

June 16th, 2019

Re-Branding Jesus

John 6:1-14

Defcon 4, “Danger, Will Robinson, danger,” that old Star Trek classic: “Red Alert,” or that now classic Apollo 13 misquote “Houston, we have a problem.” We in the Christian Churches should feel as though we should be using these statements regarding our religion today.

I don't know about you, but it really has been feeling like the Jesus of my understanding has been assaulted, kidnapped, and is being held hostage by certain... undesirables. Just a note, a quick Google search, for google is the new oracle of Delphi, shows the minimum combined sentences for these crimes is a total of 38 years in prison. Of course, this varies in severity, from state to state, and based on how well paid a defense attorney is. No offence to any attorneys. I will not be touching on Jesus being misused in, particularly, U.S. politics. That is a whole 'nother sermon.

One of the most obvious places to start is the news... Oh boy. There have been plenty of folks better educated and/or more spiritual than I am who have commented on the abuse patterns by our brother priests in the Catholic Church... But it *does* make for good ratings doesn't it? I'm almost 99% confident that Jesus would have branded these priests vipers and cast them out to repent, rather than perform a coverup and play reverend roulette.

Then there's the handful of priests who have made some pretty bad statements. Take the case of one priest, delivering a funeral homily for an 18-year-old that completed suicide. His parents asked the priest to speak about unity in the face of loss, and the kind of bright young man he was. The priest in question did make the comment that “God awaits us with infinite mercy.” Then promptly told this grieving Catholic congregation, for whom suicide can still be considered an “unforgivable

sin,” that “we must not call what is bad good, what is wrong right.” So, here the grieving family and friends of this young man are informed he’s a mortal sinner rather than providing words of comfort and healing as requested.

Of course, there are the hand full of pastors, priests, and bishops that have made headlines for tweets from their personal, or professional, Twitter accounts. After all Ephesians 4:29 reads: “Let no evil talk come out of your mouths [can I insert keyboards and phones here], but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.” It dawns on me that in a more perfect world Twitter would be banned for clergy people *AND* politicians. Total 1st Amendment violation but a probably much calmer national atmosphere.

And before anyone thinks I’m just picking on priests, during Hurricane Harvey one mega church pastor was refusing to open his church for shelter owing to it being “inaccessible due to flooding.” When videos were taken showing clear routes to that church it changed to “murky water in a parking garage.” The latter could be something serious enough actually to worry about. The former? What Would Jesus Do? Open the temple up to those who don’t have a home anymore? Or turn away the stranger in need? I really hope I don’t have to answer that for you...

Or how about the pastor who tried getting his congregation to donate 54 million dollars for a private jet to spread the good news! (B.T.W. it would be the, not first, not second, not even third, but the fourth that they have!) Seriously?! Seriously? How many homeless meals, homeless shelters, could 54 million dollars fund? How much disaster relief could this provide folks who had been affected by hurricanes, floods, fires, or quakes.

According to UC Berkeley’s Turner Center for Housing Innovation the cost per unit for low income housing is \$425,000 per unit. This money

could easily fund a 100-unit complex, especially since that number is representative of the State, and it would probably be cheaper to build here. I seem to remember Jesus calling an old woman the most generous giver because she had given all she had, and even the Pharisees weren't seeking designer chariots to run around in.

Then there's the pastor that bought his wife a Lamborghini Urus worth over \$200,000 then makes an ask from the church for \$350,000 to fix the church roof! How much are they paying this guy?! I get that the car wasn't paid out of church funds, I don't object at all to a living wage, particularly for degreed, ordained professionals, but dang! Do I need to rehash this or is quoting Acts 20:35 good enough? "In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

Then we have the depictions of Jesus in the U.S. popular cultural context. Our cover this morning is one representation of this Pop Culture Jesus. Here is this Roman Catholic style Jesus icon, but seriously? Seriously? The only thing here remotely Jesus I see here are the robes, and I doubt Jesus wore robes that fine and clean! This Jesus here reeks of the Hollywood culture with the "thumbs up," pointing at you, winking, with that goofy grin you'd expect to see plastered on some ego maniac movie star. I can't see this Jesus telling the disciples to stand aside and let the children come to him. More than not I see this Jesus asking, "where the babes at?"

Then there was the church who tried launching a "Jesus text app" that didn't really turn out all that well. When texting "Jesus" "we need to talk," "Jesus" replies "Can it wait? I'm kinda busy." While this interesting attempt to re-connect people with Jesus may have appealed to a younger generation with algorithm that governed it didn't really have that "Jesus touch." I hope not too many folks got the impression that the Christ child is too busy for humanity. After all Matthew 28:19-20 reads:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

One gen-x phenomenon that really brought out Jesus was the animated series South Park. This often dark, sarcastic show featured an animated Jesus on a cable show called “Jesus and pals.” However, this fictional show shares more in common with “Jerry Springer” than a religious talk show. Then again, many religious talk shows seem to have more in common with “Jerry Springer” than a discourse on faith.

The series also pitted Jesus and Santa in a knock down, drag out, Jesus gets twirled over Santa’s head and then thrown in front of a snowman. Utter rubbish. But rather hilarious if you’re in that state of mind. While this Jesus presents a bit closer interpretation of the Jesus we read about in the Bible, please take a moment to recognize how ironic it is that *South Park*, *SOUTH PARK*, depicts Jesus closer to the Bible version than other pop culture references. However, it is still flawed representation leading viewer to an incomplete understanding of Jesus.

In an article about Pop Culture Jesus, author Billy Kangas states: “But oftentimes in the rush to make Christ cool, communities [of faith] can lose track of the very nature of the incarnation: that God choose to be revealed in a simple man who endured human life in all of its pain and brokenness and revealed in it the fullness of God’s light and life.

Christ did not come with the ephemeral luster of popular fashion but in universal and timeless language of humanity itself, a language that is never exhausted, for it is the wellspring from which all our deepest longings and highest hopes spring.”

The premise for this sermon was when Pastor Jesse was showing some folks down to K-Hall to begin setup for Transweek. One of the individuals made a comment like “I still can’t believe a church is willing

to host us.” Me, being me, promptly turned to Jesse and said “We need to rebrand Jesus.” Because despite all the negative things I’ve brought up we all aware that there are many Christians, many churches, who do right in the name of Jesus.

Despite having been in my current position at The Jesus Center for less than three months I can testify that we need to rebrand Jesus! I had a gentleman, same gender attracted, in at my desk. During the initial needs assessment, it was obvious he was very nervous about being there. When I asked if he was okay, he kind of shrugged. I wasn’t buying it. I lean in and told him that he is just as welcome and just as accepted and just as valued here as anyone else who walks through our doors. He was floored. Seriously?! Seriously. The Jesus Center doesn’t discriminate, even on religious faith. We don’t ask participants about their faith to receive services! The question actually is “Do you have your service card so I can scan you in?” Our mission is to provide help and hope in the name of Jesus.

When we look at today’s scripture do we read Jesus having the disciples seat people on the grass and tell them “okay, guys, make sure the orthodox Jews who follow me get some first... Then maybe the Roman citizens so we don’t upset Caesar... Umm... then let’s go with the Jews that aren’t certain about me... and I guess we can finish up with the foreign folks... yup, sounds good.” No, of course we don’t. We see Jesus perform this miracle for some 5000 men, and who knows how many women and children were seated with them. Worse yet, this wasn’t even a ploy to get folks to listen to him, because Jesus leaves at that point before being arrested. One of the greatest physical miracles written in the New Testament was simply an act of charity to those who came to see him. So, it is with my work, probably why I’m happy where I’m at. And the news (okay, maybe not *all* the news) but a fair chunk is about what we do “wrong,” or at least reporting on people who say we’re doing homeless services wrong.

Take the many churches in Butte County who opened their doors to Camp Fire evacuees, the smaller churches who couldn't take people but did act as distribution points for donations. Or the church from Washington D.C. who showed up to the doors of the Torres Shelter with clothing, food, and hygiene products for survivors? They didn't make many headlines. Think about the folks who work at places like Loaves and Fishes in Sacramento. Headline news? 500 homeless people received a good meal, read all about it! The proverbial Boy Scout who helped the equally proverbial Old Lady cross the street? Not newsworthy. Unless we make it newsworthy.

The major problem is that it is all too common to see all the negative on T.V., in the newspaper (people still get those, right?), on the internet, etc. This is when it becomes our responsibility to spread not only the Good News, but the good news of spreading the Good News! We just celebrated Pentecost, the descent of the Holy Spirit gifting the followers of Jesus with many gifts, including the gift of tongues. In this age where the news is depressing, focused on all that goes wrong, we have at our disposal, not only as a church, but as individuals to each of us be reporters. But in that we are reporters with a beat: Covering the amazing and wondrous works of our brothers and sisters in Christ who believe in his name, who act in his name. And then, we rescue, reclaim, and rebrand the Jesus of our understanding. Restoring his image to one of compassion, service, acceptance, and unconditional love.