

Text: Ephesians 4:17-24
As truth is in Jesus.

Ruskin Falls, March 31, 2019
Pulaski Heights Presbyterian Church
4th Sunday in Lent

TEXT (English translation: NRSV)

Now this I affirm and insist on in the Lord: you must no longer live as the Gentiles live, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart. They have lost all sensitivity and have abandoned themselves to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. That is not the way you learned Christ! For surely you have heard about him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus. You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

(1)

It is through Jesus Christ that you meet with the new self that God desires for you to clothe yourself with. Christ lived on earth according to the likeness of God, in true righteousness and holiness. In him is the truth that God intends for you to know regarding who you are and how you should live. In him is the truth that conforms *your* self and *your* life to God's good will and way. It is as you and I study, learn from, and come to know Jesus, and as we let *our* lives be changed by how *he* lived, that we can put away our old self and clothe ourselves with the new self that is in keeping with the righteousness and holiness of God.

This morning I want to sketch a picture of this Jesus who lived according to the likeness of God and whom we are to let ourselves be changed by. Admittedly, no picture of Jesus drawn by any of us is beyond being added to, improved on, and corrected. No matter how exactly grounded in Scripture one's picture of Jesus may be, it is colored and shaped by one's way of *interpreting* Scripture. And the very fact that there are differing ways of interpreting Scripture makes for differences in the respective pictures of Jesus that people draw.

Moreover, there are always new things to be learned regarding Jesus, both from the Bible and from other sources. New knowledge, new insights, and new perspectives are gained as your faith matures, as you study the Bible harder, and as new experiences come your way. And such things as these can be expected to call forth changes in your picture of Jesus. So, the picture I'm offering today is one among other possible pictures. Neither this picture of Jesus nor anyone else's is beyond need of supplementation, modification, and correction through maturation, through study, and through exposure to new experiences and perspectives. Keep, therefore, in mind: knowledge of Jesus is not so much something we *have*, as it is something we work *toward* and grow *into* by remaining always open to learning something new, and remaining always open to being surprised by things we had not noticed or realized before.

The picture of Jesus I'm about to draw is not original with me. It's the one that was drawn years ago by the Swiss theologian, Karl Barth (see his *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, pp.166-192). I see in Barth's picture a compelling interpretation of what the Bible gives us to see and hear and acknowledge regarding Jesus's life; and today I want to direct you toward that picture, beginning with this question: Just how did he live, this Jesus who lived on earth according to the likeness of God?

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For starters, he lived amidst and suffered under much *humiliation*.

Jesus was born poor, and he died by execution as a criminal. His life was lacking in worldly glamor, honor, and achievement. Many people took offense at things he said and did. His own townspeople regarded him skeptically and discounted his worth. Some of his own relatives suspected him of being somewhere between disturbingly eccentric and outright crazy. He was criticized by many people for being distastefully festive with persons of dubious character. He owned nothing and had, as he himself put it, no place to lay his head. He was dependent on the hospitality and charity of others to meet his needs.

Temple leaders looked down on him as a shameless blasphemer, palace authorities looked down on him as a rebellious trouble-maker, and the soldiers who crucified him heaped derision on him in his final hours. Of course, humiliation was one of the aims of a crucifixion. Crucifixion inflicted not only pain and suffering, but also humiliation. It forced a person to die excruciatingly slowly on public display, being scoffed at by onlookers and picked on by scavenger birds and insects. Victims died agonized, bloody, filthy, and naked (later paintings of Jesus to the contrary, there were no towels around the waist of a criminal on a cross!). And to make matters even worse, Jesus's own would-be *followers* – those he called his “disciples” – were constantly uncertain what to make of him, unsure how to understand him, and, in the end, unready to stand by him. They betrayed, denied, and abandoned Jesus and his cause.

In a word: Jesus lived and Jesus died *humiliated* by the world around him.

(3)

Also, Jesus demonstrated a preference for the company of people who themselves had had experience with humiliation.

When we look at the kind of people he generally chose to spend time with, it's as if he had a bias in favor of the weak, the meek, and the lowly, over against the socially influential, the politically powerful, and the materially comfortable. And note well: it was not the great urban centers that Jesus chose as locations for his work, but rather the small, poverty-stricken villages along the dusty back roads of Galilee. Moreover, he tended to ignore those who, to all appearances, were morally upright, in favor of the company of people looked down on scorned as uncouth and unclean sinners whose proximity good taste cannot stand. Also he outraged fellow Jews by crossing racial lines and embracing the company of non-Jews.

In a word: Jesus took this world's way of measuring greatness and insignificance, weakness and strength, beauty and ugliness, sickness and health, morality and immorality, and he stood it on its head by constantly embracing precisely the sat-upon and spat-upon of this world, the scorned and the broken, the detested and the despised, the humiliated.

(4)

Finally, even amidst his own and others' humiliating circumstances, Jesus displayed a remarkable *freedom* both in relation to the *reigning* order of things in this world, and in relation to existing movements set on *changing* the order of things.

Jesus did consistently take the side of those who were being crushed by the world as it is. Yet, he was not a reformer working to replace the old order with a new one through some social,

political, economic, moral, or religious program. He did not identify himself with any particular party. He did not set up his own party in competition with the others. He identified himself neither with the existing order nor with any of the reform movements of his day, such as the Pharisees, the Essenes, that of John the Baptizer, and others. He treated all worldly orders, both the existing order and all programs set on reforming the existing order, as severely limited in what they actually can accomplish. He treated them as conditioned by human habit in ways that render them all inevitably fallible and flawed. He treated them as strictly relative and only provisional. Also, he was regarded with equal suspicion and disapproval by the representatives of the ruling order *and* by the representatives of the reform movements. He treated *no* particular way of ordering society as absolutely necessary, and he clashed with *all* existing or proposed ways of ordering society. Still he did not work to overthrow, replace, or amend any of them. Curiously, in fact, Jesus tolerated and accepted *some* traditional social values and institutions that we might think he should have attacked and worked to set aside.

Jesus showed respect for the traditional order of the *family*. He even emphasized caring for one's parents as being of greater importance than tending to otherwise important religious duties. Still, he also showed respect for the *temple*. He took it seriously as the house of God and taught others to do the same. He refused to separate himself from the temple, even though the persons who controlled it – the Sadducees – were some of the very folks most responsible for the social oppression Jesus wanted to free people from.

Nor did Jesus separate himself from the Galilean synagogues and their traditionalism regarding *religious Law*. He even emphasized that he had come not to destroy but to fulfill the Law, and he talked about the importance of even seemingly minute religious regulations.

Nor did Jesus come into direct conflict with the *economic* relationships and obligations of his time. For example, he talked about masters and slaves without stopping to criticize the practice of slavery, and he talked about the poor as if there'll always be people who are poor.

Nor did Jesus, prior to his final week, come into direct conflict with agencies of *political law and order*. Though calling the present order corrupt, Jesus talked about courts, prisons, and executive powers without further criticism; and he even talked about tyrants without insisting on their overthrow; and he talked of one despotic governor as if that tyrant should be obeyed. And even while there's evidence of Jesus's disdain for Roman imperialism and militarism, he was known to befriend Roman soldiers, and he endorsed no party's plan for overthrowing Rome.

In a word: Jesus lived out a kind of *passive conservatism*. He acknowledged, reckoned with, and subjected himself to, the existing order of things. And he advised disciples to do the same.

But, that doesn't mean he gave his endorsement to the present order of things. Again, Jesus treated everything about the *existing* order as limited, relative, fallible, flawed, and merely provisional. At the heart of his mission was his proclamation that the kingdom of God has come among us, and that that kingdom is utterly *different from*, even radically *opposed to*, and infinitely *better than*, any and all our human ways of ordering human life.

As regards the *temple*, for example, he made it plain that the temple is not an absolutely good thing, and that there is something in what Jesus himself was up to, that is *greater* even than the temple. As regards *family*, Jesus often assaulted traditional family values. He said his real family is not those whom society recognizes as his family, but rather those who hear and heed

his word. When a man who wanted to become Jesus's disciple wanted first to go bid his family farewell, Jesus told him, in effect, to forget his family and concentrate on the work that Jesus was giving him to do. Another who wanted to be his disciple asked to be allowed first to go bury his deceased father, and Jesus told the man he can't both be a disciple and keep to a traditional focus on the family. Far from promoting traditional family values, Jesus counseled that becoming his disciple would stress and strain and sometimes even break one's family ties. As regards the *religious Law*, Jesus constantly and openly breached prevailing religious traditions and customs. He and his disciples were forever being criticized for neglecting prescribed rituals and sacrifices. Time and again, he and his disciples offended people by violating the rules for cleanliness and purity, and for violating the sacred law regarding Sabbath observance. He talked about the kingdom of God as being greater and better than any laws, greater and better even than the law of the Sabbath. As regards the *economic order*, Jesus insisted, particularly in his parables and in his daily living, that single-minded concentration on serving God's coming kingdom is infinitely better and more important than the self-serving pursuit of material gain and profit. The same holds with respect to *political law and order*. Time and again, Jesus insisted that whole-hearted loyalty to God's coming kingdom is infinitely more important than is loyalty to any worldly kingdom, empire, or nation. And, all this got Jesus into lots of trouble with persons of influence and power. In the end, it even got him crucified.

In an important sense, Jesus did not do battle with the ways of the world. He didn't declare a crusade against ungodly ways of organizing life and society. He didn't join any one party program in opposition to other party programs. But he did do this: he proclaimed and served the coming of the kingdom of the God of grace and love, whose presence already is making itself known and effective in and through Jesus's own life and mission. Jesus declared God's coming kingdom to be better than and superior to all the ways that humankind has found, for ordering human life and society. He declared that, in the light of God's coming kingdom, this world – even this world at its most caring and concerned *best!* – is demonically dominated by the attitudes, postures, and ways of sin – and, so, is a world at odds with God. And doing *that*, got Jesus killed – executed – crucified. There is evil at work in this world which Jesus opposed by proclaiming and serving the kingdom of God. And yet, at the same time, he did not so much *oppose*, as let himself be struck down *by*, the very evil whose overcoming was his aim. In a word, Jesus talked and lived as if the kingdom of God that has become effective in the world through him, manifests itself in *opposition* to and as a *challenge* to *all* our present ways of ordering human life – be they the way of traditional values, be they the way of changing values, be they the ways of the old regime or be they programs for reform. There is, says Jesus, something about all our human ways of organizing and ordering life, that actually *offends* God.

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And that, I would say, is the biblical picture of the Jesus in whom we meet with God's truth regarding who we are and how we should live. It is a picture that focuses us squarely *on* and that admonishes and challenges us urgently *with* such *questions* as these: How does one live *in* without being *of* this world? How can we *relish* life and *enjoy* this world that our gracious and loving God *intends* to be relished and enjoyed, without becoming *distant* from God's good will and way, and without draping ourselves in *resistance and opposition* to God? How can we relish life and enjoy this world *truly* as a blessing and gift from the very God whom the world as it is has turned its back on and grown indifferent toward? And the *answer* to such questions is always this: *Study, learn from, and grow to know Jesus, and let your life be changed by how he lived, putting away your old self and clothing yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. Amen.*