

I Don't Know How to Love Him

From the Lenten series: Following Jesus

Text: Luke 8:2; Matthew 27:61

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Our worship theme this Lenten Season is “Following Jesus,” and to follow Jesus it is necessary to know something of the shape of Jesus’ life, the manner of his behavior, his spirit, his attitude. This was recognized early on and there were four Gospels written, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. For centuries the Church read those Gospels as though they were accounts of the life of Jesus that could be taken quite literally, just as they were presented. As those Gospels were compared one with another there was a recognition that the chronology was rather difficult to put together and there seemed to be different emphases, etc. Nonetheless, there was assurance that these were pictures of the life of Jesus and one could read them and know something of the historical Jesus.

When I was at Hope College, I think I even had to purchase “*A Harmony of the Gospels*.” Do they still sell that book? I hope not, really. I have in my hand a book published in 1969 called “*The Life of Christ in Stereo*.” There was a gentleman who had studied for the ministry and then was wise enough to cop out at the last moment, but he did have good tools of Greek and Hebrew. Then in the midst of his life he was stricken with a disease that put him to bed. There he was. So he spent his time snipping the Gospels. I can imagine a whole pile of old Bibles that he might have had, you know, and he clipped this paragraph from Matthew and then slipped one in from Luke, then add one from John, and go back and pick up Mark so you could read from the beginning to the end. Here it is! The whole of the four Gospels put into one consecutive tale or narrative. Isn't that wonderful!

Not really, because it not only does not give us one Gospel, it distorts all four, because the four Gospels were written by four different evangelists to four different congregations, four different concrete communities with four different sets of needs, for four different purposes. Now they were written twenty, thirty, forty, fifty or sixty years after the event, so they had all of the oral tradition of the early Christian community, and they had all of the experience of being Christian to work with, so they had material from which to select. That's what they did in order to do a specific thing, in order to make a certain point. John tells us that very clearly in his Gospel, in the twentieth chapter and the thirtieth verse he says,

“There were indeed many other signs that Jesus performed in the presence of his disciples which are not recorded in this book.” In other words, “I have done a little selecting here, folks. I haven’t given you the whole picture. This isn’t a snapshot. This is a portrait I have painted.” Why? “These things I have written — my selection was in order that you might believe that Jesus, the one that lived, that very real human being — who when he ate garlic you smelled his breath, that very real Jesus who when he walked on the earth got his feet dusty like everybody else — that you might believe that that one is the Christ of God, and believing have life through his name.”

Now this is very interesting — do you know what’s in the paragraph above? The story of Thomas, that disciple that Jesus found in Missouri—the one who said, “Dead people don’t rise, fellas. Unless I can touch the nail prints, I’ll not believe.” Jesus appears and Thomas says, “My God.” Jesus said, “That’s right.” Jesus said, “Happy are those who never saw me and yet believed,” because that was the problem for John in his day and his community. Those who never had the chance to rub elbows with that one, whom his contemporaries knew was as real and true, and flesh and blood as they were.

So now, here we are and we’ve got Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Now we’ve got the historical records, right? Wrong! We’ve got *faith* documents. We’ve got history seen through Pentecost, through Easter, through Good Friday. And the day-by-day life of Jesus as it was experienced by his contemporaries is very difficult to recover. Their problem was not that Jesus was truly human. The Gospel writers in the experience of Easter and Pentecost, in the experience of the Christian community said, as Thomas said, “This Jesus, my God.” They had to say, “This one was that one.”

But all *we* have are documents that say, “That one was this one.” So we’ve got a kind of supernatural divine Saviour who started there and dipped down here and did his thing and went back there. We’ve got this exalted Christ for whom it is very difficult to get next to in terms of a human Jesus who might have been flesh and blood like us, who might have cared about this world, who might have had something to say about those who would follow him. It’s a lot easier to just let him be the Son of God who comes down, dies for our sin and goes back. Whew! I’m off the hook. My sins are forgiven. But what we’ve done to Jesus is reduce his life to a comma, as in the Apostles’ Creed: “Born of the Virgin Mary, (comma) suffered under Pontius Pilate.” Let’s leap from the virgin birth to the atoning death and not get all nervous about that concrete life of the one who said, “I give you an example, follow in my steps.”

Well, there is Good News because today there seems to be new interest in the life of Jesus. There are all kinds of historical methods whereby the layers can be peeled off. This research is going on all the time and there are some very interesting studies that would peel off that faith crust in the Son of God in order to lay bare the flesh of the man from Nazareth. Wouldn’t it be interesting if we

could get out of time for a bit, have someone who actually followed him and tell us what it meant? I think I see such a one coming . . .

(Colette Volkema DeNooyer speaking:)

My name is Mary Magdalene, which means simply, Mary of Magdala. Magdala was the village where I was born and raised. My memories of Magdala are not particularly good ones because I spent most of my life there filled with what we called 'evil spirits.'

I had heard of Jesus even before I first encountered him. He was healing and teaching around Capernaum near the Sea of Galilee, which was not too far from Magdala. His first disciples were from that place. Peter and his brother Andrew, the Zebedee, James and John—they were fishermen. But you probably know that already, don't you? Because you have a great gift, the written word and the ability to read it. Most of us had only the words we could hear with our own ears, and the sights that we could see with our own eyes. You see a whole picture, don't you? But for those of us who were in the midst of it, it was not at all clear at times, and yet we knew the man, we walked with him and we talked with him. We touched him, and we held his hand. We experienced the power of his spirit, of God's Spirit in him. So perhaps ours is the greater gift, or at least as great a gift, for I fear that perhaps in your written words he is beginning to become imprisoned behind them.

Words . . . you know words are such inadequate vessels. And they can grow rigid and cold with time. That's why I have come, you see, to breathe some fire and life into those words, to bring you to his human passion and love. I owe him at least that because he gave me life when he banished the demons and filled my soul with truth strong enough to keep the evil spirits at bay. But how to do that? I thought perhaps if I remembered things about him that have stayed with me. What were my strongest impressions of him? Three short years was all his ministry was, you know. And I knew him for less than that, really. But the intensity of the experience, it changed lives; it changed my life.

I have seen your artist's rendition of Jesus and I think you misunderstand—he is so often pictured meek and mild. If you think that it was easy to be around Jesus of Nazareth you are mistaken. He was a relentless seeker and prophet of truth. He was always asking, "Why? And, why not?" He was challenging rules and laws that had become burdens for us. It wasn't enough for Jesus for someone to answer, "But it's always been done that way." Or even simply to say, "The law requires it." Jesus believed that they had lost sight of the purpose of the law and the purpose of tradition. "Why don't you wash before you eat? It is written in the law," they said to him. "Because it's what comes out of one's mouth and one's heart that determines whether or not we are clean," he said. "Why do you eat with tax collectors and sinners?" the Pharisees asked him. "Does a physician come to one who is well?" he asked.

And they were appalled at the way he kept or didn't keep the Sabbath. They say the Pharisees invited him to dinner on the Sabbath once. When Jesus arrived the seats of honor were taken—the ones closest to the host. So, obviously, they had not invited him because of their great love and respect for him. Jesus said that when he entered the room he could feel their eyes watching him, and almost immediately there was a knock at the door, and then it was clear the invitation was a setup, for in the doorway stood a lame man and it was the Sabbath and, of course, it was unlawful to heal on the Sabbath. They say Jesus looked at the man and then turned and gazed at those seated around the table, pious and faithful keepers of the law each of them. And he asked, "If your cow fell into a well on the Sabbath, would you pull it out to save its life?" The question hung in the air. They didn't need to answer. They knew they would. So, he turned — in strong truth he turned and healed the man on the Sabbath. For Jesus said, "The Sabbath is made for us, we are not made for the Sabbath." It is God's gift to us for wellbeing, so what better way to keep the Sabbath than to heal the broken and the lame?

Have you ever known someone in your own life who, when they were near, it seemed somehow as if God were close? I mean, when you were with them, you believe in God and in yourself, in life and in the future. It was that way with him — the power of his presence. There are not words that can describe it, only its happening. In his presence people were healed; by his touch they were healed. They were made whole by his compassionate gaze. How? I don't know, exactly. I only know that it happened.

I saw a woman — she had had a flow of blood for twelve years and no one had been able to heal her. She managed to just reach out and touch the fringe of Jesus' garment and she was healed. The crowd was large that day, and I'm sure she hoped no one would notice. I mean, it was a great risk she took, you know. It was unlawful for her to touch the Master's garment in that condition. With her flow of blood she was unclean, and so untouchable. Can you imagine — untouchable for twelve years? She must have been desperate. She risked and she reached out, praying that something would happen, hoping that she would not be noticed. But she was. He noticed. Immediately he turned and said, "Someone has touched me. I felt the power going out from me." She came forward, terrified, trembling. She fell at his feet weeping and told him why she had touched him, and told him that she had been healed. You should have seen him then. He lifted her so gently up until she was standing right next to him. Then he looked unflinchingly into her eyes and said, "Daughter, go in peace, your faith has made you whole."

Word would spread when someone had found healing. People would come bringing others who had needs. Then the crowds would swell even greater. But you need to know something. He never used his ability to heal or to discern when people were hurting to manipulate them. He never used their adulation to claim political power and authority. How often didn't he heal and say to the one made whole, "Go and tell no one." He didn't heal to draw attention to himself. He

healed to draw attention to God through him, and to the way to God. You know, I don't think Jesus even intended there should be a religion called Christianity. Oh, I think it was essential for the Gentiles and for the persecuted ones in the years that followed, but Jesus was a Jew. In that time of his ministry I think what he longed for most was that the Pharisees and others like them would see the error of their ways — to see that they were becoming an obstacle, a block to our way to God.

What else? Perhaps this: His attentiveness to the overlooked, the disregarded, the shunned of humanity. It never ceased to amaze me or to delight me, his availability to lepers, to tax collectors, to sinners, to children, to women. I don't know if you can understand, but there are times when men look at women, when they look at us it seems they are not seeing us, they are not touching us, but they are seeing objects to own or to use. It was not like that with Jesus. I wish you could have seen the way he looked at me when he banished the demons. I've thought about that moment often and I've come to believe he healed me with a look that accepted me just as I was — demons and all. He cast them out when he touched me, not with a touch of lust, but with a touch that showed he valued me. And for me that is still the greatest miracle.

So, I tell you what I remember of him, the Jesus who for us was so real, so human, so down-to-earth. And who, for you, I fear is becoming so exalted, so majestic, maybe even so unbelievable. Let me say it again in another way. I know that Jesus was a man, because his humanness caused for me a particular dilemma, and I am not afraid or ashamed to tell you. I was in love with him. Why do you think I dragged myself to the foot of that cross? A thousand soldiers could not have pulled me away until I had seen him breathe his last. Why do you think I went Sunday morning in hopes that I might see him one last time? *But, I didn't know how to love him.* He moved me so. And I longed to love him in the only ways I knew. I longed to cling to him in the way one would, to keep him with me. And yet I couldn't. I had to let go because I sensed that he was called for something more, chosen for something more. Maybe he was even born for something more.

I don't know. But I think you have a dilemma too. The Gospel writers and the apostles that preached Jesus, they took for granted that he was a man. So they talked about that other something that we felt when we were with him, the way in which he was so filled full of God that there was a unique relationship there. And now centuries later you have read only of that. Are you able to cut through the doctrines and the creeds about him, cut through the black and white translations and the spoken pious clichés to feel the heart and the soul and the way and the truth of the man? Or do you cling too tightly to his Godliness? So, I have a dilemma and you have a dilemma. On the one hand his humanness that I knew, his fire and his passion. On the other, his Godliness and his glory. Perhaps that's why the Church has so long confessed Jesus as truly God and truly man to honor us both.

But I wonder, if I may say so, I wonder if perhaps my perception of him is less confusing, does not distort things as much? You see, what I remember most is that he wanted to show us the Way, the Way to God and the Way to the Kingdom of God. In loving him, his human person, I saw the face of God and, to my deep delight and joy, I have discovered that, now, to love another person – even though I can't reach out and touch him – when I love another person, it is as though Jesus is with me. Now I find that in them I see also the face of God. I experience that that one who dwells in love, dwells in God. Loving one another, it is the way to God. It is the only way I know to follow Jesus.