Domesticating Jesus

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I am fascinated that none of the four gospels in the New Testament tell us anything about Jesus’ appearance. They are expansive about Jesus’ life and ministry but altogether silent about what Jesus looks like. His physical features don’t seem to factor into the story.

This is unimaginable to our image-driven culture, where appearance and personality are everything. TVs are ubiquitous these days; I came upon one in a public restroom recently. Image and personality are everything.

I was raised with this picture of Jesus. It hung in several Sunday school classrooms in the church of my youth. This painting was popular back in the day. It was reproduced 500 million times since Warner Sallman originally painted it in 1941. I’ve seen it on funeral cards, bookmarks, greeting cards, you name it.

You may like this painting. I never cared for it much. It seems too portrait-like for my tastes. Jesus appears too cleaned up, like a schoolboy dressed for picture day. His hair is washed and combed. His demeanor comes across as serene and gentle, almost harmless.

This next painting provides a marked contrast to Sallman’s rendition. Jesus looks downright angry as people scramble to get out of his way. The whip in his hand seems so out of character.

Some of you may be surprised to learn that Jesus displayed anger in his ministry. Isn’t anger a sin? Isn’t it one of the seven deadly sins?

All four gospels record this story. John places it at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, while the other three position it during the final week of Jesus’ life. The fact that all four gospel writers describe in detail Jesus cleansing the temple ought to tell us something about its importance.

The role of the first century Jerusalem temple cannot be underestimated. The temple was regarded as God’s house. It’s the place where God resided with His people. Oh sure, God lived everywhere, yet somehow people believed that God was present in this house in a special way.

The temple functioned much like a community center. It served as the headquarters for Israel’s political, financial and religious life. It was like the White House, the Supreme
Court and the Federal Reserve rolled into one.

This temple was enormous. It dominated the Jerusalem skyline, occupying 35 acres of the city, much like the Vatican does in Rome today. Jews who were scattered throughout the Roman Empire made a pilgrimage every year to the temple for Passover. This festival commemorated God’s deliverance from slavery and settlement in the Promised Land. During the season of Passover, the population of Jerusalem swelled from 25,000 to 180,000.

These pilgrims brought money to pay the required temple tax. Since they carried coins that bore the image of a pagan emperor, they were required to exchange their Roman coins for temple currency; kosher coins, you might call them. Moneychangers were on hand to expedite the transfer, charging exorbitant rates of interest. Whether or not they took Traveler’s checks, I can’t say for sure.

These pilgrims also brought animals for sacrifice. Such practice seems barbaric to us, but to agrarian people, who measured their wealth in livestock, sacrificing something of value was a tangible way of expressing remorse for sin. Every animal offered had to be “without blemish.” The chief priests made certain that animals brought into the temple would be judged unacceptable—You see that mark under the right foreleg of your sheep.

You can’t sacrifice this animal. You’ll have to buy one of our temple-approved animals. The mark-up for these animals was downright criminal.

This commerce created a carnival-like atmosphere in the outer courtyard of the Gentiles. Josephus, a first century historian, refers to this temple business as the “bazaar of Annas.” Annas was the chief priest in those days. He also had four sons and a son-in-law who served as temple priests. They charged a licensing fee for their booths and took a cut of every exchange. What a racket!

Have you ever visited a historical or religious site and come away thinking that the whole scene was rather honky-tonk? I step outside the hallowed grounds of some important site and I’m inundated with people hocking their wares. The crass commercialism is such a turnoff.

Jesus walks into this carnival atmosphere and promptly loses it. He overturns tables and sends merchants scrambling for the exits. Imagine someone treating our sanctuary this way—throwing hymnbooks and offering plates—you get the drift.

There’s nothing subtle about Jesus’ approach. I’d liken it to shouting “bomb” in a TSA airport security line.

Jesus justifies his action with two verses from the prophets. Back in the day God said through Isaiah, “My house shall
be called a house of prayer” (56:7) and then couples it with a verse from Jeremiah about making God’s house into a “robber’s den” (7:11). Our story closes with Luke describing the temple bigwigs stepping up their plans to kill Jesus. He has become too dangerous.

There are two things that impress me about Jesus from this passage. First, I’m struck with Jesus’ authority. He speaks with such authority. Authority and power are used interchangeably but, in actuality, these words are quite distinct from each other. Power is something external. People exercise power by virtue of their position or office.

Authority, however, is something internal. It emanates from within a person and, therefore, must be earned. Caesar has all the power in the gospels, yet Jesus exercises authority.

People who meet Jesus for the first time are amazed with his authority. Luke recounts earlier that people are “amazed at Jesus’ teaching, because he spoke with authority” (4:32, 36). His authority does not derive from other rabbis or teachers. He confidently proclaims, “All authority has been given to me” (Matthew 28:18). He exercises authority over sin, evil spirits, sickness and death.

The second thing that impresses me about Jesus in this story is his anger. I’m more often repelled by anger than I am drawn to it. But here, Jesus’ anger is entirely justified. We have a term for it. We call it righteous indignation.

This is the same Jesus who commanded his followers to turn the other cheek and walk the second mile. This Jesus, who could display incredible warmth, is also able to express appropriate anger.

There is a tendency for churches to become cultures of niceness. Some people in the church have adopted the notion that the only demand our religion makes on us is to be nice to people.

Now, please, Jesus wants his followers to be nice to people. Mean-spirited disciples make Jesus repugnant to the outside world. Christians who are shrill and judgmental are a drag on the body of Christ.

But that said, church people tend to hide behind a thin veneer of niceness. We avoid being honest with each other. We do not “speak the truth in love,” as Paul admonishes us to do.

Jesus isn’t nice to the religious establishment when they turn the house of God into a flea market. He certainly isn’t nice to Peter when he tempts Jesus to circumvent the cross. He tells him in no uncertain terms, “Get behind me, Satan.” Loving people doesn’t mean we avoid unpleasant conversation.

You want to know what makes Jesus angry? When we
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turn God’s house into a carnival, when we play church and just go through the motions, when we feign interest and treat worship as a check-the-box drill.

Soren Kierkegaard was a 19th century Danish philosopher. He was also a committed Christian who was an outspoken critic of the state church. One day, shocked parishioners expressed outrage that teenagers on Saturday night had used the sanctuary for a dance. They brought their upset to Kierkegaard, who responded, “Using a sanctuary for a dance on Saturday night is not half as bad as using it on Sunday morning to make a fool out of God.”

“God is not mocked,” Paul writes, “for we reap whatever we sow” (Galatians 6:7). We sing, “Oh, for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer’s praise,” yet with that same tongue we run each other down and talk about people behind their backs. We confidently sing, “Jesus breaks the power of canceled sin and sets the prisoners free,” yet we withhold forgiveness from each other and keep people in our debt. We need to fall on our knees and tell God what a sorry mess we have made of religion.

I titled this sermon “Domesticated Jesus.” If truth be told, some of us want a benign Jesus. We want sweet, little Jesus, meek and mild. We want a safe, tame Jesus. Don’t make any demands on me. Don’t disrupt my life or alter my standard of living. Love me, Jesus, just the way I am. Make me happy. Give me everything I want with none of the inconveniences. We want a soft, cuddly Jesus, one who tucks us into bed at night and like a benign grandparent, lets us get away with murder.

There is, you understand, a limitation that comes with a domesticated Jesus. A docile Jesus is so limited. There is only so much Jesus can do when he is beholden to us as our errand boy.

We need to set Jesus free. We need him to be wild and unrestrained. We need Jesus to be sovereign. That’s why we call him “Lord.”

Jesus is nice, don’t get me wrong. His warmth and kindness is like nothing this world has to offer. But he is more than nice. He is Lord.

I’m inviting you, today, to relinquish your hold on Jesus to be who you want him to be. I’m asking you today to yield your will to Jesus and entrust him to be your benevolent Sovereign.