

Sermon – March 30, 2008

If there's room for Thomas, there's room for you

Somehow some people have gotten the impression that to be a follower of Jesus you have to be the kind of person who has always “colored between the lines”, never gotten in trouble, always obeyed the rules, *and* never had any problems – and stays away from church until “everything is fine” if they ever do have problems.

I think the devil made all this up and planted this in peoples' minds to keep them away from God, because it certainly does not bear *any* resemblance to the people Jesus drew to him as described in the Bible.

Jesus went out of his way to draw in the outcasts, the powerless, the unconnected, the poor, single people, women, the mentally ill, ordinary working guys without political connections, children, the sick, those who were labeled as “sinners” by the goody-goodies, ethnic and religious minorities, turn coats, enemies of his own nation, the violent, those who had doubts, the prejudiced, people who talked big but delivered small, even the *dead*. *No one* was beyond the reach of his power and love.

That's still true.

The violent? One of the twelve apostles was Simon the Zealot, a guerilla warrior who fought the Romans. Turn-coats? Another apostle was Matthew, who when Jesus called him was a tax collector for the Romans. *That* must have made for some interesting conversations around the campfire with Jesus. Step one for each of them was not to turn the other one over to their erstwhile buddies. Step two was to *let themselves be changed by Jesus*.

Other enemies of his nation? How about the Roman army officer whose servant Jesus healed at the centurion's humble request, in response to which Jesus said, “Not even in Israel have I seen such faith.” Women? There are too many to mention, but Jesus smashed the conventions of a very chauvinistic culture to heal and empower many women, some of whom became prominent disciples, shocking those people who loved their oppressive culture. “Sinners”? Again, too many to list, but Jesus repeatedly reached out to people who had broken some rule – or many – and offered them forgiveness, *the chance to change* and a place in his community *if* they did. Likewise, the sick, the crippled, the mentally ill – all of whom were considered to be literally untouchable by society, were offered healing, empowerment and membership in *Jesus'* community.

Regular working people like Peter and Andrew, James and John, became leaders instead of those who were trampled by the Powers That Be of their time. Jesus even took people who talked big but delivered small, like Peter, who expressed such devotion to Jesus at the Last Supper and then denied him three times of Good Friday.

The prejudiced? When Philip went to Nathanael to tell him, “You have to meet this guy, Jesus of Nazareth,” Nathanael said of Jesus’ hick town, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Nathanael, too, was invited in by Jesus *and was changed*.

Ethnic and religious minorities? Jesus reached out repeatedly to the Samaritans, an ethnic and religious minority with whom the self-righteous had no dealings at all. In fact, the first person Jesus empowered to be an evangelist to an entire village was – yes, a Samaritan woman who had been divorced five times. He changed her life too. And patriotic Jews had had “issues” with people like the Syro-Phoenician woman for, oh, only about 1,200 years, since the time of Joshua. He healed her, too, and she called him Lord.

There was no one whose life Jesus couldn’t transform *if they wanted to be changed – even those who had already lost their lives*. Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, as well as the 12 year old daughter of Jairus, and the son of the widow of Nain.

Jesus’ ministry with children is especially notable, because in ancient times to many people children literally didn’t count and they weren’t counted. *Everyone was priceless to Jesus*. And that, also, is still true.

What Jesus did was reach out to people, offer them forgiveness, healing, hope, love and membership in his community – *with the expectation that they wanted to change* and to live as he would coach them to live.

The sick had to give up their sickness. That may sound odd, but it’s true; some people’s identities are neurotically tied to their sickness or disability or other status. People had to give up status – whether low status or high – and have their *primary* status (though not their only one) become **being a disciple of Jesus**.

Not surprisingly, giving up status was harder for “high status” people than for those who were powerless. “The rich young man” walked away from Jesus when Jesus “loved him” and then asked him to give his riches to the poor and come and follow him. The powerful and well-connected in Jerusalem – with the exception of Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea – saw Jesus as a threat and wanted to destroy him.

The self-righteous who were unwilling to change, those who thought they knew God’s rules so well that they no longer needed God, those who were unwilling to forgive others, those who thought they needed no forgiveness *themselves*, the stingy who were **unwilling** to share their time, talents and treasure, especially to help the poor – all these rejected Jesus *if they were unwilling to change*.

But surely the door closed on all this inclusiveness on Easter, right? Wasn’t this a “limited time offer” by God? Surely God expected everyone to “get it” instantly, and Jesus’ followers all believed 100% and started posing for stained glass windows, right? No room, say, for doubters, or for people who miss church on Easter Sunday, right?

In case anyone has this impression, the very first story about the risen Christ after Easter Sunday in John’s Gospel features a guy who didn’t show up on Easter Sunday, and who doubted Christ’s resurrection. Hmm.

“The other disciples” gathered in fear on Easter Sunday – after all, their Master had just been executed by the Roman Empire, and the Romans usually had extra crosses available to

execute other people they thought might pose threats to their power. No wonder the guys were scared.

But “they rejoiced when they saw the Lord,” which had to be the understatement of the millennium.

Thomas, though, wasn’t there. Maybe he was too afraid even to show up, maybe he slept in Sunday morning, maybe he had to take his son to a Little League game – we don’t know. But not only did he not show up, he didn’t believe his buddies when they told him Christ was risen from the dead. And he made a statement as bold in its own, very different way, as Peter’s affirmation of ultimate loyalty which he had made to Jesus at the Last Supper.

Thomas said to them, “‘Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger *in* the mark of the nails and my hand *in* his side, I will not believe.’”

“A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.’ Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.’”

There is no record of Thomas actually touching Jesus, in fact. A personal experience of Christ in his life was enough, for all his previous bold doubt and the high threshold of proof of Christ’s resurrection Thomas had demanded – which Jesus was willing to meet.

In fact, Thomas, of all people, makes the statement of faith which serves as the climax of the entire Gospel of John: “Thomas answered Jesus, ‘My Lord and my God.’”

Doubt can, in fact, be part of a path toward profound faith. Sometimes more so than bland, shallow lip-service to an inherited belief.

What **we today** are invited to is a personal, saving relationship with Jesus Christ, the Light of the World, the way, the truth and the life: risen from the dead and unstopably alive.

If we feel ourselves to be powerless or powerful, well or sick, rich or poor, part of a dominant majority or an oppressed minority, women or men, adults or children, single or married, people who have lived good lives or not, people who have always had faith or who have had doubts, or have them this minute – **all** of us are invited to meet Jesus Christ. All of us are invited to be changed by him: to be healed, forgiven, empowered, humbled, guided, challenged, loved by him.

It’s optional. We can stay stuck the way we are, or we can be transformed.

“Jesus said to Thomas, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.’” Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.”

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