

This is really Jesus!

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My daughter and I were driving back from shopping, and I was pondering thoughts about what kind of sermons would really reach her generation. Like many of the college students I know, she may or may not go to church on Sunday morning, depending on what she was up to the night before. Even though I did my best to raise both of my kids in the church and relay to them the value of worshipping every Sunday, since leaving our home, she now has complete control of her Sundays and can decide if worship is a priority or not. I asked her, "What sermons or messages have stuck out to you recently, what do you remember?" Like a typical twenty-year old talking to her mother she said, "I don't know. I can't remember." So, I prodded some more and asked what Bible verses or stories did she remember being preached that captured your imagination? She sat next to me, thoughtful and pensive, reflecting on the question. Then she said, "I remember this story about two mothers who were fighting over one baby and this guy was threatening to cut the baby in half." She looked at me and added, "Yeah! I remember that and it was a vivid picture for me. But, I don't remember when I heard it or where." My heart swelled for a moment because I preached that sermon in May during Mother's Day, and she was there. It may have been the last sermon she remembered because it was the last worship service she went to, but I told myself that it was because of how I helped her encounter the text in my preaching. All I cared about was that she remembered SOMETHING in the sermon that was preached.

In reality, most people don't remember the messages they hear from week to week, especially if they are regular attenders of worship. One message gets replaced with the next message as preachers and parishioners engage with each other every week. I tried this same approach on my father who is a retired preacher while we were out on a walk, and I was preparing for the next week's sermon. I said, "What do you remember from the sermon last week?" He thought about it and looked at me and honestly said, "Ummm ... I don't know." This again was discouraging, and I said, "Well then, what's the point? Why do preachers work so hard to prepare a sermon every week when people forget it the minute they walk out the door?" My sweet father felt for me and dug a little deeper in his memory and pulled out a few illustrations from the message before. Both of these wonderful people are those who love me enough to care about what I have to say whether or not it feeds their spiritual souls. What about the hundreds of people who hear our sermons, don't know us, don't necessarily care about what we think, but at the end of the day, they want their souls filled and fed because they are hungry for the encounter with the Divine? It took me some time to remember this amid my own soul needing nurturing, but as I looked up and out at the world, I realized that this is what Christ was inviting us to see.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19).

Jesus’s words come to us right after being tested in the wilderness and tempted by the devil according to the Gospel of Luke. He’s back in Galilee and on a spiritual high from overcoming the challenges of forty days of fasting and the testing of his human condition and abilities. He starts teaching in the synagogues there in Galilee and people are astounded, marveling at his wisdom. I can only imagine how affirmed and confident he felt, being rewarded through human accolades for his preaching, teaching, and transformation as a spiritual leader in Galilee. A moment later in verse 16, he goes to Nazareth, his hometown, and he again stood up and read from the prophet Isaiah the words that remind us of his anointing and the power of the Spirit who is upon Jesus. But, as he sits down and starts teaching the people whom he knew well and who knew him well, things started to turn. At first in verse 22, they speak well of him and “were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips.” But, this son of Joseph, the carpenter, doesn’t leave it there, like most people would. He starts to tell them something they don’t want to hear. According to Craig C. Hill in his book *Servant of All: Status, Ambition, and the Way of Jesus*, Jesus is claiming “the prophetic anointing for himself and announced that the long-anticipated time of restoration, “the year of the Lord’s favor,” was upon them. According to the Gospels, this was too much for his hometown audience to swallow.”¹ Who is this Jesus? And who does he think he is, anyway? That’s what the people of Nazareth seem to be saying as they listen to him claim the status and power of God that had been promised to the Messiah. They can’t believe that Joseph’s kid would come back and tell everyone that he’s all that and more. It seems like an implausible and unbelievable claim, and it made many of the religious leaders in that community angry. They were so angry that they “drove him out of town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff” (vs. 29).

Preachers and teachers of the Gospel don’t want another Nazareth experience to happen to Jesus again, so we hold onto the ways in which Jesus was received in Galilee, versus how he was received in Nazareth. As preachers, we want to present a well-respected, kind-hearted, gracious, authoritative picture of Jesus who, like our religious dignitaries today, have the power to command the presence and attention of the people. Jesus, the influencer, who has gained popularity and a following because his words of wisdom and his connection with the Divine is like an addictive substance that has drawn everyone in, that’s the Jesus we try to present as we wax and wane about the beauty of the Gospel. It’s easier to get people to follow this lovely image of Jesus, our best friend, the one who has it all together so that we, too, like him can have it all together. Our attempt to make Jesus worthy of remembering often morphs this concept of Christ into something so unrecognizable that people aren’t sure if it’s really Jesus.

Ryan Lokkesmoe, a contributor to *Relevant* magazine, wrote about how we have airbrushed Jesus into a “socially palatable” image that “smooths out His rough edges and His apparent inconsistencies.”² This image of Jesus is much easier to get along with and to present to the general populous, because he is pleasing to our lives. He fits in better with our communities and our cultures; he doesn’t ask too much of us or demand too many sacrifices. The Jesus that many churches represent convinces us that our denomination, our church, our institution is the most correct image of Jesus, the risen Christ, that we can follow. And for whatever doctrine we believe is most essential, we may “airbrush”³ Jesus into the image we want him to be. Why is this unacceptable? What’s wrong with focusing on the good aspects of Jesus and simply ignoring the parts that might drive us a little crazy? Maybe the better question is, Will the glossy airbrushed preaching and teaching engage twenty-year-olds, like my daughter, and give her something worth getting up every Sunday for?

If you have ever entered any kind of long-term relationship with any other human in this world, you’ll know that focusing on the good and sometimes ignoring the parts that make us a little uncomfortable is necessary to sticking with them even when faced with things that make us question the relationship. In his book, *Universal Christ*, Richard Rohr interprets the words of St. Bonaventure (1221-1274) from *The Soul’s Journey to God* as a slow and gentle movement towards love by “loving the very humblest and simplest things, and then move up from there.”⁴ His illustration of the long-lasting love of God is demonstrated in everyday relationships that have the depth of love for someone other than oneself.

I once had the privilege of serving as the pastor in a sweet church where I was blessed by people who had discovered what it meant to have a long-lasting love for one another. Whenever we celebrated birthdays and anniversaries at our Wednesday night dinners, and for anniversaries I would ask, “How many years are you celebrating together?” What always made me marvel were the couples who said they had been together for fifty years or more. And what delighted my soul was when they looked into each other’s eyes, and you could still see the spark of love and hope shining through their gaze at one another. That was always a gift from the Holy Spirit, to see the beauty of love in those relationships. As one who has enjoyed twenty-six years of marriage, I am beginning to recognize what it takes to really hold onto one another through thick and thin and to discover the very “humblest and simplest of things” that make you fall in love over and over again.

The problem is that there are too many influencers in our world who convince us that when the going gets tough, the tough get out of there. Like Peter, when the pressure was on to follow Jesus to the cross, he denies having been with him as a disciple, he denies knowing him, and he denies even being associated with him due to his accent (Matthew 26:69-74, NIV). This painful, but poignant, illustration of Jesus’s and Peter’s relationship in the gospel of Matthew reminds us how difficult and complex human and Divine relationships can be.

I tend to believe that preachers have a similarly complex relationship with Jesus as we do our best to respond to Christ's call in our lives. Like Peter, we are eager to please Jesus, and prove our loyalty to him. We are ready to walk on water with Jesus (Matthew 14) and be told that we are the rock where Christ will build his church (Matthew 16:18). Maybe we remember the first time we fell in love with Jesus, and we could still feel the butterflies in our stomach, the beating of our hearts, and the transcendence of our thoughts and minds as we discovered that Christ was just as in love with us as we were with him. There is something beautiful about the first moments of discovery when you are falling in love. Everything is new and exciting; the challenges are exhilarating as you begin to dance with the Divine. The feelings of love are at their most brilliant stage when it first sparks within you. Rohr writes in his chapter "Love is the Meaning": "When we are truly 'in love,' we move out of our small, individual selves to unite with another, whether in companionship, simple friendship, marriage, or any other trustful relationship."¹⁵ That moment of surrender to the movement beyond ourselves is the invitation we have to commune with God. In the beginning, it's an easy movement, a delightful action, the part in the movies when everything is glowing and focused in on the main characters who are in love. We live for that moment. We treasure that moment. We idolize that moment so much that we believe that is the only feeling of true love. And once again, we airbrush Jesus into that image that made us feel so wonderful.

Unfortunately, that experience of Christ is limited and, like Peter in the Gospel of Matthew, we begin to discover that a relationship with Jesus is much more complex than the single call moment, the falling in love moment, or the glowing in the spotlight moment, that our world wants us to hold onto and long for. Every time Peter thought he was doing the right thing with Jesus, he discovered it was a bit more scary than he thought. Remember when Peter stepped out of the boat and started walking towards Jesus, he looked up and out and saw the waves, and the wind was whipping his hair in his face and next thing you know, he can't see Jesus. As he cries out, Jesus is right next to him, helping him out of the storm. He falls in love again (Matthew 14: 28-33, NIV).

Then there is the moment when at the beginning of Matthew 16, Jesus is being challenged by the Pharisees and the Sadducees and turns to Peter and asks him to declare who Jesus is to everyone who is listening. Peter gets it right! I'm sure in that moment, Peter was beaming with pride that the one whom he loves, worships, and follows, had just found him worthy of building his church upon his shoulders. We've all felt that moment when we have declared our love and devotion for Christ to all the world and in some way, we know with confidence that Christ is using us to build his church. We stand up a little taller when the people whom God has called us to serve give us the words we long to hear, "Well done, Preacher! You hit a home run today!" We must be doing something right! This is an easy moment to feel the love of Christ being showered upon us.

Wait, we can't stop there, because not more than five verses later, in the good news presented by Matthew, we hear Jesus rebuking Peter saying, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns" (Matthew 16:23, NIV). How many of us have said in our heads, "But wait, Jesus, you just said you were building the church on me because I was blessed by your Father in Heaven! And now I am being called "Satan?" Certainly Peter had to have been very confused by the complexity of Jesus's words, actions, and behaviors. We see the messiness of the relationship between Jesus and Peter, and we wonder, Why did Peter stay with him through it all?

Crushed and confused, we can all imagine Peter wanting to wallow in his wounds when the very one he loved threw daggers of accusation at him because all he wanted to do was protect him from the world that would crucify him. Maybe that's what we do with Jesus every time we present him to the world as a palatable, prophetic teacher who will make us feel good about every aspect of our lives. Maybe that's what we do with Jesus when we airbrush the edges out and soften what we call impurities to offer an image of Jesus that the world won't persecute and crucify. Like Peter, we just want to cling to the one we love the most and ensure ourselves that we will never lose Christ, even when we take our eyes off him and face the winds and the waves.

The responsibility of the prophets of the Old Testament, the prophets of the New Testament, and the prophets of today is to present all of the Divine complexity, chaos, and messiness of God. Anyone who spends time with the prophets of the Old Testament discovers how difficult it was to prophesy against the powers of the world and speak about the God who created all the world and who can work in spite of those powerful people. Take a moment to dig into Exodus and work with Moses as he argues with God and is still called and used to move the people of Israel out of Egypt. Beyond the four Gospels of the New Testament, there are letters upon letters written by the faithful followers of Jesus who weren't afraid to witness to the Good News of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection, illustrating the complexities of following Jesus in their time and place. Whether you love Paul or not, he went all out for Jesus in a way most of us would be uncomfortable with today. I know too many preachers who shy away from what Walter Brueggeman calls "prophetic imagination,"⁶ because we have bought into systems and cultures that have convinced us that there is only one way to see God's work in the world. Brueggeman challenges that thinking as he offers this explanation:

If you take the phrase "prophetic imagination," the imagination part of that is that the prophets are able to imagine the world other than the way that is in front of them. The word prophetic alludes to the reality of God. And what the prophets believe deeply is that God is a lively character, and a real agent who acts in the world, who causes endings and who causes new beginnings. And that's worth thinking about, because that is not ordinary thinking among us — that God is a lively agent and a real character.⁷

We continue to discover God through Jesus the risen Christ every day we take time to sit with the scriptures. By the gift of the Holy Spirit, we can listen closely to the whispers of the Divine with our own soul, in our own experiences, and in our own interpretations of God's love in the world. The longer we stay in love with Christ, the deeper that love grows and the more confident we become in giving that prophetic witness, even when it's difficult. Rohr notes that, "Love is a paradox. It often involves making a clear decision, but at its heart, it is not a matter of mind or willpower but a flow of energy willingly allowed and exchanged, without requiring payment in return. Divine love is, of course, the template and model for such human love, and yet human love is the necessary school for any encounter with love."⁸

At the end of the day, each preacher, teacher, and prophet is invited and called to give a witness to Jesus who loves them. When we put the living, breathing, magnitude of love that Jesus has for us at the center of our witness, then it's easier for us to begin to speak of the love that we have for Jesus. The Jesus I know through the scriptures constantly draws me closer to him with every story, every person, every love I have in this world that gets me beyond myself and into God's great living story of creation. It is the foundation of my faith that allows me to join Peter, Paul, Mary, and the other millions of Disciples around the world to lean into the mysterious wonder of Christ. Our everyday invitation is to be that witness in all that we do. One of the best ways for preachers to get the people to come back for their weekly date with Jesus is to present Jesus in all of his complexity, messiness, and love. When hearers, too, fall in love with Jesus, it will be something worth remembering and paying attention to every week.

I'll leave you with words from Pope St. Francis:

"Let us all remember this: one cannot proclaim the Gospel of Jesus without the tangible witness of one's life. Those who listen to us and observe us must be able to see in our actions what they hear from our lips, and so give glory to God!"⁹

Notes

1 Hill, Craig C. *Servant of all: Status, ambition, and the way of Jesus*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017.

2 Lokkesmoe, Ryan. "The Dangers of Making Jesus Look like Us." *RELEVANT*, June 7, 2017. <https://relevantmagazine.com/faith/dangers-making-jesus-look-us/>. (accessed 9/17/23)

3 Ibid.

4 Rohr, Richard. *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope For, and Believe*. 1st ed. New York, NY: Convergent Books, 2019.

5 Ibid. 70

6 Brueggemann, Walter. "Walter Brueggemann: Jesus Acted out the Alternative to Empire." *Sojourners*, March 10, 2020. <https://sojo.net/articles/walter-brueggemann-jesus-acted-out-alternative-empire>. (accessed 9/17/23) - In this speech, Brueggemann introduces the idea that the prophets "context is an ideological totalism, that intends to contain all thinkable, imaginable, doable social possibilities." He goes on to criticize this "totalism," by noting how it tells people what to imagine and think. This critique is important for Brueggemann to point out because he goes on to argue that in buying into this, we lose the possibility that God can still work in us and through us today.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid. p. 71

9 Kelly-Gangi, Carol, ed. *Pope Francis: His Essential Wisdom*. New York, NY: Fall River Press, 2014.