

TWO PORTRAITS OF JESUS [FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH](#) of Kissimmee, Florida

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Luke 19:28-40 (NRSV)

After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

[29] When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, [30] saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. [31] If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" [32] So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. [33] As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" [34] They said, "The Lord needs it." [35] Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. [36] As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. [37] As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, [38] saying,

"Blessed is the king
who comes in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven,
and glory in the highest heaven!"

[39] Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." [40] He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

Philippians 2:5-11 (NRSV)

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

[6] who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,

[7] but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

[8] he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death--
even death on a cross.

[9] Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,

[10] so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

[11] and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

PORTRAITS OF SUCCESS

What is your portrait of success?

If you wanted to point to someone who was successful in their job, to whom would you point? Would your image of success be a person who is a CEO of a large corporation? Perhaps your image of vocational success would be a great sports coach, somebody like Vince Lombardi. What was it Vince said? “Winning isn’t everything. It’s the only thing.” For many winning is the ultimate measure of success.

Some of us have told our children something like this, “You can be anything you want to be. You could even grow up to be president of the United States.”

We have other benchmarks of success. For example, there is the image of what it means to have a successful family. Family success is being happily married, having 2.5 children, a cute dog, and a picturesque house with a white picket fence. It’s a cliché but it’s an image of success that many of us still carry in our heads.

For some of us success is defined by having enough money to do what we want to do and go where we want to go. Success means being “comfortable” as we sometimes put it.

Others view success in terms of health. People often say, “If you’ve got your health you’ve got everything.” Or perhaps we define success as personal happiness. Peace of mind becomes the holy grail of success.

REDEFINING JESUS

It’s important that we talk about what it means to be a success because this will influence our faith. For good or for bad, how we define success will determine how we interpret the life of Jesus.

For example, if we think that good health is the ultimate success in life we will put greater emphasis on those passages when Jesus heals those who suffer from dread diseases. If we think that peace of mind is the most important thing, we might stress those passages in which Jesus says, “Don’t be anxious about tomorrow.”

If we have political ambitions we might stress those passages that tend to support our particular political viewpoints. And if we can’t find any scriptural warrant for what we think is most important, maybe we will just use the name of Jesus and point heavenward after we score the touchdown on Sunday!

In other words, the name Jesus can become something of a Rorschach test. We put on the name of Jesus what we would like to believe about him. We redefine Jesus in terms of what we think is success. And that’s why many people are shocked when they actually read the gospels for themselves. Our views of success and our views of Jesus are often quite different from the stories we find in the gospels.

The popular author, M. Scott Peck decided to read the gospels straight through and just try to understand as best he could the basic message of the scripture without all the personal “filters” we often put on the message. After doing this he wrote in astonishment,

“The Jesus of the Gospels ... whom some suggest is the best kept secret of Christianity ... did not have much peace of mind as we ordinarily think of peace of mind in the world’s terms, and insofar as we can be his followers, perhaps we won’t either ... It is as if most Christians haven’t read the Gospels, and most Christian clergy are not even able to preach the real truth of the Gospels, because if they did, their congregations would flee out the door.”

Scott has a point. Way too many people have fled the church, and we members of the clergy are not interested in seeing any more go. If that means tweaking the image of Jesus and downplaying the more difficult parts of the message, then so be it. We are quite willing to do it, and, most of the time we are quite successful.

We manage to turn Jesus into the great therapist who lessens our anxiety and supports our pet projects. We are like the crowds who cheered Jesus as he made his way into Jerusalem. We shout, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Here comes King Jesus, hoorah!"

But, do we really know the one for whom we cheer? Or are we like the crowds who only wanted to make him king because he could give them a free meal? Do we just want Jesus for what he can do for us?

Do we like his disciples James and John just want to be on his right and left in glory? Or do we really want to follow him into Jerusalem and all the way to the cross?

THE REAL JESUS

If you really want to follow Jesus, you have to follow and not lead. You cannot change Jesus into a military or political hero. You cannot change Jesus into some kind of divine Santa Claus who gives us what we want if only we are good enough to deserve the gift.

Think about the very difficult things that Jesus had told his disciples.

What did Jesus tell his disciples about their vocation? "Drop your nets. Quit your job and come follow me!" Jesus didn't say, "Take a vocational test to see what you would like to do." He said, "Come follow me, and I'll tell you what to do. It will involve being compassionate toward your fellow men and women and giving up everything you've ever had."

So much for vocational success and doing anything that we want to do!

And what did he say about family? He had his disciples leave their family in order to follow him. And he said that sometimes their faith would cause them to clash with their families. Sometimes division would come into a family because of him.

So much for family values and a family friendly church!

Do you equate success with money? Think about what Jesus told the rich young ruler. He said to sell everything he had, give the money to the poor and then come follow him. The young fellow couldn't do it. He was making too much money on Wall Street.

Every time I preach or teach on that passage, the reaction is always the same. I wish you could see it from my side of the pulpit. The furrowed eyebrows and the frowns say it all. "I know this is in the Bible. But, what can it mean? It doesn't seem fair that Jesus would require this rich young man to give up everything that he has and then come follow Jesus."

I have to do some fancy interpretation when I preach on that passage or as Scott Peck put it, people would be running for the exits.

THE WAY OF THE CROSS

And I just about make through the year unscathed until we come to Holy Week. Then the message gets so plain that we can't interpret it away. Following Jesus is not a way to escape suffering. Following Jesus is to be on the road that leads to suffering.

There's no way to explain away a cross. A cross is still a cross even when you make it out of gold and adorn it with jewels. A cross is a horrible way to kill someone, and it was the way that Jesus was killed. The cross is a symbol of human weakness and mortality. The cross is a symbol of evil and the terrible things that human beings do to other human beings.

And yet, according to our passage from Philippians, the cross also represents a choice that Jesus made. It was a choice to give up everything for the salvation of the world. It was a choice to lower himself in order to raise us up.

It was a choice to give up divinity for humanity, to give up the glory of heaven for the struggles of mortality. It was a choice to give up being a king to become a slave.

And, in the end, in the ultimate act of humility, it was a choice to give up life for death.

And, according to our passage for today, this willingness to sacrifice for others represents the essence of success in the Christian life. According to Paul, our attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus. In a world that encourages us to fill up in every way, Jesus encourages us to empty ourselves, to deny ourselves.

As Jesus lowered himself to become a human being so we are encouraged to embrace humility as a lifestyle.

THE WAY OF DOWNWARD MOBILITY

I love the way the Roman Catholic priest, Henri Nouwen talked about this aspect of the Christian life. He referred to it as the way of "downward mobility." That's a great way to put it. In an upwardly mobile world, Jesus encourages us to go against the flow, to downsize, to give up the things of this world that we might gain what is really important.

Some of the members of our Bible study talked about downsizing after retirement. They said that at first they were reluctant to give up all of their "stuff", but after they did it, they found that there was a certain freedom to simplifying their life. Their life was being controlled by their possessions and now they are much happier.

I think that this is true to a certain extent for almost all of us. As we strive to live the good life and fill our world with the things that we want, we separate ourselves from what is really important. Jesus shows us that the way to true humanity is this way of downward mobility.

Paradoxically the goal of the Christian life is not to have more and more. It is to have less and less.

No one has run for the exits yet, but I suspect some of you are ready to go at this point. Following Christ seems like such a difficult thing to do. When we're told all our life that the way to success is to build ourselves up and make something of ourselves, it seems almost masochistic, almost un-American to suggest that the way of true life is the way of downward mobility.

And yet in practice, this humble way is not nearly as difficult as you might imagine.

There really is a freedom for those who are not possessed by their possessions.

There really is a joy for those who willingly give their life away to others with no strings attached.

THE STRUGGLE OF HOLY WEEK

But, in order to do this we must once again go through the struggle of Holy Week. Like Jesus we must struggle to let go and believe that God's kingdom will come ... especially when it looks like everyone has abandoned us, and there is no hope. Like Jesus we must struggle to believe in the power of resurrection when the dark night closes in on our life and all that we hold dear is taken away.

We would rather not face a time such as this. We would prefer to go straight from the cheers of Palm Sunday to the joyful proclamation of Easter. But, it doesn't work that way ... not in the liturgy of the church or in our lives. Faith does not come easily. It only comes as we take up the cross and follow Jesus.

I had a friend, a Methodist minister who had moved to the South from a church in the Northeast. He found that everyone seemed to be more religious in the South so he was sure that the celebration of Holy Week would be an extensive one.

But, he was disappointed. No services were scheduled anywhere during Holy Week. So, he asked someone in his rural congregation, "So what do the people do on Good Friday?"

And the old truck farmer replied, "Oh, that's the day we plant corn!"

Did you know that fully a third of the gospels are taken up with the story of the passion and crucifixion of Christ? This cross is at the heart of the gospel, and it seems to me that we need to take it to heart.

Someone asked me this past week why we don't have more Holy Week services, and I replied quite frankly, "We don't have more services because no one comes to them!" Now I know that people have other things to do, that some people are on vacation and so forth.

But, I also think that one reason Holy Week services are not well attended is that the message is hard to hear. The story of the crucifixion is painful to hear. It is a struggle to go through a somber Good Friday service. And yet I have become convinced that unless we are willing to go through the struggle every year, we are not able to really understand the joy of Easter.

LITURGICAL HELP

In this regard I think that the more formal, liturgical churches are better equipped to really help us understand the meaning of the gospel. Their highly symbolic and dramatic services give us an intuitive grasp of the sacrifice that was made on our behalf and the sacrifice that may be required of us as disciples of Christ.

In the fictional book, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, the narrator talks about this struggle. He says,

"I find that Holy Week is draining; no matter how many times I have lived through his crucifixion, my anxiety about his resurrection is undiminished. I am terrified that, this year it won't happen; that, that year it didn't. Anyone can be sentimental about the Nativity; any fool can feel like a Christian at Christmas. But, Easter is the main event; if you don't believe in the resurrection, you're not a believer."

Don't let this week pass you by without spending at least some time with the story of the Passion of Christ and the story of the passion of your own life. Read without interruption the stories of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. Let the hopes and fears of that week become a part of your life.

Allow yourself to struggle with that short but intense in between time when the colorful vestments of the church are stripped from the altar and everyone leaves the church not to the joyous tune of hope but to the silence of shock and despair. Allow yourself to think about the horrible doubts that the Apostle Paul entertained when he talked about the implications of a world without a resurrection.

Paul wrote, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. [18] Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. [19] If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied."

1 Corinthians 15:17-19 (NRSV)

One of my professors used to refer to this passage as the passage of the terrible "ifs." This is the passage that raises those doubts that haunt our soul and cause us to seek a temporary hope in the minor successes of this world instead of the hope of the life to come.

And, just for a few moments we consider the terrible implications of being wrong about our faith. For just a few moments we abide with those first disciples who ran away from their Lord and betrayed the one they believed in most deeply.

For just a few moments, if only in a symbolic way, we become participants instead of just spectators. We realize that it's not just about what they did. It's about what we do. We recognize that we are not all that different from those who rejected and crucified Jesus. We understand that if we had been there, we too might have cried give us Barabbas instead of give us Jesus.

We who live in a post 911 world know all too well how ordinary people are capable of extraordinary evil when told by those in "authority" that it is the "right" thing to do. Don't think that technology has changed the need for a Savior, that somehow we are more sophisticated or moral than those who first killed Jesus.

If anything technological progress has increased our need for a Savior. We have become "clever devils," able to express our evil nature in a much more effective and frightening way.

Only a realistic theology of the cross can give us hope in times like these.

FORGIVENESS AND SUFFERING

Last week our adult Sunday school class studied the meaning of forgiveness. And the author of that study, a pastoral counselor by the name of Janet Ramsey gave a very unusual and I think helpful definition of forgiveness.

She wrote that forgiveness is "exchanging one form of suffering for another ... namely, the passive suffering of victimhood is exchanged for the more active suffering of forgiving." In other words, instead of just reacting to what someone has done "to us" we are able to do something positive to make things better. But, there's a cost.

This definition also has the advantage of being realistic about the high price of forgiveness. It takes into account the reality that we suffer when we really forgive. But, through the suffering we come to accept an unchangeable past and slowly move on.

In conclusion she wrote, "Since I worship a suffering God who forgave me, a sinner, and since I have accompanied many persons who struggle greatly as they struggle to forgive, I feel it is important to name this aspect of the process in my definition."

To put it another way, you can't get to Easter unless you go through Good Friday. It's more than a liturgical fact. It's a fact of life, and it's a fact of our faith. As Paul put it in his letter to the Philippians, our "attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus." (Philippians 2:5 NIV)

Salvation and forgiveness always come at a very high price. In the final analysis salvation and forgiveness came at the cost of the death of God's own Son on the cross. And that has implications for us as well.

Eugene Peterson wrote, "Christ is the way as well as the truth and life. When we don't do it his way, we mess up the truth and we miss out on the life. We can't live a life more like Jesus by embracing a life less like Jesus."

"Take up your cross and follow me," Jesus once told his disciples. And Jesus tells us the same thing. There is great mystery in a God who suffers, but there is great hope as well for those who have the courage to embrace that suffering personally.

A friend told me this week about two Mennonite farmers who had a terrible falling out. It was a real scandal of a community that prided itself on forgiveness and peace. In the Mennonite church three sacraments are acknowledged, baptism, the Lord's Supper and foot washing. Once a year those who had disagreements with another member of the community, in obedience to the Lord's own example, took the extraordinarily humbling act of washing their enemy's feet.

The people wondered what would happen when they had this service. Would the farmers have the courage to put aside such bitter differences?

Their questions were soon answered when one of the farmers came to church with basin and towel in hand. Without hesitation he washed the feet of his enemy as a sign of forgiveness, and his former enemy in turn did the same for him.

That, my friends is a picture of what God's grace can do, and in many different ways that is what we are called to do. So, I encourage you to exchange one kind of suffering for another. I encourage you to take up a cross and a towel and a basin and follow him. Take the way of downward mobility because when we are on our knees in service, we are indeed closer to eternal life.

Amen.

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