the dynamism of spiritual LIFE - away from personal relationship with God. And He Himself worked constantly to awaken and encourage people to come into their own as God's people - as children of God, as citizens of the Kingdom - endlessly gifted, and eternally destined. Isn't that what kept happening in the encounters: with Mary of Magdala, with fishermen, with tax collectors, with anybody He could reach? They were not all called to change their outer circumstances, but they were all called to leave their former ways

and reasons, and called mostly to leave their former estimate of themselves and the value of their lives. They had to start reaching for, and receiving, a new identity - the New LIFE that God wanted for them. *That* is why we call Jesus the man of love.

But He was not “nice.” He offended more people than we ever dare to. He had to in order to stay faithful, in order to keep honest and straight with God. *Real* love got Him resoundingly hated.

I don’t know how *you* handle this information, but it has made it clear to me that over and over in my ministry, I’ve tried to put *being liked* above *being loving*. I’ve never found it easy or natural to get involved when I see people in bondage, whether to money or success or oppression or whatever. It’s always easier to think first of “peace” and wanting the church to go well, and what will make the most people be approving and possibly then helpful. From watching the life of Jesus, however, I have to *make myself* think in a different way - to care from a different perspective - to put *being loving* over *being liked*. And as Jesus’ life also proves, not everybody hates you for doing that. Many realize it is the best freedom and light and joy and LIFE there is. Their friendship is not based on “deals” or trade-offs, because LIFE and faith have no need or desire for such things.

Jesus was the Great Lover, Comforter, Healer. But He brought this compassion in a context so different that it belies the usual assumptions and expectations we have about love. He challenged everyone He encountered to come into New LIFE - into what He usually spoke of as the Kingdom of God. Equally, He challenged everything that was against this LIFE with God. Therefore, He misfits all our normal categories, drawing both more love and devotion *and* more hatred and jealousy than any of us ever have. If we follow, will we not also begin to draw more and more of both?

Being a “good Christian,” as most of the world describes and imagines it, will never change the world, or us, or the people we love. Something about Jesus is outside the security-conscious, pleasure-seeking, accommodating lifestyles that most of us learn and live. That is one of the intriguing and dangerous things about wanting to follow Him. Yet we do - we do want to follow Him - for life is short, and He beckons us to things beyond all that we have ever wanted, or known.

Do you remember the benediction of Meister Eckhart?

*Henceforth may you be unbelievably happy,
Never overcome by fear and the fearful,
And always in trouble.*

PRAYER

You are the Potter ... we are the clay. You are the Creator ... we are the creatures. Why is it so hard to remember, Lord? It must be hard to work with us if we are stiff ... resistant to all Your suggestions ... complaining at all Your assignments ... demanding guarantees at the beginning of every new venture ... often rebelling before we have understood the destinations. Forgive us, O God, and grant that we may put more trust in Your love, and more trust in Your will and WAY. Let the recalcitrance, the stiffness, the resistance melt away. All the reminders are sweeping toward us: Palm Sunday, and Good Friday, and Easter. Come be our God, and make us wholly Thine. This we pray together in the name of Jesus the Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.