

Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?

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Preaching on:

[Mark 8:38–50](#)

Does Jesus ever confuse you? I'm not alone in this, am I? Sometimes Jesus seems like the perfect hippie flowerchild—so relaxed, so enlightened, so loving and forgiving. This Jesus is best summed up by a bumper sticker I saw once: “No, Obama is not a foreign-born, brown-skinned, anti-war socialist who gives away free healthcare: You're thinking of Jesus.”

But that's only half the story, right? There's this other Jesus who comes with fire and a sword. He shouts out, “Repent! The time is near!” He battles with demons and evil spirits! This Jesus is maybe best summed up by a sandwich-board sign I saw a guy wearing once in Times Square Station. It said, “Turn to Jesus or Burn in Hell!”

So, what gives? Which one is it? *Will the real Jesus please stand up?* Let's take this morning's scripture reading as another example:

I can't imagine a more openminded, non-defensive, and (in the broadest possible sense) liberal approach to life than the saying, "Whoever is not against us is for us." Can you imagine how the world might be different if everyone believed this? I mean, how many of the world's conflicts are really about hopelessly irreconcilable differences, and how many are simply about a psychological desire for power—for me to be in control, for our side to win? What wars could we have prevented? What political dead-ends could we have turned into compromise and cooperation?

If they're not against us, then they're our allies and colleagues. If they're not against us, then we count them as our friends. And we count their victories as our victories. And we mourn their losses as if they were our own. And we will trust that the path they're taking up this mountain of life, although it's not the same path that we're taking, will inevitably lead them up to the same peak.

At the same time, I can't imagine a more harsh, exacting, damning approach to life than the words, "If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it's better to enter life maimed than to have two hands and go to hell, to the unquenchable fire." Can you imagine what the world might look like if everyone behaved like this? It'd look like the Taliban justice system out there. It'd look like a Civil War field hospital. Everywhere you looked, people would be cut to ribbons. There'd be little bits of us littered all over the place. You'd've been stepping over hands, and eyeballs, and tongues, and hearts, and God knows what else just to get to church this morning. It's a scene from a horror movie.

Beloved, how is it possible that the same person said both of these things—practically within the same breath? And what can we learn from it, about who Jesus is and what he expects from us?

Let's begin where Jesus concluded—with salt. Jesus said, "Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another." Obviously, Jesus isn't really talking about salt. This is your bible, not a cookbook. That means Jesus is speaking metaphorically. But what does he mean by it?

Well, first it helps to know that back in ancient times salt actually could lose its flavor, it's saltiness. Back in the day sometimes salt was harvested with other crystals that weren't salt. They'd all go in the same bag. And maybe the bag, in storage, would get wet, and the true salt crystals would dissolve away leaving behind a bunch of stuff that looked like—but didn't taste like—salt.

Remember when Jesus said, don't store your treasures on earth where moths and rust and thieves get at them, store them in heaven instead. Well, this is similar. Jesus is saying don't store your salt in the kitchen cabinet where it might lose its flavor, store it inside of yourself, and you be the flavor of salt. Salt is a metaphor for faith—faith loses something when you identify it with the external world, keep your faith within you.

Many of us learned this lesson from the Disney movie *Dumbo*. Dumbo is this little baby elephant with big ears. His ears are so big that he can fly! But he only flies when he's blackout drunk, and in the morning he can't remember, and he doesn't believe it. You know—a children's story. Anyway, his friend, a mouse named Timothy, gives him a "magic" feather and tells him that anyone who holds that feather can fly. So, whenever Dumbo holds the feather in his trunk, he flies, and he becomes the star of the circus. But one night during the high dive, Dumbo drops his feather and goes plummeting towards the ground. Timothy yells in his ear, the feather is just a fake! Just a regular ol' crow's feather to make you believe in yourself. The power was within you all along! And at the last possible moment Dumbo pulls out of the dive and flies without the feather. The feather is on the inside now where it can never be dropped. So, Jesus says, put your faith on the inside where it can't lose its flavor. Put it on the inside where it belongs, and be at peace with one another.

Be at peace with one another, that's an important part of this. When you put your faith in its proper place (on the inside, not the outside), then you've got the right perspective for being at peace with other people. Your faith, your essence, is safe and secure on the inside, and what other people may or may not be doing on the outside of you doesn't have to be so threatening to who you are and to what you believe.

Now, Jesus cares a lot about the circumstances of our lives. He cares about how much money we do or don't have. He cares about what we do with that money. He cares if you're sick and suffering. He cares if you're hungry or in prison. He cares if you're marginalized and lonely. He cares about justice and kindness and love. He drinks at

weddings. He cries at funerals. He cares about the external stuff. But for Jesus, it's the inner journey we ignore that matters the most.

We tend to externalize the meaning of our lives. We look for meaning in success on the job, or in education and learning, or out playing on the football field, or in a beautiful home, an expensive car, nice stuff, maybe we look for meaning by standing in a pulpit, or through having a loving family, close friends, meaningful relationships. Now, some of these are worthier than others. Some lead you in the right direction, some in the wrong direction. But Jesus reminds us that true purpose, true love, true faith cannot ultimately be found outside of yourself. Your most genuine voice, your most fulfilling destiny, your deepest capacity to love, and your biggest life must eventually be found within yourself. That's what Jesus means by salt.

Moving backwards now, we're in a better position to understand all this hand chopping, foot sawing, and eye plucking. First, Jesus is being symbolic. Salt was not really salt. Amputation is not really amputation. No, Jesus does not want you to cut your hand off. We know this because there's no story in the Bible of Jesus hacking somebody's leg off to save their soul. That's not how it works. There's no story where someone runs up to the disciples all happy because they just poked their eye out for Jesus. It's the opposite. Jesus is the one who heals bodies and restores sight, not the one who breaks bodies or causes blindness. And I would push it even further than that and remind you that Jesus is also the one who saves and not the one who damns.

But that doesn't get us off the hook here. Jesus gives us this disturbing, gripping metaphor because he wants us to pay attention to something. And what are we supposed to be paying attention to? "Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another." We're supposed to be paying attention to the inner journey, and we're supposed to be paying attention to our peaceful relationship to the world.

Once some Pharisees criticized Jesus for not following their custom of washing his hands before he ate. Maybe they had a point. But Jesus is emphatic about it. He says, It's not what goes into your body from the outside that defiles you, it's what's on the inside that comes out of you that defiles you. The greatest meaning of your life is not outside of you, and neither are your biggest sins. Chopping off bits and pieces on the outside won't solve your inner problem, will it? It doesn't get to the root—to the spiritual problem. And so Jesus pleads with us to cut out and cast away the resistance within us

to God's love and salvation, the resistance within us to loving our neighbors, the resistance within to loving ourselves and to fulfilling our destiny as children of God. Pay attention to the inner journey.

And "Be at peace with one another." One of the heart-rending stories that has gripped many of us over the last week or so was the US military admitting that a drone strike in Kabul that killed 10 family members, including seven children, was a "tragic mistake." It was the wrong person, he was not in any way a terrorist, it was the wrong car, there were no explosives, there was no threat. This admission almost certainly never would have happened had it not been for the large number of journalists in Kabul covering the US withdrawal who were able to investigate. And so one has to wonder: How infrequent are these deadly mistakes? And one has to wonder if it was truly necessary to add such a tragic exclamation point to the end of our nation's beleaguered legacy in Afghanistan.

Gen. McKenzie, after offering condolences to the devastated family, assured us Americans that, although ultimately mistaken, the strike was carried out "in the profound belief" that the target posed a grave threat to US security. It's not easy being great. It's not easy being Christian. We must ask ourselves, "Is our safety and security worth a drone strike that incinerates an innocent man along with his children?" If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it's better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell, where the fire is never quenched. Christians must wrestle with the question: Is it better to risk the bodies of my neighbors, or is it better to risk my own body? Our "profound belief" in the righteousness of our strike must be mirrored by an equally profound skepticism in all of the choices that led us to the murder of someone else's children. We must ask ourselves, where does our true security lie? Does it lie outside of us in drone strikes and missiles? Or does it come from God?

And so part of the inner transformation Jesus calls us to is to reevaluate our actions and relationships in the world. Be merciless with the blockages of sin and you might save the troubled heart. Even if it feels like you're cutting off your right foot, do it, because once that old habit—that old crutch—dies, we're on the path to freedom.

Now, I hope that you heard that right. I didn't say be ruthless, or cruel, or unforgiving to yourself. I didn't say beat yourself up, make yourself miserable, mire yourself in guilt. Jesus never called anyone into self-hate. Jesus simply calls us to be vigilant in the practice of love and virtue, and vigilant in our opposition to our vices and our personal

and collective smallness. That is not an invitation to self-flagellation, it's the beginning of a fulfillment in God that goes way beyond self-anything—it's bigger than you!

And so now we arrive back at the beginning, and we're ready to answer our original question—Which is it? Sweet, forgiving, doe-eyed Jesus or judgey, strict, fire-breathing Jesus? Will the real Jesus please stand up?

Well, we've seen it for ourselves: Jesus is a little bit of both, right? The key is to apply the right attitude to the right situation. When it comes to other people, Jesus says, be as tolerant, as kind, and as forgiving as possible. "If they're not against you, then they're for you." Live and let live. Be gentle with the world. The place for hand-chopping and hellfire is not when you're interacting with the world around you, it's for when you look within yourself. When it comes to yourself be as vigilant as you can. Don't beat yourself up, but be ready to fight for yourself—for your soul, your goodness, your joy.

For others—tolerance, forgiveness, and, of course, love. For ourselves—vigilance, repentance, and, of course, love. May Jesus' way of love (a love which is both gentle and challenging, and always good) lead us all within and without to be closer to God and to all God's children.