

But We ARE Different!

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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- Matthew 26:47-52 Good News Translation ⁴⁷ Jesus was still speaking when Judas, one of the twelve disciples, arrived. With him was a large crowd armed with swords and clubs and sent by the chief priests and the elders. ⁴⁸ The traitor had given the crowd a signal: "The man I kiss is the one you want. Arrest him!" ⁴⁹ Judas went straight to Jesus and said, "Peace be with you, Teacher," and kissed him. ⁵⁰ Jesus answered, "Be quick about it, friend!" Then they came up, arrested Jesus, and held him tight. ⁵¹ One of those who were with Jesus drew his sword and struck at the High Priest's slave, cutting off his ear. ⁵² "Put your sword back in its place," Jesus said to him. "All who take the sword will die by the sword.
- James 2:14-18, 24 Contemporary English Version ¹⁴ My friends, what good is it to say you have faith, when you don't do anything to show that you really do have faith? Can that kind of faith save you? ¹⁵ If you know someone who doesn't have any clothes or food, ¹⁶ you shouldn't just say, "I hope all goes well for you. I hope you will be warm and have plenty to eat." What good is it to say this, unless you do something to help? ¹⁷ Faith that doesn't lead us to do good deeds is all alone and dead! ¹⁸ Suppose someone disagrees and says, "It is possible to have faith without doing kind deeds." I would answer, "Prove that you have faith without doing kind deeds, and I will prove that I have faith by doing them...." ²⁴ You can now see that we please God by what we do and not only by what we believe.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: As followers of the way of Jesus we are called to embody Christly values.

Michael McRay is a Nashville writer and story-teller. McRay believes that thought-provoking stories can help to begin bridging deep divides in relationships and in society, de-escalating conflictive situations and creating empathy between unlikely people. As he likes to say, he is searching for the stories that might save us.¹ One of the projects he's working on he has given the bold, tongue-in-cheek title of "I Wanna Rewrite the Gospels." Yes, you heard me correctly: "I Wanna Rewrite the Gospels." But he wants to do it in order to make a point, so let's hear him out. McRay explains,

I'm sure I'm not the only [Christian] who notices that often when Christians... speak of policies and politics like healthcare, the death penalty, refugees, violence, etc., Jesus is conspicuously absent from the conversation. We often claim that Jesus is our "Lord and Savior," and yet, when it comes to some of the really big issues in our world, we seem fairly uninterested in what he had to say, or not say. Not only are we uninterested, but some of the positions of Christians don't resonate at all with the words of Jesus in the Gospels.²

Let's pause to realize this foundational truth: Jesus was a radical. Jesus really believed in not only the power of love but the necessity of it. Jesus taught that the world should be guided not by power but by love. But by its radical nature, the way of Jesus makes us uneasy because it makes us uncomfortable because it makes demands on us because we're not doing as much as we could to try to live in this world the way Jesus challenges us to live.

That insight got McRay wondering: how could we get a better view of what Jesus calls us to become? So McRay decided to rewrite some of the gospel episodes in such a way that "Jesus spoke and acted the way many Christians do. What would the stories about Jesus sound like if they reflected our values?"³

In a series of what he calls "Gospel Rewrites" McRay takes familiar gospel passages and writes a few revisions to what we're accustomed to hearing in scripture. We hear what Jesus might sound like if he reflected the mindset and values of his earthly sisters and brothers rather than that of his Heavenly

¹ michaelmcray.com, accessed 8/21/2018

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Parent. I want you to hear one such episode – a rewrite of familiar scripture – and please remember: the Jesus in this “rewrite” is not at all the Jesus of the actual gospel stories.

Matthew 26:47-52 Jesus is arrested

⁴⁷ While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; with him was a large crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. ⁴⁸ Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, “The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him.” ⁴⁹ At once [Judas] came up to Jesus and said, “Greetings, Rabbi!” and kissed him. ⁵⁰ Jesus said to him, “Friend, do what you are here to do.” Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and arrested him. ⁵¹ Suddenly, one of those with Jesus put his hand on his sword, drew it, and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear.

⁵² Then Jesus said to him, “Well done, Peter. Everyone else draw your swords! ⁵³ They have come at us with clubs and swords and so they shall be met with the same. ⁵⁴ For those who live by the sword shall be met by the sword, and the stronger, faster man shall prevail. Might makes right.” ⁵⁵ At that hour, Jesus and his followers fought with the crowd. Many died. But the crowd was too large for Jesus and his men, and they were disarmed. ⁵⁶ When it was clear that the fight was over, all the disciples deserted him and fled, and Jesus was arrested.

John 18:33-36 Jesus is taken to Pontius Pilate.

³³ Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” ³⁴ Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” ³⁵ Pilate replied, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?” ³⁶ Jesus answered, “My kingdom is indeed an earthly kingdom, like yours. That’s why my followers fought bravely to prevent me from being handed over. The kingdoms of the world are held together by violence, and that is why my followers also take up arms. We are no different than you.”

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“We are no different than you....”

No, Jesus did not say that. That’s just author Michael McRay imagining Jesus thinking and speaking and acting like we do. Scripture does not report Jesus telling Pilate nor anyone else that being a Christ-follower made no difference. We ARE different. Our hearts and minds are formed to function differently from the typical behavior of the average person. We’re different because we realize we are claimed by God... different because we have a brotherly relationship with Jesus the Son of God... different because our faith assures us that God has saved us.

We are servants of the Living God intending to follow the way of Jesus. So our lives ARE to be different from humankind’s inherent mode. As followers of Jesus we are not to tolerate injustice rationalized by self-centered thinking expressed in sayings like “looking out for Number One,” or “finders-keepers, losers-weepers,” or “might makes right,” a distortion of the “golden rule” claiming that “those with the gold make the rules.”

Choosing to serve God by following the way of Jesus challenges us to be different from the typical ways of the world; it doesn’t come naturally to us, and it’s not easy. In Mark’s gospel Jesus told the disciples and the crowd, “If any of you want to be my followers, you must forget about yourself. You must take up your cross and follow me.”⁴ In Matthew’s gospel Jesus advised, “¹³ Go in through the narrow gate. The gate to destruction is wide, and the road that leads there is easy to follow. A lot of people go through that gate. ¹⁴ But the gate to life is very narrow. The road that leads there is so hard to follow that only a few people find it.”⁵ Living according to Christian values does not come naturally in our world, and it’s not always easy.

But it can be done. We can do it. Over and over and over again the testimony of the Bible offers us direction and encouragement. In Romans Paul urges, “² Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind. Then you will be able to know the will of God – what is good and is pleasing to him and is perfect.”⁶ Paul adds, in 2 Corinthians, “¹⁷ So then, if

⁴ Mark 8:34 Contemporary English Version

⁵ Matthew 7:13-14 Contemporary English Version

⁶ Romans 12:2 Good News Translation

anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived!"⁷ Yes, as Christian members of society we ARE called to be different!

So what must we do to make a difference? The answer is found in that very question: we must "do," we must act. Jesus himself cautioned, "²¹ Not everyone who calls me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but only those who do what my Father in heaven wants them to do."⁸ In the New Testament letter of James, the author develops this argument about how Christianity is not only about believing but also about doing:

¹⁴My friends, what good is it to say you have faith, when you don't do anything to show that you really do have faith? Can that kind of faith save you? ¹⁵If you know someone who doesn't have any clothes or food, ¹⁶you shouldn't just say, "I hope all goes well for you. I hope you will be warm and have plenty to eat." What good is it to say this, unless you do something to help? ¹⁷Faith that doesn't lead us to do good deeds is all alone and dead! ¹⁸Suppose someone disagrees and says, "It is possible to have faith without doing kind deeds." I would answer, "Prove that you have faith without doing kind deeds, and I will prove that I have faith by doing them...." ²⁴You can now see that we please God by what we do and not only by what we believe.⁹

Now, having just laid out a compelling argument that we show our faith in Jesus by carrying out good works for the benefit of others, let's remember that it is not the works that we do that make us worthy or deserving of God's favor, God's love, God's mercy. The good works we do are the result of our faith, not a prerequisite that qualifies us as worthy of God's generous love. Recall the familiar words of Ephesians Chapter 2: "⁸⁻⁹ For it is by God's grace that you have been saved through faith. It is not the result of your own efforts, but God's gift, so that no one can boast about it."¹⁰

So as Christians we deliberately try to be different from the tendencies that we see so often in the world we live in. How? For instance:

- Christians are charitable. We strive to be generous with the resources we have and the resources we control.
- As followers of Jesus we strive to be forgiving. Understanding. Showing the benefit of the doubt. Offering second chances, and third chances, and more.
- We Christians try to maintain an attitude of humility, to remember that we're not superior to everyone else, that we don't have all the answers, all the best ideas.
- We strive to follow the example of Jesus by being open and welcoming to all peoples regardless of any differences or distinctions that we may perceive. We resolve to look beyond differences in language, different physical appearance, different customs or behaviors, different abilities, differences in income or lifestyle or politics or theology or you-name-it, because first and foremost, we see others as fellow children of the One God.
- Like Jesus we seek to promote a common good rather than self-service.

So let's be clear: we Christian are called to be different. Despite the creative license of the Nashville author, Jesus never told Pilate and the powers that rule the world that Christians are not different from them. Our lives are our workshop, our rehearsal hall, our training camp where we work at developing our ability to be more Christlike, serving our world and setting an example.

In Philippians Chapter 4 Paul gave those Christians words to encourage them to keep practicing being different for Christ's sake.

⁸From now on, brothers and sisters, if anything is excellent and if anything is admirable, focus your thoughts on these things: all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise. ⁹Practice these things: whatever you learned, received, heard, or saw in us. The God of peace will be with you.¹¹

Let that encouragement to "practice being different" send us back into the world today.

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⁷ 2 Corinthians 5:17 Common English Bible

⁸ Matthew 7:21 Good News Translation

⁹ James 2:14-18, 24 Contemporary English Version

¹⁰ Ephesians 2:8-9 Good News Translation

¹¹ Philippians 4:8-9 Common English Bible