

## **DOES JESUS CHANGE LIVES?**

### **Scripture Reading: Romans 12:1-8**

When you only preach once a year, the worst way to begin a sermon is “as I was saying last time.” But last year I preached on the nature and identity of Christ, saying that the one thing I hope we all agree on as his followers is that we believe that he was right; that he spoke the truth from God, the only truth that can save us and this world. Today’s text from Romans exhorts us not to be conformed to the world, which I believe lies at the heart of what it means to follow in the Way of His truth.

The first time I heard a lecture by theologian Stanley Hauerwas, who was to become my dear friend and mentor, he began this way: “The first duty of the church is NOT to make the world a better place. The first duty of the church is to tell the world that it IS the world.” Which is to say that unless the church lives by a very different vision than the world of secular consumerism, we are merely a little gloss of goodness that gives the world permission to continue as it is, with its injustices, violence, greed, and cruelty. If you put chocolate sprinkles on a liver and onions ice cream cone, it is still a liver and onions ice cream cone. On another occasion Stan said that the liberal mainline church is down to its last remaining conviction, which is that God is Nice, and therefore we should try to be nice. It is not a compelling conviction. It reduces us to well-intentioned do-gooders who happen to have a cross hanging somewhere.

The fact that the church of Jesus Christ has allowed itself to become so horribly politicized in our time tells us that we are the tail and the world is the dog. Because I have not been your pastor for 14 years and I get a nice pension check each month, I am not afraid to say that in my view the words and policies coming from the current White House are antithetical to the teachings of Christ. I suppose that statement suggests that I have allowed my faith in Jesus to become politicized; at least it is fair to argue that to me. But for the life of me I cannot comprehend how so many persons who fervently claim the name of Christ can accept policies that are in direct opposition to the teachings of the One we believe spoke the Truth. Remember “welcome the stranger?” “As you have done for the least of these you have done for me?” “Who is my neighbor?” “Turn the other cheek?” “Do unto others?” “Love your enemies”?

I have long been a centrist who believed that neither liberals nor conservatives had exclusive claim to Christ; that each contains a partial understanding of his truth and that we needed one another to gain a more complete understanding of his Way. I still believe that. But we are living in extraordinary times that can no longer be adequately described by words like liberal or conservative, Republican or Democrat. We are living in a culture of death, division, and flat-out meanness, and it gets its hooks into all of us, telling us that we must participate in its hateful words and hurtful ways. If ever we need to be centered in Christ and to know that we may be in this world but we are not of it, that time is now.

I was a very young pastor when I first heard the question. “If you were put on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” When was the last time you did something bold because as a Christian you had no choice? When was the last time you took a significant risk because as a Christian you simply had to? When was the last time your faith got you into hot water? If we take the teachings and practices of Jesus seriously, shouldn’t hot water

be our natural habitat? I suspect that if I were on trial for being a Christian, saying “well, I sincerely tried to be nice to others” would not be enough to convict me.

I am proud of some of the risks and bold stances this congregation took during my 23-year tenure as your pastor. To name just one, I am proud of our pioneering leadership in the 1980s in welcoming and advocating for Gay and Lesbian folks. When the first man in the valley was diagnosed with AIDS, this congregation provided pastoral care and hosted his memorial service. Your pastors performed same-sex union ceremonies many years before marriage was a legal option, we welcomed wonderful Gay and Lesbian folks into our life, and baptized their children into the faith. At the time, we were the only Christian church in the area doing these things. Did we get into hot water? You bet we did. Did we lose some valued members? Yes we did, including some folks who were very dear to me, and that was very painful. People said “that’s what you get from those liberal Congregationalists,” but “liberal” or “conservative” had nothing to do with it. We did these things because we were trying to follow the Way of Christ. Even though we are not Lutherans, we have had Martin Luther moments when we were forced to say “Here I stand, I can do no other!”

I still believe that being nice and trying to help others are virtues that we should practice, and that we don’t need to slay a dragon for Jesus every day. But from time to time we should ask ourselves what we will do that we ordinarily would not do, what will we risk that we would prefer to avoid risking, what price will we pay that we are not eager to pay because this pesky Jesus has taken hold of us and knocked us out of our complacency? “Dear Jesus, I have become too predictable and safe. Inspire me to do something genuinely interesting in your name that will surprise the heck out of my friends!”

I recently encountered a “thought experiment” that I have not been able to let go of. It is called “the problem of the child in the pond.” You are walking by a pond and see a small child you do not know who is drowning. Problem is, you are wearing a new outfit that you paid \$300 for and it will be ruined if you save the child. What would you do? And of course, absolutely everyone answers without hesitation, “Of course I would save the child.” Fine. So why do you not give \$300 to an organization that will use it to save the life of a child on the other side of the world? Why is the child right in front of you of more value than the child you will never meet?

Part of the answer, of course, is that we are relational beings: we place more value on our family, our friends, and those in our community because they are more real and less abstract. But Jesus challenges these priorities, and that challenge extends to national policies. What would Jesus have to say about a phrase like “America first!”? About shipping immigrant children back to lives of abject poverty and rampant crime? About cutting essential services to the most vulnerable in our society and sending less aid to nations in great need? Ultimately it is only a few steps from the child in the pond to confronting the huge and growing disparity between the rich and the poor, both here and throughout the world. As a nation, the answer we are giving to the question “who is my neighbor” makes it hard for us to claim the name of Christ with a straight face.

When things appear to be going relatively well in the nation and world, the church of Jesus Christ tends to be at its least interesting; we just toss on the chocolate sprinkles. But the world is in multiple crises today – a public health crisis we have not seen in 100 years, a history of systemic racism becoming undeniable, extremist politics emerging on both the right and left, and the gap between rich and poor becoming a canyon. We cannot both follow the teachings of Jesus Christ and accept the world as it is.

The question of faith I was given was “Does Jesus Change Lives?” The answer I have been attempting to give is that he does, but only if we permit him to. And that is hard, because we like our safe, comfortable lives as they are and are not eager to change them in ways that make demands of us or move us out of our comfort zone. Another dear mentor of mine was a Jesuit priest and Biblical scholar named John McKenzie. In one of his books he wrote “The problem with Christianity is not that it has been attempted and discovered not to work. The problem is that it has been discovered to be difficult and therefore never truly attempted.” Yes, it is difficult, and it will stretch us. And we will never be absolutely certain we are right. Am I looking at our nation’s policies and practices through the lens of Christ or am I looking at Christ through the lens of my political views? Or is it some sort of muddy mix of both? I cannot know for certain, which is why Kierkegaard said that the leap of faith is always made in fear and trembling.

But scripture tells us that perfect love casts out fear. “Perfect love” is not a place I can live in all the time. But the God who came to us in Christ Jesus loves us perfectly, completely, unconditionally. To know that, to believe it deeply, and to know that God’s perfect love extends equally to every other person on this planet: this can inspire us to be bold, to take risks, and to make sacrifices that will allow his love to displace the pain and suffering and ugliness of the world as it is. In his farewell discourse Jesus said: “I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world... As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.” That’s us. Let us go forth in his blessed name to transform the world rather than be transformed by it. Amen.

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Sermon preached by Reverend John McFadden at First Congregational United Church of Christ, Appleton, Wisconsin  
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