

## Same Old Jesus

We often give Jesus' disciples grief for being clueless, comic relief sidekicks who never quite seemed to understand what Jesus was saying. But there was one instance in which the disciples really got it, as opposed to most of us modern Christians who still struggle.

When eating with the disciples at the Last Supper, Jesus said to them, "One of you is going to betray me."

How did the disciples react? Did they trot out their guesses as to which of their group had messed up? Did they nod knowingly and start pointing fingers? "It's got to be Peter—he's always shooting off his mouth and losing his temper."

Or, "It must be James. Remember how he wanted to be God's right hand man—got too big for his britches." Or, "Aha, it's Judas. I've seen it in his body language. I knew he was no good."

No, when Jesus exposed a failure in the kingdom of God, the response from each of them was, "Is it I, Lord?"

I don't know how common such responses were in that era, but I know for certain that is not a modern response. The modern response to problems and concerns that arise is to look around and identify who out there is responsible, and start pointing fingers.

When problems arise in our society, when was the last time you heard anyone's first reaction be: "Is it I? Am I the problem?" In our society, I am never the problem. We are never the problem. It's always them.

That knee-jerk, defensive posture is characteristic of the church as well. I sat in the pews on the business end of sermons for enough years to feel that sermons that proclaim the welcoming embrace of God's love are directed to me, while sermons that identify sins and call for repentance are aimed at those lousy, no-good people who aren't in church, and who really need to hear this.

Nowhere is that tendency stronger than in reaction to today's Gospel reading.

Jesus begins his ministry in his home town. As is often the case with hometown products, at first the people are proud and supportive—even astonished by what he's

doing. *“Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands!”*

New life is breaking out in the town of Nazareth! Something special is happening! Until the people take a second look at say, “Wait a minute! It’s only Jesus. You know, the carpenter’s son down the street. One of the Josephson boys. Who does he think he is, acting like he’s so high and mighty?”

Jesus is so familiar to them that, despite the evidence, they can’t picture him as anything special, and so they totally blow him off.

Jesus then comments that a prophet working in his home town has a really tough gig. Even when you do everything right, as Jesus did, they won’t take you seriously. And then comes this fascinating statement: “He could do no mighty work there.” The previous great work he was doing just fizzled out.

This story of rejection and failure is followed by Jesus commissioning the disciples to go out on a mission trip. Having experienced the harsh reality of rejection, he gives them instructions for what to do if they encounter resistance: “If any place will not receive you and they refuse to hear you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet and go on.”

With whom do we identify in these two stories?

With Jesus and the disciples, of course. We’re on Jesus’ side, spreading the Good News. The villains are those fat-headed ninnyes who have grown so comfortable and familiar with Jesus that they don’t take him seriously. The villains are those ignorant, fools who refuse to welcome or listen to Jesus or his disciples. We don’t identify with any of them. They are the problem, not us.

And so this passage becomes a manual for culture war between us, the good and faithful believers and them, the sinful, godless unbelievers. The message is: it’s a rough world out there. We’re going to experience rejection. People are going to laugh at us, criticize us, persecute us. That’s what happens in a sinful world.

Here’s what you do when you run into people like that:

Don’t waste time and energy fighting with naysayers. Band together with your friends, stay focused, and go perform mighty works in places where you are accepted.

Us against the world is an effective motivational strategy. How many sports teams drive to the championship on us against the world? *No one respected us. No one gave us a chance. But we believed in ourselves. We dug down deep, circled the wagons, and had each other's backs, and we showed them; we won the championship.*

That strategy achieves similar success in the religious world, which is why it's used so often. *No one respects us, everyone rejects us. But we just shake their dust from our sandals and keep going because we are doing God's work and God is on our side.*

*We are the faithful remnant who dig deep down, we circle the wagons, we have each other's backs in this culture war against the heathens who are destroying this county. We are going to show them, we're going to win this world for Christ.*

Is this story, and a similar one in Ezekiel, meant to warn us that the world is going to give us grief for proclaiming the true Word of God? Is it advising us to steel ourselves against that, and be a close-knit band of true-believing brothers and sisters who separate ourselves from the rest?

Is the message of this Gospel text that we are to shake the dust from our feet against our godless neighbors and have nothing more to do with them?

If we are supposed to identify with the good guys in the story, yes, that very likely is the message. But that doesn't sound much like the Gospel.

Which is why I don't think we are supposed to identify with good guys. I think in this case, the intention is for us to echo the disciples and ask, "Is it I, Lord?"

This is not a Bible passage for that neighbor who never comes to church and is living a selfish life and really needs to hear this. This message is not aimed at the atheist who foolishly rejects God. It is aimed at those of us in the pews.

Nazareth was the place where Jesus was best known in the world. Too well-known. People took him for granted. Because of that, he could do no good work there.

Where is the place where Jesus is best known in *our* world? Obviously, among those who attend worship regularly. The church is the home of Jesus—the Nazareth of today.

Look what Jesus started out doing in this home. Look at the spectacular rise of the early church and you cannot help but echo the Nazarenes in this story: "Look at the

amazing things Jesus is doing!” Read the books of Acts and marvel at all the lives that were changed, the lost being found, the love of God that was pouring into the world.

But after awhile, somewhere along the line, so many in the Christian church got as familiar with Jesus as did the neighbors in Nazareth. Jesus was just kind of there. Same old Jesus. Same old Bible, same old words. Same old rituals, same old sacraments. We could do the liturgy in our sleep.

My favorite children’s sermon story is the one where the pastor was describing something that was kind of small and gray, with a bushy tail, and liked to climb trees and store nuts. “What am I talking about?” he asked the children.

One of the children responded, “Well, it sounds kinda like a squirrel, but I know the answer must be Jesus.”

Jesus became the automatic, unthinking, default answer--so routine that we plug that name in without even listening to the question.

What is a worship service? It is a place where we encounter God. Think of that for a moment. Martin Luther once commented, “In times past we would have run to the ends of the world if we had known of a place where we could hear God speak.”

This is a place where we actually meet God. Where we can hear God speak. But this encounter with God has become so familiar now, so routine that it even though we believe it has some value, it’s not a big deal. We’ve heard this stuff before. Same old, same old.

Like the Nazarenes of our Gospel reading, we have forgotten what Jesus can do and just looked at that old, familiar presence, and we have said, “No, nothing special can happen here. Nothing to stop our decline along with the rest of the churches. Nothing new here, just the same old Jesus who has been around forever.”

Young people who have grown up in the church don’t want to get involved in the church because it’s boring—same old Jesus. Adults find better things to do with their time—more interesting places to go. Other priorities. Because after all, being active in a church is no big deal. It’s just the same old Jesus—been there forever. He’ll be there tomorrow.

Nothing much is going to happen. (Yawn.) Wake me up when something exciting happens.

What happens when the church takes that attitude? It's the same as in our Gospel story. God can do no mighty work there. Despite the amazing, life-giving power of the Almighty and Loving God at our disposal, nothing much happens. Attendance declines; giving tapers off, mission gets lost.

The message of the Gospel today is that God can do mighty things. But when we reject the power for good that God offers to us because it doesn't seem special anymore, then God can do no mighty work here. That message is not for the unbeliever; it's for us.

Which is why I don't take the second part of this story of the disciples going on a mission as an *us against them* pep talk. Again, with whom are we to identify in the story? The disciples or the rejectors?

*Is it I, Lord?*

The disciples spread the word of God. They heal, invite, and open up the kingdom of God to everyone. Read the Gospel accounts of the great banquets, where God sends messengers to the alleys and the rural lanes, trying to locate everyone. Inviting everyone to come.

Read the Gospel accounts where the poor, the lame, the blind, the sinful, the downtrodden, the losers of society are invited into the reign of God. This happens time after time.

Jesus doesn't build barriers and boundaries between the good and the bad. He breaks them down. There is neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, slave nor free. All are welcome; new life is for everyone.

With whom do we identify in the story? Are we the ones who are spreading this good news, this invitation? Or are we the ones who are rejecting it? I'm not saying we need to beat ourselves up and take the blame for everything. But if we do not at least occasionally ask the question, "Is it I, Lord?" we are not being honest with ourselves, or with God.

During my ministry, I have heard infuriating stories of people who have experienced rejection in a religious setting. I have met with visitors in my office who seek a fountain of life. People who have been cut off from God for years because some church told them, “You’re not good enough. You don’t believe the right things. Get out of here. Even as the sign outside their church proclaims, “All are welcome!”

Do you know who rejected them? Not unbelievers. No, it has been those who claim to preach the Gospel of Christ

Over the years, the Christian church has rejected people for all kinds of reasons, most of which make the church feel superior to others. It continues to do so as zealously as ever.

Do you remember the judgment day story of the goats and the sheep in Matthew 25? Where a multitude of people are stunned to learned that Jesus accuses them of having rejected the Gospel?

“What do you mean?” they splutter. “We’re the good guys. We worshipped you; we honored you. We loved you. We upheld your laws. We didn’t reject you.”

Jesus responds, “You rejected the hungry, the poor, the stranger, the prisoner, the down and out, the person who is different from you. When you reject the least desirable person around, you reject me.”

When we reject others for whatever reason, we reject God. And what does the Gospel say happens when we reject God or begin taking God for granted? *Jesus can do no mighty work there.* In a church that fails to reach out and welcome all people, God can do no mighty work.

The stories we read today are not told to stiffen our resolve against our enemies, to build a solid wall between us and the bad guys. They are there to remind us that this congregation is not just a boring place where the same old Jesus hangs around like an old, comfortable piece of furniture. This is a place where God can do mighty works.

God can do mighty works in any congregation that takes the Gospel seriously, that steps out of the rut of routine and passive comfort, that takes a fresh look at the message of Jesus, and opens its heart to everyone in God’s creation, so that the gospel message of love and hope and healing and forgiveness gushes like a cascading river of compassion into a desert world of despair, struggle, pain, and sorrow.

Repentance can happen only when we pay attention to what Jesus is saying, and check in from time to time to see if we are part of the solution or part of the problem.

“Is it I, Lord?”

God can do mighty works only when we wake ourselves from the comfort of the familiar ritual and routine and say, “Here I Am, Lord.”

Never forget--God *can* do mighty works here--in this congregation. Be ready for them.