

LIKE JESUS - 4

What are we doing here? Do we want to “make more Christians” so that they in turn can “make more Christians”? Well, I suppose so, yes, that would be fine. On the other hand, what’s the point? The fast answer, in some circles, is that we are trying to help Jesus save people – that is, keep them from going to Hell. Most of us in this church don’t see it in quite that color or light. Hell is a condition, not a place – more about attitude than about geography. Eternal life, though it has infinite longevity, is only appealing for its quality, not for its length. Things that last a long time are not automatically desirable, as anyone who has ever been sick can tell you.

Of course, from the Christian perspective, all of us are sick. We have a couple of serious diseases. One is called “mortality” – we are all finite, and rushing toward death. The other is pride (*hubris*), a condition that makes us want to stay aloof and act independent and superior to all other beings, human or divine. One symptom of pride is an increasing tendency toward alienation and separation – a condition called “sin” in the old language. And that condition leads us into ever-greater tendencies toward acts and behavior called “sins” that cause suffering and harm to others. Being in a state of alienation leads us toward alienating behavior; if we harm others, it causes alienation and separation. It is a vicious cycle: Being in a state of sin, we tend more and more toward sinful acts and deeds. As Jesus keeps pointing out, it is the attitude or stance of the heart that makes the real difference. And everything we do is either increasing alienation or drawing us toward God’s love.

This is God’s real issue with what we call “morality,” though it takes most of us years to figure that out. Why not commit adultery, for instance? Well, because God hates sex and doesn’t want us to have any fun, that’s why. Many people talk and act like that’s what the rules are about. The truth is, adultery breaks trust, the most important basis of relationship. Adultery is on the side of alienation. Even the adulterous relationship is forged in deceit and pain, and often cannot overcome its beginnings. God doesn’t punish anybody for committing adultery. Adultery carries its own punishment with it, because its principles are false. The truth is, sex isn’t very good for very long in that kind of setting.

It is much better with someone you trust, someone who truly loves you in a long-range, committed relationship. So the commandment is only a summary of long-experienced truth. God actually loves sex and wants us to have wonderful fun. Adultery isn't how we get it, not in the long run. Marriage isn't either, for some people, but that's for other reasons. There is more than one way to follow the principles of alienation. Am I confusing anybody?

Truth is even bigger on the interior, spiritual level, but on the overt, physical level, the problem with Godlessness (alienation) is that more and more we have our own self-interest at heart and do not have each other's best interests at heart. There is a cure for both diseases - mortality and pride - but as with alcoholism, sexual addiction, greed, prejudice, and many other diseases, most of us prefer to stay sick for as long as we possibly can. Hard to believe at first, isn't it? I actually know some people with drinking problems who do not *want* to quit drinking. If I didn't have such a good memory, I probably couldn't believe it. I know how much fun they're having, but I also know that a much better life awaits them if they stop drinking. Yet they are eager to hang on to their increasing misery, trouble, decaying relationships, and self-loathing. For what?

Well, I know some people who hang on just as tight to their pride and mortality. They do not want Jesus' love - God's love revealed in the Messiah sent to us. They would rather hang on to their isolation, sorrow, depression, and personal hopes for personal security and safety. It doesn't matter how wondrous the LIFE that awaits them, or how much they might accomplish with the Spirit's presence and guidance. "Please, Daddy, I'd rather do it myself."

Am I telling you things you don't know? Not hardly. But just "knowing it" doesn't help much. Behind such clear and simple-sounding phrases, there is a world of pain and chaos out there. We are all caught in it no matter what we do - no matter how good or bad or indifferent we try to be. And just taking our temperature doesn't cure the disease. So what is our purpose in the Christian church? What is the goal we strive toward as we pour energy and thought and prayer into the Christian Life? Why do we worship together, have study groups and classes and retreats, baptize people, take communion, share more and more LIFE together? What is it that we are trying to accomplish?

Supposedly we want to “spread the Gospel.” But why? Because the Gospel will make a nicer world? We have been spreading it for two thousand years – is the world any nicer? Or maybe we see the peace of the Gospel itself spreading into each individual life, and we want that blessing for each individual person. Is that the motive?

On some level, in some language, most Christians see the world alienated from God and believe that Jesus came to heal the great gulf between us and God – to restore us to love and belonging within the right and rightful family of God. And the reality of this drama is that each of us (body, mind, and spirit) must move from seeing ourselves as individuals in an isolated physical world ... toward realizing that we are part of a vast Kingdom that reaches beyond the physical, beyond this world, beyond time as we know it – yet still is personal and meaningful – and that everything is connected because One Creator has designed it all with specific and caring intentions.

Then it becomes our purpose to find some way to live our own lives in the new awareness of this vast Kingdom to which we all belong. It becomes our eager hope that more and more of those we know and encounter will awaken to this larger reality, and tune their lives to the heartbeat of this Kingdom of God, instead of to the isolated dissonance of some tiny, temporal, earthly environment.

Of course, here in this church, we live in what is often called the “free church tradition.” Our tendency is to downplay institutions, structures, and creeds. At our best, we play up the faith family – the Christian fellowship, the support community. It has seemed to us that institutions and hierarchies – while they define a clearer path and make behavioral standards much more explicit (often a very helpful thing, we must admit) – usually usurp the place and function of the Holy Spirit in the lives of individual Christians. We are impressed that Moses, Abraham, Amos, Samuel, Paul, Peter, Luther, Augustine – not to mention our Lord – all were called individually, and were dealt with individually. Their lives impacted institutions, but their spiritual guidance and inspiration and purpose did not come *from* the institutions or hierarchies. As we said recently, Jesus was a man of prayer. He was *not* a man of creed. Isn’t that interesting, in the light of church history? It is one of the many ways we try to honor Him but don’t bother following Him. Jesus was a man of prayer, not a man of creed.

What is our purpose? We are forbidden to make up purposes of our own, since none of us is the head of the church. It is our purpose that each of us will take orders from the “Head” of this body - from Christ. It is our purpose to be responsive to the Holy Spirit on a daily basis - turning our lives over each morning, for each new day. It is our purpose to prevent me from running your life, or you from running mine - that we might each be responsive to the Christ, who is our Leader. It is our purpose to be supportive, responsive, caring, encouraging - that all of us may be glad when the Holy Spirit speaks to any one among us, and that we may, insofar as we can, back up others in the assignments they are given. So we try to operate more like a family of friends than like a corporation or an institution. Nevertheless, it is the task of each one of us to pray in willing obedience and allegiance so that we pattern our own lives after the guidance of the Holy Spirit, not on pleasing each other or any other person or group on earth.

Some of you think trying to follow the Spirit’s guidance is risky business. We are never certain we “hear” the Spirit’s guidance clearly or correctly, and even if we do, it might lead us into difficult or even dangerous situations. Sometimes people you know, or know about, claim to be following the “will of God,” and you think they are evil or crazy, or both. Faithful people have been aware of and troubled by such things for thousands of years. Abraham wanted to settle for Ishmael being his successor because he didn’t think he would ever get Isaac; when he got Isaac, he thought for a while that he was supposed to sacrifice him. We have been terrified of the Living God since the dawn of time. Ever since Adam, we have been trying to put religious institutions and rituals between us and God, to protect ourselves. For as far back as we can remember, we have been alarmed by false prophets claiming to know the will of God when they did not, or when they were only saying things in God’s name to get their own way. Though far from the first to be angered by it, Jeremiah’s words ever ring in our ears: “*You have healed the wounds of my people lightly, crying, ‘Shalom, shalom, fa ain shalom.’*” (“*Peace, peace, when there is no peace.*”) (Jeremiah 6:14)

So of course the life of prayer and obedience to God can be abused. Every good thing can be abused - it is Satan’s stock-in-trade. And the higher a thing, the worse its abuse can be. Can money be abused? Can friendship be abused? The higher the potential for good, the greater the potential for evil. So shall we abandon all promise and potential in order to keep as safe as possible? Live life as close to neutral as

possible? Lots of people do. Some members of this church are angry with me most of the time because I never want to do that, and I never want any of you to settle for neutral either.

But one of the things we can do to improve the depth and perception of our prayer lives is to study the life of Jesus. We are not trying to turn into little Jesuses, but we can ponder the principles and purposes He revealed in order to follow Him better into living our own lives. At least I think this is so. In fact, I think it is embarrassing that we do this so little. Is it possible that we claim Jesus as our Savior but really don't like Him - don't want to be anything like Him? It is a question we must each answer for ourselves.

The great bugaboo of the "liberal church" in our day is represented by the word "inclusivity." We must all be inclusive, at all times, in all situations. To be inclusive has become almost a synonym for being Christian. (By the way, I have a "lovers' quarrel" with the liberal church, but it is still my camp. Some of you suspect there's not much love left in this quarrel, though that's not the case.) But what was Jesus like? Jesus the man - despite great faith and unlimited trust in God, despite the miraculous powers this gave Him, despite His passion and great love, despite His world vision and purpose to save or reconcile the whole world - Jesus was very aware of His limitations. He had a great humility, which the liberal church in our time usually lacks. *Awareness of limitations makes us exclusive.*

We are all being taught (badgered is more accurate) that we should always be inclusive. But Jesus never was. All are invited, but the gate is narrow. If we are not willing to let somebody through the gate who wants to come, clearly we are anti-Christian. But if we take the narrow gate away entirely, we are also non-Christian - which is, by the way, another way of being anti-Christian. "*He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters.*" (Luke 11:23) I'm not trying to make any of this up - I'm just trying to learn from the man.

Jesus knew He could not be everywhere at once, could not heal everybody, could not have a ministry in every nation that needed Him. He chose carefully - where to serve, whom to help, how to go at it. He chose twelve disciples, thereby offending all the others. He picked His place to work, leaving the rest of the world to the hopefully-spreading mission of followers. It would be generations and centuries before this

mission of labor and love reached some. That was reality. Jesus knew His limitations - much better, it seems, than most of us know our own.

The fact is that Jesus, as a human in the flesh, was exclusive. He had no choice. He either dissipated His efforts in vague sentiment (walking around Palestine telling everybody to “have a nice day”), or He chose twelve, limiting the field to a disciple band of enormous focus. While we are human, while we are in the body, the Christian Way IS to be exclusive: to limit the field; to get focus, even if it hurts people’s feelings. Following Jesus often forces us to ask whether we are here to serve God or to please people. That was, as a matter of fact, one of Jesus’ issues: “*For they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.*” (John 12:43)

Did Jesus love everybody? Heal everybody? Do everything He wished He had time for? Did He take every opportunity to do good that came His way? Do I get to “love my enemies” the way Jesus loved King Herod? “*Go and tell that fox ...*” (translated: piss ant, false prophet, deceitful fraud). (Luke 13:32) Do I get to love my enemies the way Jesus loved the High Priest, or some of the Pharisees? I think I not only can, but must - though that’s not what they taught me in Sunday School.

What percentage of the sick people in Palestine did Jesus heal? One-tenth of one percent? There were too many sick people; there were many other things He needed to do. What happened to love and compassion? Why didn’t He heal on other days besides the Sabbath, and at night? In the face of such great need, why didn’t He spend all of His time and energy healing? Wouldn’t that have been “the Christian thing to do”? Yes ... unless we allow Jesus the Christ to help with our definitions of what it means to be a Christian. If Jesus is our model, we have to change our minds about “the Christian thing to do.” *It is the Christian thing to do* to neglect some of the suffering people, some of the people in need, in order to focus on the vocation that God has assigned to you, and to truly love the people the Spirit sends you to. Do you know the difference between secular charity and Christian giving? Do you know what it means to be a bigamist? Do you know what it means to be a spiritual bigamist? To pretend love for everybody is to love nobody.

Our Scripture reading today is the story of Jesus when He goes north into the region of Tyre and Sidon. He is way out of His territory. I suspect He had to get out of Galilee for a while, to avoid arrest. He

is also on leave for rest and relaxation. We have no notion how long He is away, for weeks or for months. Perhaps He intended to stay until things cooled down back home in Galilee. (How selfish of Him to go on vacation and neglect His ministry.) But He doesn't want to start a new ministry in the region of Tyre and Sidon; He cannot keep up with what He is trying to accomplish in Galilee. So all He wants is some peace and quiet - a little time to recuperate, a little time to be alone. But this woman somehow puts things together and catches on to who He really is. And she is a mother and loves her child. But Jesus wants to keep His anonymity. He doesn't want to start a ministry in Sidon. He hasn't got the time or the energy. He cannot be everything to everybody everywhere - not in the body. So He is really quite nasty to this woman. What He's saying is, "Please go away. Just leave me alone." Jesus knows what will happen if He heals this woman's daughter: the word will spread like wildfire. Even in Galilee, He had tried to slow it down, asking everyone He healed to please keep quiet about it. He knows what the woman does *not* care about: one healing and His retreat will be over. So Jesus cuts this woman dead and doesn't even acknowledge her existence - until her love for her daughter, and His own compassion, becomes too much for Him. But we still hear Him claim His true purpose: "*I was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, and to them alone.*" (Matthew 15:24)

In the end, Jesus gives in and heals the woman's daughter. For many of you, that's the good part of the story, and that's what this sermon should be about. We should never consider our own needs and realities, and should always help everybody who needs it. By the way, Jesus immediately leaves the region and heads back to Galilee. His respite is destroyed. If He's going back to work, it might as well be to where He belongs. He comes very close to the third wilderness temptation taking over His life, but He recovers by getting back to His own territory. And if you are comforted that He helps this one woman, be comforted also that He leaves everyone else in Lebanon and goes back to Galilee. It is the Christian WAY to know your field, limit your purposes, focus on what God has sent you to do - and *not* try to respond to need or want in general. Need and want in this world are *limitless*, and you are *limited*. Jesus knew His limitations in the body. He was exclusive - focused - dedicated to following His own mission by the guidance of His prayers. People wanted Him to stay, but He left. People wanted Him to change His standards, but He would not. People wanted to be His disciples on their own terms, but He refused them.

We cannot say “yes” to God if we have not learned to say “no” to anything and everything else that might get in the way of that - no matter how worthy, or how much it might draw our compassion.

Every area of life I know about and care about - every area of life that has any meaning to me - is framed, understood, and experienced by exclusiveness, not by inclusiveness. Is everyone welcome to share your bed? Do you think you should be welcome to share everyone else's? Does everyone have as much right as you do to the title to your home, or car? Do you still have any right to choose your friends? Don't you know that calling everybody in an ethnic or racial group “good” is just as prejudiced as calling them all “bad”? We are trying to spread God's love by shame and coercion because we are tired of it taking so long to grow authentically. “Inclusivity” is a word we use to try to persuade everybody to love everybody, whether they really mean it or not. “Let's take all choice away and force everybody to accept everybody.” But love without choice has no value - and no power to redeem. Love apart from personal choice is not love. “I love you” means nothing if it is just a political or social slogan. True LOVE is always incredibly exclusive. Much of its power is in the choice. “*You did not choose me, I chose you.*” (John 15:16)

If you are accepted and included but not chosen, then when you get inside whatever you've been included in, you will discover there is nothing there worth having. “Unconditional love” is like that: “I love you, but it's nothing personal.” “All are welcome.” “I assure you that you are included and important, but if you ever need me, I'll be off drafting resolutions and writing my congressman.”

Move into my world for a minute, where alcohol is not a pleasant social custom, used in a sane and pleasant manner like some of you use it. If I, or my alcoholic friends, are still drinking, we are not living a sober life. It doesn't make a bit of difference what I say about it or pretend about it. It also doesn't matter how valuable people tell me I am, or how much they rant and rave about how I'm included or accepted - conditionally, unconditionally, or any other way. The fact is, if I am still drinking, I am not living a sober life.

Well, if I am still alienated from God and running my own life, does it make any difference what creeds I say, what church I belong to, what reputation I have in the community, or how much anybody insists that God loves me? If I am still alienated from God and running my own life, you can hang signs all over me but the fact remains that I have

no notion of what the Christian Life is like - what the Christian WAY is really all about. Christianity may invite everyone, but it is still a very *exclusive* WAY. And nobody's rhetoric can get us into the Kingdom if we won't surrender our lives - trust the grace and love of Christ - and truly enter. The Cross of Christ does not mean we are forgiven; it means forgiveness is offered. The love of Christ does not mean we know and feel ourselves to be loved; it means the love is offered. But we cannot keep our pride and receive the love and forgiveness at the same time - any more than I can keep drinking and find a new and sober life at the same time.

Doing good is not the Christian WAY (any more than it is the Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, Humanist, Atheist, Democrat or Republican way). Doing what the Holy Spirit asks us to do is the Christian WAY. We don't get to take back control over our lives just because we think we have good motives. The Christian Life is about turning it over - the willingness to be humble servants, a decision to let the Holy Spirit be in charge. Jesus wasn't the Christ because He did good. Because He was the Christ, He watched the Conductor - and did what God sent Him to do, in the way God asked Him to do it. We ended up calling it "good." He couldn't have cared less what we called it.

If we are followers of Christ, we do not do anything - good, neutral, or any other way - until we have permission from the Holy Spirit. And that makes it a very *exclusive* WAY.

PRAYER

Somewhere deep within us, Lord, we do know that You have been offering us abundant LIFE for as far back as we can remember. Much of the time our awareness has only picked up whispers and glimpses. We turn quickly to other things ... clearer, more obvious things. And they delight or amuse us for a while. We thank You for all the little delights of LIFE that keep us occupied: the games, the sex, the money, the birds, the flowers, and all the intriguing subplots of our material world. But we seek also Your Kingdom and Your presence. We live in the midst of the physical, but more and more we want to serve the eternal. Stay with us now, we pray, and teach us how the two may be truly intertwined. These things we pray in the name of Jesus, our Savior. Amen.