

Talk, Talk, Talk 25 March 2007

Bible passage: 1 John 2:6 (The Message)

“Anyone who claims to be intimate with God ought to live the same kind of life Jesus lived.”

Sermon nugget: Many of us talk *about* Jesus a lot, but how are we doing at living the kind of life he modeled?

Do you remember the rage a few years ago of people wearing those WWJD bracelets? There were many people who saw the bracelets, and who weren't altogether sure just what it was supposed to mean. I actually heard one person interpret WWJD as “What would Jesus drive.” But that wasn't it. Rather, WWJD stood for “What would Jesus *do*?” It was a reminder to ask ourselves that question if we were in a quandary as to how we should act in any given situation.

Now I never wore a bracelet like that—primarily because bracelets tend to drive me crazy, but I have to say that whenever I saw someone wearing one, I often looked more closely at how they were behaving than I otherwise might have. Were they acting the way I think Jesus would have? I guess that has a lot to do with how we understand who Jesus was and how he lived.

In my view, there's a problem with Christianity, and that is that many people talk about being Christian, but sometimes it seems that the words and the actions don't fit together. Sometimes the ugliness of human behavior seems to be the most prevalent voice, even among those who profess to be faithful followers of Jesus. It is at times so pronounced that I have seen bumper stickers saying, “Jesus, protect me from your followers,” and I can understand why.

Local Friends pastors Jim Mulholland and Phil Gulley have put it quite succinctly in their books, *If Grace is True*, and *If God Is Love*. In the former, they quote their friend “Ray” who says, “**The problem with Christianity is we made it into a religion about Jesus rather than a commitment to be like him.**” They state it a bit differently in *If God is Love* when they write, “**We don't need to accept Jesus into our hearts; we need to have the same heart as Jesus.**”

Those writers really are stating what our Bible passage for today puts so succinctly. It says, “**Anyone who claims to be intimate with God ought to live the same kind of life Jesus lived.**” Len Sweet, in the dedication to his book *The Jesus Prescription for a Healthy Life*, writes these words: “**That Jesus may be not a word, but a way of life.**” In other words he's restating the Bible passage, saying, if we claim

to be followers of Jesus, all our words are empty and meaningless unless our actions and deeds are in line with the Godlikeness we have had the opportunity to see in Jesus.

You may or may not be aware that the first name of what eventually came to be called Christian was “The Way.” That term did not mean that Jesus was the only way to God, as many interpret it, but that we were to live our lives in a different way. As Gulley and Mulholland write, “**It is the way of Jesus, not Jesus as the way that is crucial.**”

So, OK. What does that mean for us? In order to figure that out, we probably need to reflect on what we know of how Jesus lived, and then see how that applies to our own lives.

For me, I think it all begins with how we see things. Marcus Borg, whom I've mentioned a number of times recently, writes how Jesus was a teacher of unconventional wisdom. To say that Jesus taught us about unconventional wisdom means that there is a conventional wisdom. I don't know if we stop to think about it very much, or not, but there is a conventional understanding that many of us adhere to today, as they did in the time of Jesus.

What I think that means is that most of us simply buy into “the way things are.” It's not that we're evil or bad people; it's just that that's the way we've become accustomed to things being. We tend to value what those around us value, and we're afraid of what the culture fears. We just take for granted what life is about and how to live. It's whatever everyone assumes is right, and just seems to know.

We see this so easily when we kids grow up. There seems to be an accepted way to “look,” to dress and to behave, and anyone who doesn't follow the norm that everyone seems to think important is on the outs. Many of us have been through that, or we've watched our children go through that, and it's really hard to walk to the beat of a different drummer, because we want to be liked and accepted.

That's how it all starts, and I'm not sure it ever really ends. We measure our worth by how much we possess, where we live, what we drive, and the crowds we hang out with. We stare in the mirror to see if we're good looking enough to be accepted. And if we hear our friends making fun of someone who isn't like us, we often tend to go along, deriding those who are different from us. Oh yes...most of us conform to the conventional understandings of how things are.

Not Jesus, however. Time and time again we have talked about how Jesus did the things that the religious folks and the authorities found abhorrent.

He ate with those with whom a respectable person would not be caught dead! He did things that were against the rules. He turned things upside down, and didn't adhere to the traditional "pecking order" of who or what was most important.

In other words, instead of valuing what the culture tended to value, he set forth an entirely different way of seeing things. It was a reversal of the way we typically see life, other people and priorities. We don't acquire wealth for our own good, but to share what we have with others. We don't deny people their freedom and rights as human beings and children of God; we honor all peoples. We don't discriminate on the grounds of where someone grew up, what their heritage was, or on the basis of color, race, creed or sexual orientation. All we have to do is listen to today's news or read today's paper to see that's a far cry from the way many of us live in our world today!

If there are two words that could summarize what the life of Jesus was like—at least to the best of our ability to know and understand it—I think those words would be compassion and justice. That's what "the Way" was supposed to be all about. Frankly, I think justice is the social form of compassion, so maybe it's best to just think about what compassion looks like, and how we might be compassionate people who live more the kind of life Jesus lived.

Let's be clear on what we're talking about here when we use the word "compassion." According to dictionary.com, "compassion" means **sorrow for the sufferings or trouble of another or others, accompanied by an urge to help**. At the very core, it means letting go of our tendency to judge another's situation or perceived inadequacy. It means feeling deep hurt for what another person is going through, and wanting to help—no, not just wanting to, but *helping* things be different. It starts with you and it starts with me.

It seems to me that all we have to do is to look around our world and see people who are suffering mightily. There are hundreds of people who live on the streets of Indianapolis, homeless, wandering, virtually unable to help themselves. Instead of looking the other way, what can we do to cause things to be different?

As we look around our world, we see thousands of persons dying of AIDS, children orphaned or dying of malaria, people going to sleep hungry night after night after night. What can we do to change things?

As we look around us, we can see countless examples of people being marginalized, not accorded their freedom to be who they are. If we look around us with eyes wide open, we can see

discrimination and prejudice rampant in our legal system, in our legislature, in our workplaces, in our schools. What can you do, what can I do, to turn things upside down, to reverse the way things are, to live out the unconventional wisdom of Jesus?

In our world, there are those who are physically, mentally and emotionally challenged. How often do we turn away, rather than reach out to help? How might we look with different eyes, and change the way we respond to someone who's different from us?

I really like a story I heard about the humanitarian, theologian, musician and physician Albert Schweitzer. It happened when the man was 85-years-old and he was talking with visitors to his jungle hospital. It was almost high noon as Dr. Schweitzer and the group climbed up a hill, when suddenly, Schweitzer left them to help an African woman who was struggling with a huge load of firewood for the cook fire.

The group watched as he took the entire load of wood and carried it up the hill for the woman. When he returned to join the group, one of the visitors asked him why he did things like that, especially at his age and in the heat of the day. Schweitzer looked at them, and answered how I imagine Jesus would have answered: **"No one should ever have to carry a burden like that alone."**

I think that's what it means to live as Jesus lived—not talking about Jesus, but simply living a life filled with compassion and care. We all have corners in our world where a little compassion would go a long way to change things. I'd like us each to think about that for a moment, and then to write down on the 3x5 cards on the tables what we can do today, tomorrow, this week, this year, that Jesus would do. How can we live with the heart of Jesus—with a heart of compassion?

In the next couple of minutes, we're going to do something we've never done here at The Garden. We're going to take up an offering. Don't rush the doors—it's not an offering of money, but it's an offering of ourselves—our time, our energy, our passion, our interests, our compassion to make this world better, and more like the world Jesus envisioned. Please place the cards in the baskets, and know that action is a commitment from each of us to live more as Jesus lived.

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray we walk through these doors and into the world with a heart filled with God's compassion and love.

