

## Come and See

Every pastor I know, and I suspect it would be true of many of you as well, but every pastor has a story about a conversation with someone who “used to go to church but no longer does.” I hear these stories on airplanes doctors appointments, hair salons, pretty much any where I go when they find out what my job is, tell me that they used to go to church but they don’t anymore.”

In his book *Preaching in the Crossroads*, Pastor David Lose tells one of the more powerful stories he heard. Recognizing that they had become critically overextended, a family shared with a friend the need to simplify their life. Between work, social commitments, and the activities of their middle school aged child and elementary school aged child, they were exhausted by Christmas and struggled to make it to the end of the school year.

Determined to make some changes, the family held a “family council” to review all of their commitments in light of how each helped them be the kind of individuals and family they wanted to be. They seriously considered everything they were doing. After about an hour and a half they made their decisions. Church was out. The man explained to his friend, “It’s just not that meaningful. We go each week and finally realized we’re not getting anything out of it. It’s hard to believe I’m saying this. Our parents took us and once we had kids, we took them too. But it just doesn’t connect with the rest of our lives. So we’re done”

Now we might be tempted to see that story as one more sign of the decay of the mainline church. And there is an element of truth in that. But even more, we need to listen carefully to what the man said. His family wanted to spend their limited time and resources on things that “help them be the kind of individuals and family they want to be.” And for them, “church just doesn’t connect with the rest of our lives.”

Yes, this family is searching for meaning. They have a vision of what a meaningful life looks like. They want their life and the life of their children to be more integrated. They want what they do to help them understand their place in the world.” They want to raise their children so that they will make a positive impact in the future. They are not selfish or out of touch. They are willing to commit. But they have determined that church is not helping them to live a “good life.” Or to paraphrase the words of Nathaniel in our scripture for today, they are asking, “Can anything good come from church?” And their answer is no.

They are like Nathaniel sitting under the fig tree. He is sitting there when Philip shows up with some news. Philip has met Jesus and is thrilled. He is so excited that he needs to tell his friend that he has found the Messiah. Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth, is the one for whom generations have waiting.

But Nathaniel cannot fathom the idea. He thinks he knows Nazareth – those who come from Nazareth don’t contribute to the economy or create beauty and art. He thinks he knows Nazareth, those from Nazareth are not “good.” He thinks he knows Nazareth – Messiahs don’t come from there. Can anything good come from Nazareth?

Philip hears his friend and must make a choice. ON the one hand, he could enter into an argument. he could try to make the case that Nazareth really is good and beautiful and

productive. But that is not what he does. As Jill Duffield from the Presbyterian Outlook has written: In our day of constant debate accompanied by the relentless need to be right, Philip's response is worth noting. Philip doesn't defend Nazareth. "Have you ever been to Nazareth? It is beautiful this time of year. Lots of lovely people in Nazareth." He doesn't do that. He simply says, Come and see. Don't believe me? Come and see for yourself.

This week we remember the faithful life, leadership and service of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. He was part of a movement that responded to the questions, "Can anything good come from Selma?" and "Can anything good come from Montgomery?" by saying, "Come and see."

And while there were and are churches that perpetuate racist systems, the civil rights movement in this country was led by the church and other faith based groups who were willing to risk their lives for justice.

When we read the Gospel and keep the love of God through Jesus in the center, the church shows up very differently from how the Nathaniels of the world perceive it.

In his letter from a Birmingham jail. Martin Luther King, Jr writes, "If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Every day I meet young people whose disappointment with the church has turned into outright disgust."

This letter was written nearly 60 years ago. For too many people, however that is still the perception in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Often we see this attitude in our society. When people's experience of the church has been one of judgment or hypocrisy, they brush it off saying, "Can anything good come out of the church?"

How many that want a relationship with Jesus don't know where he is staying because they don't believe they will find him inside of a church building. Today is Human Relations Day in the United Methodist Church. It is an opportunity to recognize that Jesus is not staying behind the walls of the church building. Among the other lessons we have learned during the pandemic was that even when United Methodist churches must close their doors to physical worship gatherings, we continue to partner with God in ministry.

Jesus is at work in our communities, building relationships that may seem unlikely and that transform hearts, minds and spirits.

In Chicago, Illinois, Maple Park and Englewood-Rust United Methodist Churches are in partnership to engage in community based alternatives to juvenile incarceration. Mentorship and leadership development support local youth, create healing relationships, and reduce recidivism. Jesus is staying in the parks, gardens, and homes of Chicago youth.

The Sons of David Program, though Lincoln Memorial Church in Buffalo, New York, provided academic tutoring, after-school basketball opportunities, and mentoring to African American preteen and teen boys who were not in school. Through the program, grades significantly increased, providing new opportunities for the youth who participated. Jesus is staying in the heart of urban cities.

Underpinned by arts, culture and music spaces, the Beacon Center in Washington, D.C. houses state of the art affordable housing, a gymnasium, classrooms, a food pantry, immigration clinics, and small business services. Jesus is staying at the Emerson Beacon of Light Center.

And Jesus is staying in communities around the world. In the Philippines, community organizations are strengthening family resiliency to address substance abuse, particularly with those who are living in the Manila North Cemetery. And in West Congo, United Methodist Churches are working with ecumenical partners to provide pastoral support and advocacy for children and youth who are in prison.

The church is called to treat human needs as holy. We are called to care for the people we meet as children of God – fearfully, respectfully, and wonderfully made in God’s own image.

How do we invite others to come and see that they are neither alone nor forgotten? In relationships formed in community, no matter where people are on the journey. “Jesus is staying there” and the promise of resurrection is real. In his letter from a Birmingham Jail, Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote “There was a time when the church was powerful – in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days, the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion, it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society.”

People are hurting and fearful. We have endured a challenging year of pandemic, societal uprising and political turmoil. And that is on top of personal crises and trauma that may include illness, grief, financial instability and educational concerns. Values and attitudes have shifted in a way that what once was unacceptable is often considered normal behavior.

Let me read to you the introduction to the book “Your Jesus is Too Safe, Outgrowing a Drive-Thru Savior.” by Jared Wilson

Who do you say I am? This is the question Jesus once asked his closest followers. No question penetrates more deeply or cuts more closely. The answer, like the sword of truth, can unite or divide.

Before Jesus asked this question, he first asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” The answers to this question are many. The man known as Jesus of Nazareth – Jesus the Christ, or Messiah to Christians – is undoubtedly the most popular, the most recognizable, the most cited, the most admired, and the most controversial figure in all of history. No other person has been more scrutinized, studied or cited – ever. Entire philosophies and religions have been founded on his teachings. More books have been written about him than about any other person who ever lived. Every day, his name is spoken more than any other name, which in affectionate admiration by his followers and fans, or in absentminded curses or denouncements by those ambivalent or antagonistic toward his fame.

The figures that loom largest in our cultural history have not been able to avoid him. John Lennon couldn’t think of anybody bigger when he said the Beatles were bigger than Jesus.

President George W. Bush cited Jesus as his favorite philosopher. The Fresh conqueror Napoleon Bonaparte allegedly said, “Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne and myself founded empires, but on what foundation did we rest the creations of our genius? Upon force. Jesus Christ founded an empire upon love; and at this hour millions of men would die for him.

No less a loving soul than Fidel Castor – that big teddy bear – is said to have effused, “I never saw a contradiction between the ideas that sustain me and the ideas of that symbol, of that extraordinary figure Jesus Christ.

No message has been more used and exploited and appropriated than Jesus Christ’s. It happens whenever a politician co-opts one of Jesus’ quotable quotes to promote their own platform. As a result, every careerist soul climbing the ladder of American political engagement – in either major party or neither- and every one of their constituents believe that Jesus is on their side.

Every religion in the world, too, Christian or not, has to factor in some appraisal of Jesus himself whether it’s to honor him as one of God’s prophets or as an enlightened man, to reject him as a false prophet, or to hail him as king of the universe. Indeed, a handful of religious leaders today cannot even avoid claiming actually to be him.

With all this talk over all these years, it’s no wonder that no man is probably more misunderstood than Jesus. The great irony is that, despite being the most discussed and confessed figure in all of history, no historical figure has been more marginalized and commoditized than Jesus. For many today he is a generic brand, a logo, a catchphrase, a pick me up. He’s been fictionalized by the Last Temptation of Christ, humanized in the Passion of the Christ, and satirized by South Park. He’s been romanticized by countless admirers, and sanitized by the Christian consumer culture.

Yes, even the church itself is guilty when it comes to the marketing of Jesus. We’ve put our own gloss on him, our own spin. It’s no wonder the world doesn’t get Jesus, because we’ve spent decades selling a Jesus cast in our own image. Even our religious ancestors feared the stern taskmaster Jesus. This quasi-Puritan Jesus liked to smack you on the knuckles with a ruler when you got off the line. Later, we received Postcard Jesus – the Coppertoned, blond haired, blank stare of Jesus of the gold-framed portrait, a bland two-dimensional figure occupying moral talks that help us to be better people. This flat portrait evolved into the Get Out of Hell Free Jesus and this Jesus has inspired millions to say a prayer to get his forgiveness – and then go on living lives devoid of his presence.

in the 1970s when pop culture merged with fundamentalism in phenomena like the Jesus Movement, we promoted Hippie Jesus. The Doobie Brothers sang, “Jesus is just all right,” our parents all said “groovy,” and Jesus became a good buddy who was cool like us and hung out in a van down by the river and would never harsh our vibe, because he liked rock music and wore blue jeans.

In the 1980s we welcomed ATM Jesus. This Jesus is still quite popular today. You can go home, and turn on your TV and learn that Jesus just wants you to be happy and successful but most of all rich.

One of the most amusing caricatures today is Grammy Award Speech Jesus. Have you seen him? Turn in next time the film or music industry is patting itself on the back for the stuff it produces and passes off as art these days. It's inevitable – an artist who wins an award for a work celebrating promiscuous sex or wanton violence and filled with obscenity and profanity will then grace the stage and thank his or her “Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

One night Bono, the musical artist and prophetic provocateur, came to the podium after a few of these artists had thanked Jesus for their incongruent efforts and said something to the effect, “I bet God is looking down and saying, “Don't thank me for that.”

Today we have an amalgamation of all – and more – of these Jesuses running rampant in the world and in the church. These versions of Jesus confuse the former and misrepresent the latter. IN much of the church today we worship a convenient Jesus. We designate him our “lord and Savior” but this phrase tends to serve as merely a label that in our superficially spiritual lives, belies his real function – our Great Example.. He's there when we need to lean on him, but a bit out of mind when we feel more self confident. He's Role Model Jesus, he's therapeutic Jesus.

We know a bit about what he said and did in these gospels of ours, but not enough to be dangerous with it. And the stuff we do know, we frequently misunderstand or take out of context to suit our agendas.

How often do you hear “Judge not lest you be judged”, or “Let he who is without sin cast the first stone?” These are probably the two most often quoted of Jesus many sayings but not because we face a constant threat of legalistic judgment. Instead, it's because we want to justify how we live, without the pesky burden of what Jesus requires of us.

You'd think if anyone's got a handle on Jesus, it would be the Christian church. But we've settled for the glossy portrait. We've used him and abused him, made him into types and stereotypes, taken his message out of context and make it about being a better person or being cool or helping us to help ourselves. Consequently, what we have today – in a world where Jesus is most cited, most recognized, and most admired – is a generation of people who don't know the Gospels very well – which means we don't know Jesus very well.

In the world of Biblical academia, the Jesus of history and the Jesus of faith are set against each other, as if never the two shall meet.

The task before is not to bring people to a place or even to a church. That is not what that family who decided to quit church needs. They are not looking for a place. Because a particular place or a particular church or a particular group of people, even an amazing church filled with awesome people like Central, will disappoint you.

In the church, people will let you down.

In the church, there will be days when you get nothing out of it.

In the church, the pastor is going to say something that do don't agree with.

In the church, there will be moments when you wonder if anything good can come from it.

How will we embody the place where Jesus is staying?

How will our behavior reflect the justice, love and grace of Jesus?

How will your actions and witness bring hope to the hopeless and amplify the voices of those whose voices are often drowned out in the cacophony of partisan divisiveness?

When we show up as Christians in our community, standing up for those who are oppressed, bringing food for those who are hungry, and offering a prayer and listening ear for the lonely or sick, we begin to change the narrative of how church can look.