

*In the Footsteps of Jesus: Standing with the Multitudes*  
A Collage of Stories from the Gospels (attached)

Many hundreds of years ago there was a monk who abandoned everything normal in his life to seek God more intently in the solitude of the desert. Years later, someone asked him, “What is a monk, anyway?” He answered, “A monk is someone who asks every day what it means to be a monk.”

What is a Christian? The answer, I think, is similar to the monk’s: A Christian asks, every day, “What does it *mean* to be follower of Jesus?” That’s what we’re doing in this season of our worship, as we continue to make the road by walking on it. <sup>1</sup> We’re looking up, to study again the face of this one we’re following, making sure we saw his eyes the way they really look; that we haven’t somehow distorted his expression in our minds. If we are intentional about our life as followers of Jesus, we will do this not just once in a while, but often—so that we can course-correct if we need to, so we’re not veering off in a direction of our own making, or some habit we’ve slipped into without intention.

Our scripture reading this morning gave you a view of Jesus that we get by stepping back a few paces from the way we usually read passages from the Bible. If you’re someone who has been around the church for a while—if you spent your childhood in Sunday School, or have frequented Bible studies, or even if you’ve just spent a lot of Sundays in church, the stories of Jesus that our reading just mentioned in passing will have sounded familiar. When you put them all together, you get a composite that’s really quite striking.

In a society divided, like this one, into segments of people more and less visible, Jesus regularly turned his face toward the people who were rarely spoken about. In his stories, the heroes—the ones who *got* the truth about God and God’s intentions for creation—are outsiders. He regularly exposed the hypocrisy and greed of the people at the top, even those who looked like they were conforming to religion and morality. He captured the dilemma of those caught in the middle: tax collectors who needed the paychecks they earned by assessing people who couldn’t afford it, stewards who mediated between property owners and laborers, fishermen who took their little boats out into stormy seas to catch the next day’s food.

One of the difficulties for us is that we often can’t see ourselves in these stories. We’re not so clearly in one of these segments that we know what Jesus is trying to say to us. The categories have shifted enough to create distance. We don’t actually hate IRS workers, because they rarely knock on our doors. We hardly ever call anyone a “sinner” any more. We have hospitals with people assigned to take care of sick people, VA facilities where we house veterans broken by war, prisons for people who just can’t get with the program, shelters and food banks where the homeless can be taken care of without disrupting commerce.

If he were here now, where would Jesus find the people he’d be talking to? Which group would we fall into?

There was a book first published in 2007, and re-issued just a couple of years ago, called ***unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity...and Why It Matters.***

It was written by David Kinnaman, who is a member of the Barna Group, an organization that's been doing public surveys of attitudes toward Christianity and the Church for many years. In this study, they asked 16-39 year olds what they think about Christianity.

By and large, what those young people said is that they like and admire Jesus, but they don't think much of the Church that bears his name. 38% of the study's young respondents—2 out of 5—had a bad impression of Christianity, and one-third more said that they believe other people have a negative image of Christianity that they would not want to be associated with. Marcus Borg wrote the same thing about his college students: when he asked them for five adjectives to describe Christians, the words they came up with most often were: literalistic, anti-intellectual, self-righteous, judgmental and bigoted.

The stories about Jesus haven't changed, but the stories about Christians have.

In our United Methodist branch of Christianity, I think we tend to say, "We're not that kind of Christian," and mostly I think that's right. The more recent public image of Christianity has largely been created by a loud and political strain that is as unattractive to most of us as it is to non-Christians. But I'm not sure that "our" kind of Christianity has always done a good job of countering that image. The traditional and more theologically progressive church has almost abandoned the public conversation about Jesus. We've left it to others to figure out for themselves. When we do speak, we tend to leave out some of the harder parts of Jesus' teaching, so that we portray him as an open-minded, big-hearted guy who mostly didn't want to offend anyone.

But if we are the hands and feet of Jesus, we are also his voice. And I'm afraid he has had a long bout of laryngitis.

The Barna study found, as you might expect, that one of the most commonly-held negative impressions of Christianity is that Christians say one thing but do something else. Hypocrisy. And that's a fair criticism, I think. It always has been. It's a fair criticism of the Church, which frequently fails to live out its intention to be an open, welcoming and grace-filled community. It is probably a fair criticism of most of us who come to church every week, hoping for something better, deeper, more holy than we are actually able to incorporate into life during the rest of the week. I know it's a fair criticism of this church's pastor, who preaches inspiration from this pulpit every Sunday and finds it as hard as you do to live a spirit-filled life.

The fact that hypocrisy is widespread does not make it excusable. Jesus reserved his harshest criticism for religious hypocrites, people who used their power to make rules, and then used the rules to judge other people's character, without living up to those rules themselves. He described them as people who spread good deeds like frosting over their rotting hearts. "Be careful about following them," Jesus said to his disciples. "They talk a good line, but they don't live it. They don't take it into their hearts and live it out in their behavior. It's all spit-and-polish veneer." (Matthew 23:3, *The Message*)

This is a message that I think we have taken in. Hypocrisy is abhorrent to us. We're pretty careful to try not to make claims that we cannot live up to, or to speak promises that we fear the Church cannot deliver on. I will confess to you that one of my deepest fears as I stand up to

preach every Sunday is that one of you who is watching me live on Monday or Tuesday, or (even more frightening) someone who has lived with me, will point out (lovingly) that my actions are a long way from the words that I preach. That fear could be completely paralyzing to me. I really don't want to be a hypocrite.

But if I wait until I can fully live my convictions before I name them, I will have to simply be silent. And if I stop speaking for Jesus, if you stop speaking for Jesus, if the church limits what it offers to what it is absolutely sure it can deliver; if we stop hoping for our lives something more holy than what they already are, then the picture of Jesus that we offer the world will shrink and fade until it is invisible.

And the world will be poorer for our silence. Jesus planted himself in the middle of the poorest, most humble people on earth because they are the ones who know they need something more. They are the ones whose lives have enough open space for God to find a path to their door.

All around us, people are looking for the love, the compassion, the holiness that we hope for too. I would bet that everyone you know yearns to live a life that is something other than cheap or ordinary or insignificant. Christians and other people of faith are holding something that answers those longings.

We will never actually *be* Jesus. Our lives don't have to be the answer. They only have to point in the right direction. We are no different than anyone who has come before us in our failure to live out Jesus' full hopes for our lives. Even the Apostle Paul wrote, in his second letter to the Corinthians, "If you only look at us, you might well miss the brightness of God. We carry this precious message around in the unadorned clay pots of our ordinary lives. That's to prevent anyone from confusing God's incomparable power with us...and there's not much chance of that. (2 Corinthians 4:7, *The Message*)

The answer to hypocrisy is not perfection; it's transparency, a readiness to acknowledge the inconsistencies in the way we live. The willingness to remove the log in our own eye before we try to take the speck out of someone else's. The openness to transformation and change that can only come if we can live with knowing that we need it. The acknowledgement that there's a Jesus beyond the picture we draw with even our best efforts; a God who's still at work in us, changing us from the inside-out.

A theologian was asked once how his faith survived the years of intellectual challenge. He thought for a while, and said, "Once upon a time I believed in a great many things. Now I believe only in a few things, but I believe in them more deeply than I ever thought possible." I think a similar answer ought to guide the image of Jesus being drawn by our lives. It ought to be a simple picture, with short strokes, drawn with a strong pencil. We ought to be constantly drawn back to the stories of the Gospels to check the trueness of our work. And then we ought not to be afraid to go back and erase and re-draw when we have gotten something wrong.

Most of all, remember that we too stand among the multitudes. We are no better, and no worse, than any of the characters Jesus ran into, talked to, stopped to help. Let us remember that we too

start down this road out of our incompleteness. We stay on it because we *need* to keep our eyes on the One who's walking in front of us. Now *that* gives him something to work with.

### Scripture – February 1, 2015

Our reading today is not a passage from the Bible itself, but a reminder—a sketch—of some of the stories of Jesus from the Gospels. This collection of observations comes from Brian McLaren, in his book *We Make the Road by Walking*, and from Laurence Freeman, in a book called *Jesus The Teacher Within*.

In his parables, Jesus constantly made heroes of people from the multitudes: day laborers, small farmers, women confined to work in their homes, slaves. There was a time a group of parents brought their little children to Jesus to be blessed. The disciples tried to send them away, so that Jesus could attend to more important matters, but Jesus rebuked them. “Let the little children come to me,” he said.

There was another time when they passed through Samaria, an area that the good people avoided because its inhabitants were culturally “unclean”. Jesus made a point of stopping there, sitting by a well, and inviting into conversation a woman who was not only a Samaritan, but someone with a sketchy reputation.

Another time a blind beggar by the side of the road made a big ruckus, calling out to be seen, embarrassing and annoying everyone around him. But Jesus stopped, listened, healed him. He stopped to notice and talk to a woman who was so ashamed of her 12-year illness, that she couldn't even ask for Jesus' help; she just reached out to touch his robe. He invited outcasts to dinner; he fed hungry people regardless of how it offended others. He told stories about inviting people off the streets to banquets, and about forgiving children who rejected their parents.

When he met with lawbreakers and outcasts, Jesus just loved them. His anger was reserved for the rigidity of religious authority, and for hypocrisy. He used his power not to punish people, but to re-integrate them into community. He convinced people that they were forgiven and loved, and by doing that, he empowered them to live more fully. People did not leave Jesus' presence fixated on their sinfulness. They left feeling liberated to live differently. They felt re-energized, joyful. In Jesus' presence, it was impossible to feel sad.

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<sup>1</sup> We continue to follow the outline of *We Make the Road by Walking*, by Brian McLaren.