

Visions of Jesus for Our Time (III): Righteous Rebel
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
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Text: Luke 13:31-35

The church member, an elder and friend, sounded apologetic. "I think I'm clear about my commitment to God," he said, "but Jesus?...he seems, well, like a woman's man. Someone who asks questions about feelings and relationships, someone who likes to sit around and talk—he probably would even stop and ask for directions. I can see why women would be attracted to him, but he makes us men look bad." On the one hand, I can sympathize with the member. Feminist biblical scholarship has helped recover the true egalitarian nature of Judeo-Christian faith, long-lost in a cultural sea of patriarchal perspectives and practices. Jesus accorded respect to women in a culture in which they were regarded as property; he sought them out, listened to them, and lifted them up as examples of faith. The biblical evidence is plain that women were among Jesus' first followers; women provided economic support for his itinerant ministry, and they were the very first witnesses to the resurrection. Perhaps the emphasis which has served to correct an imbalance has blocked the aspect of Jesus which is equally true: that he was a man who engaged men by communicating a compelling purpose and inviting them to embrace a life of action and adventure.

The truth is, Jesus resisted all attempts to confine him to a category; to define him and delineate his mission according to human expectations—cultural, religious, or otherwise. The vision of Jesus we will explore this morning is that of the righteous rebel: the one who marched to another drum beat than the one assigned him by either the civil or sacred authorities.....the Jesus who challenged the status quo to such an extent that he threatened those who benefited from it. We see one example of the consequence of that threat in the morning gospel reading. Here Jesus receives a warning that

the ruling power has issued a death warrant against him. You have to wonder why, especially if you think of Jesus as a guy who went around doing good—healing the sick, feeding the hungry, and reminding women that they too had worth in God’s sight. Why would anyone object to that? --or, did Herod suspect that Jesus was up to something else; something larger, the seed of which spelled danger to his crown and perhaps to every crown? Listen for God’s word to the church, in the reading from the gospel according to Luke, in the 13th chapter at the 31st verse:

[LUKE 13:31-35]

The newspaper photograph showed a man’s face contorted in rage. The two youngsters with him (perhaps his children) carried hand-made placards, emblazoned with the words “Jesus hates homos.” That article appeared around the same time as one which reported that Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez had delivered his latest inaugural address, “in the name of Jesus Christ, the first socialist.” The name of Jesus is invoked in many quarters, in order to bless particular perspectives, programs, and postures. One has only to consider the rhetoric of the religious right to find examples of using Jesus in order to promote a political agenda—though they are by no means the only ones to do so. The polarization and divisiveness of the last several state and national elections are due in part to the actions of those purporting to know where Jesus stands and for whom he would cast his ballot. Though offered a century ago, Mark Twain’s comment is apt: if Jesus were walking the earth today, there is one thing he would not be: a Christian.

During his earthly ministry, Jesus defied the expectations others placed on him. Religious leaders wanted him to stick with tradition. Zealots wanted him to stir up the people and revolt against their Roman oppressors. King Herod wanted him to stay out of the capital city Jerusalem. The disciples wanted him to stay out of trouble. And yet, Jesus refused to let anyone else, however powerful, however persuasive, however persistent, to dictate his identity or define his mission. He

resisted attempts to soften his message or make it more palatable. He rebelled not so much in reaction to the rulers and authorities, but because he had a clear sense of purpose and knew who he was. *Go tell that fox that I am going to do what I am here to do, regardless of his plans for me.*

Above anything else, Jesus wanted to fulfill God's plan for him. He was well aware of the risks that posed. He had studied the actuarial tables for prophets. He knew the score. Make no mistake—Jesus did not have a death wish. Remember how he prayed to "let this cup pass from my lips" when it was not too late to get out of Dodge. Yet he was resolutely guided by a vision of a kingdom distinct from any human kingdom, by a divine agenda greater than any self-serving one reflecting the narrow concerns of a single individual or group. In the end he was able to pray, "Not my will, but Thine, O God, be done."

Friends, the righteous rebel calls us to examine what we want from him. Are we asking Jesus to bless our personal agendas, the systems that benefit us, the lifestyles we want to live? I don't believe anyone here would condone the attitude that "Jesus hates homos." But I wonder if we can subject our conviction that "Jesus loves capitalists" to spiritual scrutiny. Rather than making Jesus fit our wants, we should ask Jesus to help us see what he wants us to want. To seek first the Kingdom of God and God's justice. Not to try and conform Jesus to our way, but to transform our ways into his.

I think that means grounding ourselves in Jesus' way through Bible study and discerning prayer; examining our perspectives and viewpoints through the lens of Jesus' teaching, rather than the other way around. We who call ourselves by his name should take care we are an authentic reflection of it. Rather than assuming we know what Jesus would say about a political issue, an economic system, a lifestyle choice we want to pursue, could we ask instead, *What would Jesus do?* --and then seek evidence of that in Scripture; test our responses against the whole biblical witness rather than a verse or two we can quote to justify what we want. The apostle Paul urges the

church not to be *“conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.”* (Romans 12:2) Could we learn to seek Jesus’ way ahead of other authorities when it comes to politics and religion and everything else? Could we practice discerning what God wants for us, rather than looking for God to grant what we want?

That’s not a question to answer too glibly. The way of Jesus is countercultural; it will always critique the kingdoms of this world, and anything less than God’s kingdom and God’s intent for a redeemed, healed and whole creation. Jesus was not naïve. He knew all too well how the world kills prophets and seeks to silence rebels. Yet at some level he also understood that whatever the authorities planned for him, those plans would fail because God’s cannot fail. Jesus lamented for a people whose house is left to them; those who obtain the whole world but lose their souls; who cut themselves off from the very One who loves them and wants to protect them. The contrast could hardly be starker: between the fox that preys on the young of others; and the mother hen who persistently cares for her young.

Recently I saw the film *Amazing Grace*, which tells the story of William Wilberforce and how he worked persistently to bring down the slave trade throughout the British Empire. He was moved by Christian faith to run for office and use that power and his considerable gifts as an orator to enact legislation prohibiting the sale of human beings. The scenes showing the debates in Parliament were startlingly contemporary, as members countered Wilberforce’s arguments with appeals based on economic loss to business interests, upset to the social norms, and even competition with France for market share. As the legislators spoke, you could almost forget they were dealing with human lives and dignity. I was struck again by how easy it is to make peace with evil when it serves us, and how very difficult it is to challenge it when it goes against conventional wisdom and popular opinion.

Jesus remained faithful to God's kingdom, and it cost him his life. His sacrificial death is remembered in this meal we will share of broken bread and poured out cup. Let it nourish us to follow the example of the righteous rebel: to give primary loyalty to the Kingdom of God and its values; to shape the social contract according to the covenant of grace. At this table let us pray for Christ's living presence that we might be strengthened to become the answer to the prayer we offer every week: *Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

The Rev. Louise F. Westfall, D.Min., Pastor