

## “The Jesus Difference”

Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – September 3, 2023

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, transform us by your Spirit of Love, so we might be faithful disciples of Christ. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

---

As we settle into fall, after all the excitement of last weekend, I realized that I wanted to preach about Jesus for a while. On the one hand, that might sound like a funny thing for a Christian preacher to say. At some level, all my sermons are about Jesus, right? We are here to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, we spent the whole month of July in the book of Romans, so maybe what I'm craving is to get back into the gospels. It's a bit disconcerting how easily things other than Jesus can take center stage in our hearts and minds.

It's part of the reason we come back to church every Sunday. Because there is so much else out there demanding our attention. And I'm certainly not saying that stuff outside these walls isn't important. That's not the point. It's about our orientation toward all that stuff, and whether it's shaped by Jesus or by the standards of the world, which are decidedly not Jesus-like.

Today's scriptures give us good examples of the difference between these two ways of being in the world. Both are on display in the reading from Matthew. It's so interesting to me that Jesus' words asking his disciples to take up their crosses are preceded by this very personal story of the brief but heated exchange between him

and Peter. So often we get hung up on Peter's role here and the severity of Jesus' reaction. "OMG, Jesus called Peter 'Satan!'" Could there be anything more dramatic or devastating? But what I'm noticing today is the next part where Jesus says, "you are a stumbling block to me." We usually think of Jesus as having a superhuman power to resist temptation. Yet, here he is admitting that Peter's horrified response to the idea that Jesus will suffer and die is causing him serious difficulty. I think it's important that this powerful reminder of Jesus' humanity is connected to the foreshadowing of his suffering and death. It's also important that it's connected to Jesus' explanation of what his suffering and death may mean for his followers. We, too, may be required to take up crosses. We, too, may be tempted to set them aside and seek self-preservation instead.

Because that's it, right? Self-preservation is the temptation here. Peter is focused on what he sees as saving Jesus' life. But Jesus says that attempting to save a life is the surest path to losing it. Sounds a paradox or just craziness to human ears. And maybe it is. But this is the Jesus difference. He's saying that a life that is focused only preserving itself isn't worth living. Finding true life happens when we are willing to give up our selves for the sake of the greater good. That is how we enter into the abundant life of God.

It sounds fancy and aspirational when I put it like that, but that doesn't make it any easier. There's a reason Peter's rebuke was so tempting. Jesus knew it was going to be hard. He didn't follow the dictates of love because he enjoyed suffering. It

wasn't less painful because he was divine. But he trusted in the power of God's compassion to bring wholeness out of brokenness and life out of death. In these verses, he is inviting us into that same trust, that same way of being in the world that sees beyond our own survival.

It's rarely easy, but the stakes are not always life or death. There is another silly meme going around on the internet this week comparing Jesus and Paul and blaming Paul for everything that's wrong with the church today. I don't understand how you can read Paul and come to the conclusion that he was somehow leading people in a different direction than Jesus was. He was one human seeking to understand the new direction of his faith. He was a leader and opinionated for sure, but he didn't ask to have his letters entered into the canon. He was taking how Jesus approached his own life and death and trying to apply it to living in community.

One of the things that was most striking about the early Christian communities was how they brought people together across the normal barriers of first-century life. Rich people and poor people, citizens and non-citizens, Jews and Greeks, slaves and free. It was counter-cultural then, and I would argue it's counter-cultural today. There is so much out there in our world that aims to divide us into affinity groups – politics, hobbies, aesthetics, family structure, age, and so many other categories. In my opinion, one of the most holy things about church, and one of the hardest, is that the Holy Spirit gathers us together with no regard for those divisions at all, and then Paul has the temerity to say we should “love one another with mutual affection.” And

the deeper we get into this section, the more we see that Paul understands how hard that is. For a moment, we're rejoicing in hope and persevering in prayer, and next thing you know, he's telling us to bless those who persecute us!

Has it ever occurred to you that holding a grudge or even just withholding mutual affection is a form of the self-preservation that Jesus condemned even as he was tempted by it? We are attracted by the idea of vengeance because it makes us feel like we are Right and the other person is Wrong. It spins a tale of our virtue and righteousness in contrast to the unworthiness of the one who offended us. It is an attempt to preserve our sense of ourselves, and it ends up making an idol of our own will. There's a reason it's so tempting. Even the writer of Proverbs that Paul is quoting here can't quite let go of the desire. Even as we're being instructed to give food and water to our enemies in need, we're reminded that the side benefit of doing so is that it will drive our enemies nuts, or "heap burning coals on their heads," as Proverbs puts it.

It's no wonder it's hard to live as Jesus-followers. There is much we are asked to give up. Safety, self-preservation, prioritizing ourselves over others – these are things that a "normal" person might consider entirely reasonable values. But Jesus is asking for something different, something beyond all that. Jesus is telling us that the path to abundant life requires holding all of that a lot more lightly than we would naturally. And two thousand years later, we're still trying to figure that out.

There is no doubt that the church and the societies it has influenced have required this kind of sacrificial living in markedly different degree from different populations. There are some who have risen to prominence and authority within the church or government, making basically no sacrifice at all. There are others, entire demographics over generations, who have always been required to give up their well-being for the benefit of others. So for us to determine what it means for us to “take up our cross” is a personal process of discernment, which must be held on conversation with our position in society. Can we even see the ways in which others have sacrificed to benefit us? Have we questioned the structures that require of us more than is healthy or holy? What would have to change for us to truly “love one another with mutual affection”? How much more deeply would we have to get to know one another? How many walls that our aching hearts have constructed would have to come down?

This is part of the work of being church. It’s part of what it means to follow Jesus. Jesus asks us to hold our selves much more lightly than we’re accustomed to, while also assuring us that we are precious in the sight of God. And maybe that’s the trick of it. Maybe when we truly lean into the truth of our preciousness in the eyes of God, we can let go of worrying about how the world sees us. We can let go of being misunderstood or underestimated or left out. When we lean into the love that makes us one, we don’t have to focus on building up our own power anymore. And then we will truly find abundant life. Hallelujah and Amen.