

“Is Jesus Still Good News?”

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(Acts 8:26-40, I John 4:13-21, John 15:1-8)

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“Is Jesus still good news?” Well, Jesus is not good news for everyone. My annual visit to Oakwood High School and Ms. Berger's religion class last Thursday offered me anecdotal evidence of my claim. I asked a class to tell me their religion. One each of the following: Buddhist, Baha'i, undecided Episcopalian, United Methodist, and Catholic. All the others said atheist or nothing. For 90% of gifted students in an Advanced Placement class at Oakwood High School, Jesus is decisively not good news.

Jesus not being **good news** relates to the followers of Jesus being **bad news**. Someone trying to explain Christianity said, “Jesus good; his followers not so much.” God risks name and reputation every time a Christian opens her mouth or walks outside. No wonder that up to 40% of young Americans are not part of the church. They belong to the tribe of NONE. But they are not all atheists. They decided that the God they saw in adults wasn't worth following. So in the past two decades, many young people began to view organized religion as a source of "intolerance and rigidity and doctrinaire political views," and stopped going to church.

Young people tell me they are turned off by an institution that is so quick to exclude others.

Luke tells us that an Ethiopian eunuch was searching the Bible for something that gave more meaning to his life than handling the queen's investments. It took a lot for the eunuch to even show his face at the Temple. The religious folk, the guards at God's house, weren't going to let him in, because the Law of Moses excluded eunuchs from the worship of the congregation (Deuteronomy 23:1). Deut. 23 has a list of those who shall not be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Those born of an illicit union shall not be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted. Now it gets a little messy.

Remember Ruth was a Moabite. But God made available an opportunity for Ruth. Ruth wanted to leave Moab and go to Bethlehem with Naomi. And loving Naomi led Ruth to love Naomi's God. When Naomi insisted, “Return to your own people and your own gods,” Ruth cried, “Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.” And from this woman's stubborn refusal to stay in Moab, God changed history. For Ruth married Boaz and was the mother of Obed, the father of Jesse, the father of David, and from this family: JESUS! (Matthew 1:5-6) We have to be careful when we act to shut out or exclude from the house of God.

And there are stories like this scattered all over the history of our faith, just as there are women in the male-dominated genealogy of Jesus (after all, you can't have a family tree without mothers: Rahab, Tamar, Ruth, the wife of Uriah, and Mary). There's Rahab, the Jericho prostitute, tying a crimson cord in her window, and throwing in her lot with the Israelites. There's Abigail, wife of Nabal, bowing before King David, pleading for her husband's life, “This ill-natured fellow, my husband, is an idiot” (loose Hebrew paraphrase). And David said, “Blessed be your good sense, Abigail.” What husband hasn't been saved by the good sense of his wife? There's the widow of Zarephath, preparing her last bit of food to feed the prophet Elijah. Why did Rahab, Abigail, and the down-to-her-last meal widow to throw in on the side of God? They heard the word about the God of Israel and they made decisions accordingly. I don't believe in luck or predestination; I believe God made available

opportunities for people otherwise shut out and excluded, people that wouldn't have a chance in life, and they said YES. There's just no way that we ought to go around on a holy high horse excluding this one or that one. And besides, everywhere that Jesus went he gathered in all these outcasts who were not welcome anywhere else in the Israelite society of his day – people who were never going to keep all the ritual laws or who had failed to be faithful to the moral law and needed restoration. This is the Jesus I want to introduce to young people.

Young people also tell me they are turned off by the hypocrisy they see in the church. Hypocrisy is nothing less than a bad performance. Enduring a bad performance is painful. Hit the remote for those local television ads by auto dealers and attorneys with bad hair! Recall the awkwardness and the pain of a stand-up comedian whose routine is not funny. Or a karaoke bar anywhere in America. Or an opening round of American Idol. Fred Craddock says that preaching has been so awful that people have come to accept bad preaching as penance for their sins. After enduring an awful sermon, they shuffle past the preacher with outstretched hand, lie through their teeth, and say, "Good sermon, Rev." and go down to their homes justified with the idea they have suffered enough for one week. So when people expect an honest, genuine, holy life and get a holier-than-thou imitation it's just hard to take. It is over-acting, a trying too hard to show the world the nature of holiness. This is why young people, especially, are so turned off by people who claim God is awesome and then act awful. This is why young people are confused by Christians who thank God for finding them parking spaces but can't be bothered to sort out the conflict in the Middle East. And why they are confused by Christians who won't pray together or take communion together. Hypocrisy is so ugly!!!!

Now, imagine your life as a life given up to a different kind of performance like a musician realizing a piece of music. When we witness this kind of art, we are looking at one human being maximizing their skill and concentration. All their strength, their freedom, and their love are focused on bringing to life the work and vision of another person. And all that practice, dedication, and preparation show.

Now, can we imagine what it might be for a whole lifetime to be given up to 'performance' in that way? Jesus is the one person who completely performed life as God intended. Jesus performs God's love perfectly, God's purpose without a break, without a false note, without a stumble; yet he is never other than himself, with all that makes him distinctly human taken up with this creative work.

I cringe a bit when people say, "I think Jesus was just a good teacher." Excuse me, I don't want to be a theological elitist or overly sensitive at this point, but would you please repeat that? Jesus **was** just a good teacher? **That is simply not true.** Jesus was never "just" anything. He was not just a prophet, just a rabbi, just a good man doing good deeds. Jesus is everything the New Testament writers claim. All God's promises find their YES in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 1:20). "Jesus the fullness of God."

Something of this nature happens when we actually abide in Jesus Christ. To abide in Jesus means to make a place in your life for the presence of the divine and perform Jesus. To abide in Jesus is to show something of God's liberty, God's love, and God's ability to make loving relationships. It means to be completely ourselves, free and independent, and yet the whole of our being is taken up in the mysterious, different performance of Jesus.

Jesus suggests that a really intense prayer life or a really holy life can open the world up a bit more to God's purpose so that unexpected things happen. **"If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."** This isn't a process we can manipulate, no formula for guaranteed results. "All we know is that we are called to pray, to trust, and to live with integrity before God in such a way as to leave the door open so that love – God's energy and movement can come through."

Since this is Mother's Day, let's also recognize that Mary is a powerful example of a human being performing faith. "Mary is the first person to put her trust in the God who is shown in Jesus." She is the best supporting actor in the drama of salvation. By her consent, she makes Jesus possible in that place, in that time. It's quite hard to imagine the depth and the level and the cost of what is asked of her by God. God makes available opportunities where ordinary people like us can mysteriously help what God achieves at any point in the world's history. And that is the role I'm asking you to play.

There's a new play opening in Dayton at FBC and there's open casting for the role of Jesus – available for all of us. We can so perform the life of Jesus without a false note, without a string of errors, without turnovers, with genuine love and faithfulness, in this place and at this time, that we will bear much fruit and be his faithful followers. I am asking you to make your lives available for what God wants to do in and through you. To be on call to show love for one another. Inviting you to make Jesus possible in this place and in this time. In ordinary ways, like Ruth marrying Boaz. In humble ways, like Naaman dipping in the Jordan, like Philip telling good news to the Ethiopian eunuch, like Mary saying "YES" to the Lord, and like Jesus living every moment in the full acceptance of the Father's will. I want God's love perfected in us so that a young person witnessing our performance of faith will say, "I want to know more about your Jesus."