

PRACTICING WHAT JESUS PREACHED –
THOUGH HE DIDN'T

I love this passage. What we are seeing is the anger of a Healer – the passion and compassion of a Healer. (More about that in two weeks.) I doubt very much that the scribes and Pharisees see themselves as evil, or realize how much damage they have been doing. Jesus has tried to awaken and enlist them. But of course they have more earthly credentials than Jesus has. They are the accepted authorities and representatives of the religious structures and understandings of their time. In their own minds, they know so much more than Jesus does that they cannot hear Him. They cannot *allow* themselves to hear Him. Every time they get near Him, everything they have stood for – everything they have thought and taught and believed in – is threatened. But now the anger has mounted, the pressure on both sides is enormous, and time has run out.

Where are we in the larger story? We are three days from the crucifixion at most. And how does the passage open? Jesus wants to make sure – not just for the twelve, but for anybody and everybody who is paying any attention to Him – that when He is gone, they will not be drawn back into the normal structures and religious constructs of their time. The scribes and Pharisees receive so much respect – they are known for their sincerity and their courageous reform movement – and for the most part they “own” the influence of the synagogues throughout Israel. This makes them very dangerous to Jesus’ purposes. When Jesus is gone, where will His followers turn? They will be confused and lost for a while. Then, if they do not give up entirely, they will be seeking new leadership. And they will find the very best leadership there is – but only if they do not jump too fast; only if they do not try to resolve everything too quickly. Pentecost is coming, but fifty days is still a long time to wait, as any of us who have waited for it can attest.

So Jesus is doing the best He can with the time that is left to Him. In this passage we hear Him slam the door on the scribes and Pharisees, at least as far as any of His own followers are concerned. As always, there is more than one layer to the story. This is not just a temper tantrum, or a careless moment, or a faithless interlude for letting off steam. Jesus is angry. But He is also and always strategic, and concerned for the Kingdom He is ushering in.

If we do not stay so surprised at this passage that we fail to hear what He is saying, the concern gets pretty clear. The religious leaders and their teachings are not freeing people from their bondage – from their fear, guilt, past patterns, or ruined relationships. Jesus thinks God is wonderful, and that trusting God will lead people into release from all the bogeymen that keep us chained to patterns and beliefs that hold us down and keep us from true Life in God's presence. The religion of the Pharisees, like so much religion everywhere on earth, is not freeing us; it is merely trading one prison for another, one set of rules for another, one false hope for another.

And yet, even in anger Jesus is not throwing all the wisdom of Torah out the window – as many want to claim. He is not urging us to abandon a clean and caring way to live for God and with each other. Torah is a covenant with God. Keep the teaching of our great tradition, Jesus says, but pay no attention to how the scribes and Pharisees think we should practice it. They have turned it from a guiding light, into a dark, dismal, rigid, and frightening little code of minor details.

“Step on a crack, you break your mother's back.” Make absolutely sure that you never walk more than three thousand feet on the Sabbath (the length of ten football fields, or halfway through the main part of Port Townsend) or you will be guilty of working on the Sabbath. This is the way to love God? This is the way to bring joy into your life? This is the way to *eternal* Life? Of course, our culture has now reversed it with no better results: Make sure you have no Sabbath at all – no time set aside to pray, to study the Scripture, to think about God, or even to catch up with your own soul. Run, run, run ... faster, faster, faster ... until we have no chance to realize that what we are trying to accomplish has no lasting value – that our values and purposes themselves carry no love for God.

How can we tell whether we are moving into the light or only moving toward another bondage? Is your heart full of gratitude? Do you wake up eager for the adventure of another day? Do you find yourself *wanting* to say hello to your Lord as each new day begins? There are ways to tell, if we really want to. Yet we need to be careful not to turn even this into just one more rule. Nor are we ever expecting to be out of all the bondage and darkness in this realm. Our Christian Path here is not an arrival. We are eager to move toward the Kingdom, but no sane person would claim that they have already achieved its fulfillment. I suspect we all know that, if we can just remember it.

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It is clear to me that Jesus frequently did not practice what most people in our culture think He preached. This morning's passage itself does not match the caricature that our society holds about what Jesus was like or how He would behave. Jesus is scathing, and good Christians are never supposed to be scathing. Again and again the New Testament stories do not match what our society thinks Jesus is supposed to be like.

The Apostle Paul is not Jesus, of course, but it can be confusing when Paul gives us instructions that go against the ways of Jesus. For example, in Second Corinthians 6:14-18, Paul reverts to his Jewish roots, and urges the Corinthians to separate themselves from “unbelievers” and people who do not have good morals. Paul cites Isaiah 52:11 (depart, go out from their midst, be separate from them, touch no unclean thing – all in order to be in good with God, of course). An important passage for Mennonites, the Amish, and many other Christians who really mean business. Yet Jesus was infamous for associating with tax collectors, prostitutes, and other sinners. Oops! Lots of Christians do not read the New Testament often enough to know or remember this. Either that, or they have no intention of following Jesus.

Is there a point to any of this? An extremely important one, as far as I'm concerned. If Jesus is our role model and we know very little about Him – that is, know very little about how He lived, what He did or said, how He reacted or responded when He Himself was living here on earth – then the “role model” cannot model anything for us. And what happens to us if the pattern we are trying to follow is mistaken or wrong or just “made up” by people who think everything will be fine if we all just decide to be nice? Who needs a Savior when all our problems can be solved by just being nice? There is no sin; there is no Satan; there is no evil; there is no Cross or Resurrection – just everybody be nice. Never mind repentance, or conversion; never mind needing to be born anew; never mind dying to self in order to find the true You; never mind living for the Kingdom, or loving God, or turning will and life over to the Holy Spirit – just everybody be nice.

Some people have accused me at times of talking about the Christian Faith and the Christian Life in ways that are different from the ways they have usually heard it. I think most of you also conclude that I am not just trying to make it fit what I think or want. I tell it as straight as I know how. Some of you have also accused me at times of making the Christian Life sound more complicated than it really is. I would love it if you could persuade me that this is really true. There

is much simplicity and peace in Jesus' WAY. But it comes from purity and focus. It comes from His constant pruning, and His unwavering desire to love and obey God. But life here is not simplex. Jesus was under enormous pressure and conflicting demands, and He lived in the middle of treacherous crosscurrents of both political and religious forces – all trying to push Him or use Him for their own ends and purposes. His allegiance to God was simplicity personified, but His life was never simple, never easy.

Some of you think you have a right to an easy life. You tell me it's not easy, as if this were some shocking new revelation for me. And you say it with real feeling, as if this were some kind of major injustice and I should drop everything and go explain to God that things are not easy for you so that God can fix it for you right away. If God is supposed to be loving, how can God create a world that is not easy for us? Christianity promises more love, more peace, more gratitude – more faith and hope and joy and purpose – but never does it promise that things will be easy for us. I know; we have translated *chrestos* as “easy”: “my yoke is easy.” But *chrestos* does not mean “easy” – it means the yoke will *fit right*. If the yoke fits right, we can pull an even heavier load. Do we ever want to be even more useful to Jesus?

Anyway, so Jesus went around with sinners and ate with them. But He did not start living in all the same ways they did. He did not adopt their ways. He called them to His New Way. Obviously a lot of us followers have a hard time figuring this out. I drank and smoked for twenty years and literally thought I was being more loving and accepting of others.

If Jesus says “love your neighbor,” does anybody ask “where and in what context does He say this?” For the most part, this is instantly interpreted to mean give a poor family a basket of food at Thanksgiving time. Except that does not seem to be changing the world, so maybe we should give even more to more charities, and not just at Thanksgiving time. On the other hand, even though we worship money, maybe it's not just about money. Maybe it means “be kind and considerate” to strangers and never be mean or rude. Is this really Kingdom business? Christ died on the cross to improve our manners? Wouldn't any serious disciple want to know more about what “love” really means than we can discover by watching the society around us?

There are plenty of reasons for people to have different ideas about who Jesus is, what He is like, and what following Him might mean for us. Though these differences are interesting and sometimes challenging, I rarely find them divisive in important ways – as long as people have sincere regard, love, and allegiance for Jesus. Other things may yet divide us, but not our love or loyalty for Jesus. It is interesting to me that there is considerable latitude in and around our images and perspectives about Jesus. I even wonder at times if that is why Jesus never wrote things down. Perhaps He wanted to leave room and space enough for His followers to seek and find Him in more than one way.

And while it is true that “outsiders” constantly highlight the problems and differences Christians have with each other, the real truth is that many Christians gather in disciple bands on a regular basis and discover that their own picture of Jesus is continually corrected, refined, and expanded by being in contact with the study and experience of other intentional Christians. What does “intentional” mean? It is far from a perfect word, or perfectly defined, but I use it to indicate that some people take the idea of “following Jesus” seriously. Don’t all Christians take the idea of following Jesus seriously? You’re kidding, right?

It is necessary for us as Christians to study some portion of the Scriptures each day, trying of course to get clearer and clearer about what Jesus was like, how He lived, and how He might hope *we* would live. Very few Christians do this with diligence or consistency. I am very grateful to have known some in past parishes who did, but that is far from the general trend. I also know others who read the Bible regularly but not for this purpose – that is, not to understand Jesus more or to love or follow Him better.

Did you just hear me say something mean and nasty? Actually you didn’t – not this time. I’m just mentioning the fact that vast hordes of Christians – that is, church members and people who, if asked, would identify themselves as Christians – have no intention whatsoever of “following Jesus” in any specific, understandable, or significant ways. They are not ashamed or apologetic about this at all. Most of them do not connect “following Jesus” with being a Christian. They definitely would claim that “believing in Jesus” is important. In fact, they would say that’s the whole show. Only, they see no connection between believing in “the divinity of Christ” and considering the earthly “Jesus of Nazareth” as a role model for their own attitudes, goals, methods, or behavior.

Hundreds of thousands of Christians think that Jesus is important as the Christ who will save us. But this is lifted up in the creeds of the church and has little or nothing to do with the story of Jesus' life on earth. In fact, they know very little about the earthly Jesus, and they do not consider this important information. Let us say it again: For the vast majority of believers, knowing anything about the earthly Jesus has nothing to do with faith or salvation. Jesus the man is completely unconnected and disconnected from what Jesus means to us, and has nothing to do with the divine Christ and what He is doing for us. Furthermore, their churches and leaders have actually discouraged any desire on their part to read the Bible or to ponder the life of Jesus. "It will only confuse them," they say. Well, they got that part right.

Is this coming clear yet? I am not mocking this position. It is very defensible, and the vast majority of Christendom agrees with this perspective – and disagrees with any claims I might make that knowing about Jesus the man is significant or important in any way. We are not saved by "the man," they say. "We are saved by the divine Christ." Who cares if Jesus walked around with a bunch of smelly fishermen? Is Jesus the true "Son of God" – or better yet, God himself – and does Jesus therefore have power and authority enough to forgive our sins and bring us into eternal Life? This is the only thing that really matters.

Obviously this is not the only thing that matters to me. I mentioned a couple of weeks back that I wanted to talk to you about what I see, believe, and love about Jesus. Yet I know – and you need to know it as well – that upon hearing such a statement, the majority of Christendom would simply turn to another channel. But you see, I have no more interest in their divine Christ than they have in my earthly Jesus. That is, I don't know anything meaningful or significant about divine constructs, which seem to me entirely ethereal, contrived, and made-up. I end up concluding that Jesus is way beyond all our normal ideas and expectations about being human. I come to this realization by watching what He did as a human. All my loyalty, admiration, love, and allegiance for Jesus come from what I see and know about His story – His participation in life here on earth. Except I *do* encounter Him as the Resurrected One: the true King and Messiah of God, whose Kingdom is not of this world. But for me, this is entirely and completely connected with who He was and what He was like as a man here on earth. I cannot imagine coming to trust or love the Holy Spirit if I had not already come to trust and love the man, Jesus.

I am not trying to say this is right or better or the only way; nothing of the kind. I am simply saying that this is how it is for me. I am not a very advanced soul. I don't fall in love with the ethereal. I don't have any allegiance or loyalty toward mere theory, or for ideas that people make up without grounding them in history or in actual human experience. You can tell me all about Jesus' true identity in the higher realms, and whether He is merely like God or of the same substance as God, and I don't really care. Maybe when I get to the divine realms myself, I will realize how right you were. But I love Jesus for what He was like here and for what He did here. I am grateful to His Holy Spirit for connecting all of it to me personally, so that I know His story is connected to my life also – that He was doing what He did for me too, and not only for those alive two thousand years ago. But I love the MAN! And when I fail Him, I feel it like a personal betrayal. When I pray, it is because I want to know what He wants and expects of me. When He is pleased, it lights my whole life. The truth for me is that His presence is the greatest comfort, hope, strength, purpose, and reassurance that I ever experience.

Even so, like with anybody else I love, I often wish I knew Him better. So I think about Him quite a lot. I miss Him when it feels like the relationship is drifting apart or when something is not right between us. It seems to me that He works harder than I do to keep the relationship strong and close. That always surprises me, even after all these years. And I am unspeakably grateful. Nevertheless, to the best of my ability I also try to keep up my end of the relationship. Ludicrous, I know. He is far beyond me. It is not a relationship between equals. But it seems to be enough for Him. He likes it that I try to know Him, honor Him, and be loyal to Him. I never imagine that He needs it. Such efforts do more for me than for Him. In any case, my options are limited. So I do the best I can to please Him, most of the time. That is, except when I get careless or stupid, or sidetracked by one of the endless distractions here. When that happens, it always makes me feel terrible, or sometimes just sad. But He never gets tired of forgiving me, if I really want it and ask for it. Isn't that your experience too?

But the key to it – the really important thing – is that if Jesus is important to us as a man, then He becomes our role model. In the classic language, He is our Lord: the One we follow and obey, at least to the best of our ability to do so. This is not about our salvation; He is also and already our Savior – that is, He does reconcile us to God. And He is the Christ, the Messiah, the true King – just as soon as we choose Him to be our King. This is never forced upon us. And that means He is not only our Savior, but our Lord.

Being our Savior has to do with Palm Sunday and Good Friday, with Easter and Pentecost. That is partially clear to us, and partially shrouded in mystery. We understand it “through a glass, darkly.” But it also goes way beyond our understanding and on into hope and faith and future realms. We do trust that Jesus will lead us way beyond any place we can see or define.

Meanwhile, we are still here – still on this earth. And what shall we do with ourselves while we are still here? Maybe that doesn't really matter to some people, but it matters to me. It is still a broken realm, though full of challenge, opportunity, and many things we still care about, like other people and animals; it is a very intricately designed creation, with beauty and terror and pain and promise all around us. Some of us, at least, have come to believe in community; we see it as Jesus' intended challenge and purpose for all of His followers that we form covenant communities (churches) in which we live out the principles and ways He showed us, learning more and more how to love each other – how to care for and support each other.

Maybe this is just a pastime, something we do while we “wait for kingdom come,” as the old phrase had it. Maybe it is necessary training, as we try more and more to prepare ourselves for life in a Kingdom far greater, and very possibly even more challenging, than this one. Either way, we are “His people” – the *ecclesia*. It becomes increasingly important to us to become the kind of people He said we could become. It becomes more and more important to us to live our lives in ways and in a manner that we think would please Him. Anybody who thinks that this is easy, simple, or automatic has never tried it. Constantly and continually we discover that our physical nature, wonderful though it may be, is not automatically tuned to His kind of Life. Every day is a challenge and a new opportunity to “try it again.” Always we are faced with choices that confuse or baffle us: Who do we try to help, and how? How do we spend our time and energy, in the vast array of possibilities before us? What is really wrong here? And everywhere we turn, it seems like we do damage as much as benefit. Even when we are being as faithful and obedient as we can possibly be, things are still broken here. And then there is our “old nature” – always coming back to the surface, often before we even consciously realize it. Then we do a kind of damage that has nothing to do with being faithful or obedient. And we need desperately to repent, find forgiveness, and start all over again.

In any case, and quite obviously for most of us, we need help. The Christian WAY is not something we can do by ourselves. We need each other – and even more than that, we need a Leader. Our prayers, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit of our Risen Lord, are clearly the most important thing of all if we are intentional about being His followers. We cannot just “paint by the numbers.” Very frequently we find ourselves in situations and in the midst of adventures and challenges that have no easy or automatic answers. They are too fresh or too complex for the mere application of any of the rules we know. Current and daily guidance is our only hope.

On the other hand, and without reducing our need for prayer and guidance one whit: we do not receive guidance – we do not comprehend the messages from the Spirit – very often or very clearly if we have no concept at all about the patterns of our New Life in Christ Jesus. What are the values and purposes we are trying to live for? So we follow our Lord, our role model. Jesus is clearly and obviously the best role model we know about. Yet we cannot simply mimic Him. It is more than a “monkey see, monkey do” affair. We are not little Jesuses. We cannot simply try to do what He did. Rather, we are trying to do what He wants *us* to do – meaning, we have purpose, destiny, lives of our own. To fulfill what we are created to be seems to be what He really wants most for us. In fact, that even connects to our rudimentary new definitions of “love.” People who want us to be and become what God has created us to be are the ones who truly love us.

Is there anything else I can say to persuade you? Thank God I don't have to. Most of you are way ahead of me, and long since. But ahead or behind, in *The New Church* I hope we will always insist: We are not just trying to be believers. We also want to be followers ... of Jesus. We follow Jesus, who loves us, and who brings us more and more into being our true selves. This is a huge surprise and a mystery and a miracle, especially at first. Jesus reveals and reconciles us to God. Who would ever have dreamed or imagined that it would turn out that God also loves us.