

## *Jesus—Another View*

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Ancient Witness: Mark 10:17-18

One of my favorite New Testament scholars, Walter Wink, once said, “I want to worship the God Jesus worshipped, not worship Jesus as God.” My message today is quite simple: you can be a good Christian and believe as Wink believed. And there ought to be at least one congregation here where you can do this openly.

There are a variety of views here, not just one accepted view. And that’s a beautiful thing. We don’t always need to agree on matters of faith. That’s one way that we’re different here, I hope. In fact, listening to other faithful people with whom you disagree can help you better articulate your own faith. When I preach I am making my own I-statement, my own witness, my own testimony, not with the expectation that everyone will agree with me, but that it might help you make your own I-statement that is unique to you. Now, some here hold a more orthodox view of Jesus. But what makes us unique is that right out in the open, we can share another view that is also Christian.

So the truest mark of good preaching, it seems to me, is not to resolve tension and answer questions, but to be honest and authentic in hopes that listeners can be honest and authentic with themselves. As the poet Rilke said, it is best to “be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions” and to “live the questions.” As William Sloane Coffin said, “The worst thing we can do with a dilemma is to resolve it prematurely because we haven’t the courage to live with uncertainty.”

I want to start out this morning by asking, “Why do we insist that our heroes are perfect?”

There seems to be almost a universal tendency to turn our leaders, religious and non-religious alike, into something they are not. We seem to demand a level of perfection and purity this is extremely high. And when our heroes disappoint us, when their flaws and weaknesses are revealed, we can be ruthless. We elevate and worship them, then crucify them, and then perhaps elevate them again.

Maybe we have a desire to be perfect by association. And so when our heroes prove to be imperfect, we quickly distance ourselves.

I remember when there were accounts of extramarital affairs of Martin Luther King, Jr. that surfaced. I remember how disappointed I felt. And I remember some reactions. There were many who desperately did not want to believe that it was true. So they blocked it out and denied it. They held an idealized image of Martin Luther King, and it was blasphemous to utter anything of his faults.

And then there were those who saw everything he did or said as suspect. To them, he lost credibility and could not be trusted. Why is that so? Why is it so difficult to regard him as the great leader and spiritual hero that he was in spite of his shortcomings? Why does he have to be sinless?

My own view is that the followers of Jesus almost immediately started turning him into something he wasn't. And he resisted. "Why do you call me good?" he said. "No one is good but God alone."

It is interesting that in spite of the effort to whitewash his life there are still accounts, such as the episode at Gethsemane. In it we have a picture of Jesus who is lonely and afraid. He's feeling sorry for himself because his disciples are sleeping. He has internal resistance and asks God to "take this cup" from him. He has his doubts. His faith isn't perfect. And later on the cross, he accuses God of forsaking and abandoning him.

The later accounts then try to have it both ways. They want to say that he was human, and yet he was not human. And so in Hebrews (4:15) for example, the writer says that Jesus was tempted in every way. In other words, he is just like everyone else. But then the writer goes on to say that he was sinless.

But the term, "sin" doesn't must refer to external actions. It is also about an internal state of mind. Part of sin is to have inner doubts, conflict and fears. The inner experience of temptation is what sin is—it means to be broken and wounded. And there are many accounts of Jesus struggling mightily with temptation, doubt and fear.

There's a story of a preacher who put this question to a class of children: "If all the good people in the world were red and all the bad people in the world were green, what color would you be?" Little Linda Jean thought mightily for a moment. Then her face brightened and she replied, "Reverend, I'd be streaky!"

To be human is to be mixed. It is to be streaky. No one is good, no one is perfect but God alone.

I believe that early on, the writers removed all the streaks out of Jesus because they carried forward a distorted view of a violent, punishing God. Some of the New Testament writers assumed this distorted view of God and interpreted Jesus' death as an atoning sacrifice. It is the idea that God sent Jesus to die for our sins. This is what many people mean when they call Jesus our "savior." From what, we must ask, does Jesus save us?

If we believe that Jesus died for us so that we will not be condemned, then we should ask, "Condemned by whom?" The answer is God! The real answer, according to this view, is that Jesus saves us from God, not from sin. It is God's wrath and punishment from which we are saved, according to this.

Further, Jesus needs to be sinless and perfect, "without spot or blemish" to satisfy this angry God. Jesus must be the purest of all sacrifices to take away God's punishment. The idea is that Jesus took the beating that God had in store for us.

Now let me just say that this image of a violent, punishing God is not the image of God we get from Jesus himself. Instead, we encounter in Jesus an infinitely loving God who forgives us before we ask. Such a God does not need an atoning sacrifice. My friend, Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, wrote:

*Perhaps Jesus saves us in the sense that he offers us a way into life in the Spirit and out of the deadly spiral of violence, including our imprisonment to violent images of God.*

To me, there is something hollow to the way some of the New Testament writers say that Jesus was able “to sympathize” with our weaknesses and struggles, and yet he was perfect. To me, it is more affirming to know that Jesus’ struggles and brokenness and woundedness were more than theoretical.

I think that probably Jesus bellyached once in a while. He knew pleasure and pain; he laughed and he cried. I think that probably he shared his feelings of anger and frustration with some close and trusted friends. Maybe sometimes he was even too negative for some of his friends and they got fed up with him. Who knows?

One of my favorite passages in the Bible is when Jesus got mad and cursed a fig tree. He was hungry and throws a small tantrum, has a fit. And he takes it out on a tree that wasn’t bearing fruit. By the way, it withers and dies after he curses it. (Mt. 21:18-19, Mark 11:12-14)

Was it unhealthy? Perhaps. Like other human beings, Jesus probably did some unhealthy things. But then again, it might be healthy to share one’s feelings of anger and grief now and again.

But what a relief to know that we are not the only ones who have these dark moments! What comfort it is to know that the best people that we love and respect are human, too.

Conversely, I have seen how unhealthy it is to pretend not to have negative emotions and to stuff them.

Henri Nouwen used the term “wounded healer” in his classic book, in which he says that it is through our imperfections and our woundedness that we can help bring healing and wholeness to others. It is through the experience of shared weakness that helps us find the pathway to God.

Victor Frankl said, “Wisdom is knowledge plus: knowledge—of its own limits.” Jesus demonstrated this compassionate, humble wisdom. And it is available to us as well! I find this to be truly good news. Being a loving, healing presence is not about being perfect.

There’s a funny Hasidic story: The king visited a prison and talked to the prisoners. Each asserted his innocence, except one who confessed to theft. “Throw this scoundrel out,” exclaimed the king. “He will corrupt the innocents.”

Claiming and accepting our imperfections, our woundedness, is our way out of the prison!

A friend of mine once said that the people often turn Jesus into a fetish, a kind of good luck charm. One definition of a fetish is “an object believe to have magical properties to protect its owner.” I think that the church has often treated Jesus this way. And when we do this, it removes us from being responsible.

The English writer, Giles Fraser, once wrote a good article titled, “Empires prefer a baby and the cross to the adult Jesus” that talks about this.

*Every Sunday in church, Christians recite the Nicene Creed. “Who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven. And was incarnate of the Holy Ghost and of the Virgin Mary and was made man; we crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate, suffered and was buried; and the third day rose again according to the Scriptures.” It’s the official summary of the Christian faith but astonishingly it jumps straight from birth to death, apparently indifferent to what happened in between.*

*Nicene Christianity is the religion of Christmas and Easter, the celebration of a Jesus who is either too young or too much in agony to shock us with his revolutionary rhetoric. The adult Christ who calls his followers to renounce wealth, power and violence is passed over in favor of the gurgling baby and the screaming victim. As such, Nicene Christianity is easily conscripted into a religion of convenience, with believers worshipping a gagged and glorified savior who has nothing to say about how we use our money or whether or not we go to war.*

When we look past the adult human Jesus as Christians, we miss the best stuff. Because Jesus had a spiritual connection and awareness of God, and he was saying that we, too, can experience this for ourselves. Every human being can. This is truly good news! We can be like Jesus. We can follow his path of awakening. We don’t have to be perfect. We don’t have to be good. I find this both challenging and hopeful. We can experience the same intimacy with God, the same unconditional loving embrace, the same joy and happiness. Let me end with a lovely story by Anthony De Mello in his book, *Awareness*.

*There was a man who invented the art of making fire. He took his tools and went to a tribe in the north, where it was very cold, bitterly cold. He taught the people there to make fire. The people were very interested. He shows them the uses to which they could put fire—they could cook, could keep themselves warm, etc. They were so grateful that they learned the art of making fire. But before they could express their gratitude to the man, he disappeared. He wasn’t concerned with getting their recognition or gratitude; he was concerned about their well-being. He went to another tribe where he again began to show them the value of his invention. People were interested there, too, a bit too interested for the peace of mind of their priests, who began to notice that this man was drawing crowds and they were losing their popularity. So they decided to do away with him. They poisoned him, crucified him, put it any way you like. But they were afraid now that the people might turn against them, so they were very wise, even wily. Do you know what they did? They had a portrait of the man made and mounted it on the main altar of the temple. The instruments for making fire were placed in front of the portrait, and the*

*people were taught to revere the portrait and to pay reverence to the instruments of fire, which they dutifully did for centuries. The veneration and worship went on, but there was no fire.*

Friends, let there be fire!