

DO YOU LIKE JESUS?

Do you like Jesus? One reply to such a question is, “Which Jesus are we talking about?” There is the anemic one: like Mother, like Son – more virginal than male. That is the Jesus I mostly heard about in Sunday School when I was a boy. Fortunately that was not the only version I heard about, but it still took a while to get over it.

We do have nearly endless versions of Jesus floating around. That may be a good thing, giving more people a chance to identify and come into one fold or another. But sometimes it seems to me that not many people like Jesus. They may worship, honor, adore in some way, but like? “Like” is perhaps not very relevant for many followers. Isn’t being the Christ – the Son of God – enough? What has “like” got to do with it? Besides, liking Him is not really the point or purpose. He is our Savior. So letting any personal feelings of like or dislike get into it only distracts us.

Maybe so, but from my perspective, not letting personal feelings into it is what keeps Christianity somewhere between boring and blasé. Liking Jesus does not seem irrelevant to me. It is not an obtuse or unimportant question. “Like” is where the loyalty comes from. “Like” is not the end, but it is at least the beginning of where the passion and caring come from. Some people think there is no connection between like and love. They say things like, “Well, I don’t have to like you, but I can still love you.” Yes, well, they can keep that kind of love. I have no use for it and no respect for it. If I don’t even like you, then love is only a charade – a pretense so I can go on feeling spiritually superior. That way I don’t have to deal with real or serious principles of relationship. I don’t have to worry about real forgiveness or making amends or getting honest about what has gone wrong.

I think that a genuine liking is at the base of every authentic love. Love is far greater and deeper and longer lasting, but true love begins with liking and moves on from there. If I cannot even like someone, how can I claim to love them, when love is a higher, more advanced dimension of the same connection? I want my love to have some real meaning. I assume that when other people love me, that has personal meaning for me as well. And if God loves me, I do not take that to mean some generic, nonpersonal, “it doesn’t really matter” kind of ethereal precept that has little or nothing to do with who I am or what is going on in my life.

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Is that part of the problem? When we claim and proclaim that God loves someone, do they assume it is just some vague generality? They do not feel any jolt of surprise or awakening? They do not realize that this changes everything in, around, and about their entire lives?

If I know John and Mary but they do not know each other very well yet, and if Mary knows that John and I are good friends and I tell her that John is strongly attracted to her and even wondering if he is falling in love with her, there is always a big reaction. She is “all ears.” She may not believe it yet, but she is very interested. She is even thrilled. It may not develop, it may not go much further, but it is certainly not a matter of indifference.

But if I tell Mary that the Omnipotent, Omniscient Creator Of All The Universes loves her and there is no elation, no curiosity, no reaction or response from Mary, then how is that possible? Either Mary does not think I have any notion of what I am talking about, or she has a very different understanding of what “love” means. Love is about yawn, ho-hum, “So what?” – “Who cares?” Love is about vague principles of another dimension but nothing personal; nothing that matters in the here and now; nothing that will change reality as we know it.

In any case, I dream of a church where people truly and sincerely *like* Jesus. If respect and admiration move on into liking Him, then perhaps one day we will come to *really* love Him. Then who knows where it will end? At least it will not leave us in the indifference, the neglect, the pretense, the hypocrisy that so often characterizes the church in our time.

And so, redundant or not, I am going to spend some sermon time between now and Holy Week talking about things I like and notice about Jesus. If we truly like Jesus, Good Friday is unbearable. If the like has turned into love, it makes it even worse. There is no resolving the tension or the contradiction between Jesus and our world. But that is the risk we take if we get close to Him. If Easter and Pentecost come in the midst of that unbearable tension, then life here is a whole new ball game. Life can never look the same again. It is no longer mere theory or metaphor or something we only want to talk about in our spare time.

So I am asking: Do you like Jesus?

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It seems pretty clear that the early followers were attracted to Jesus for few if any of the reasons His followers use to attract people into the church today. Jesus was not nearly as “nice” as people picture Him today. People with a serious mission and purpose rarely seem very “nice” to those around them. Many of us would like to think that Jesus taught about “unconditional love” – especially if we do not want to make any significant changes in our own lives. But there is no evidence that this was part of Jesus’ agenda.

The early followers seem to have been attracted to Jesus first because Jesus was part of the mission and purpose of John the Baptist. They met Jesus in a religious movement that they themselves were already engaged in. John the Baptist was claiming that the true Messiah was already here in the world and about to appear, and John claimed that this was a reason for some very dramatic changes and preparations. *“Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.”* We are so familiar with the statement that few of us even hear it anymore. But many people heard it in John’s time, and Jesus not only heard it but it became the core of His own early preaching.

After John was arrested, Jesus became the leader of John’s movement. Jesus’ own top disciples (Peter, Andrew, James, John) had been followers of John the Baptist first. But from that somewhat natural beginning, these and other disciples became more and more intrigued by what Jesus was like: what He preached; how He was able to heal; what He seemed to care about; what He was asking of them. But some people were also drawn to Jesus by the way in which He was living His own life. No one they had ever known was taking personal, interior, obedient prayer as completely seriously as Jesus was.

It is hard work to come to terms with Jesus of Nazareth. At first glance, He seems to do nothing we can quickly point to or understand as the reason for His growing fame. He left no new continent; invented no new machines. He won no huge battles; acquired no huge fortune. His influence does not seem to be material or physical. At first it leaves us with the impression that Jesus really was not “all that much.” Many of us can remember as children thinking that Jesus was a rather drab and colorless kind of hero. Why would anyone even get worked up enough to bother to put Him to death?

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It is perplexing that such a man should have become the most influential man who ever lived. It is even more astounding to realize that more than any other person, people claim to pick Jesus as the man they most wish to emulate, most want to be like.

For a long time I have been convinced that people come to the awareness of Jesus the Christ by getting to know Jesus first as a man. We are all comparable, in our religious experience, to the person who picks up an exciting novel and quickly turns to the last three pages to see how the story ends. This story ends, of course, with Jesus being proclaimed as Lord and Savior and Son of God.

But like the person who reads the end of the story first, we are tempted to assume that we know the story, having learned its ending, without ever really understanding how or where the ending came from. Growing up in church or Sunday School, even being part of our culture and society, we have mostly learned about the end of the story in just this way. That is, we are handed a fast and shallow ending tacked on by those who have never studied the story very carefully themselves. If we are ever to be truly moved by it, we must decide to find out how the story developed and how it came to its remarkable conclusion.

Jesus' favorite name for Himself was "Son of Man." The prophetic overtones of that title notwithstanding, it seems clear that Jesus' plan was for the people around Him to get to know Him first as a man. Jesus never hid His identity from those who came to realize it. But He often admonished His followers, and even those He healed, not to go shouting their conclusions to others. Jesus confronted people with His deeds and His Message and then left them to arrive at whatever conclusions they would or could come to. (At least this was true up until Palm Sunday.)

Is there any authentic way to circumvent or shortcut this process? The church has often tried to find some faster way to convert each new generation. It has tried fear and terrorism; it has used various kinds of bribes and promises; it has tried to impress people with numerous philosophical and theological arguments; it has used all manner of propaganda techniques; it has exploited all the psychological principles of shame, blame, and fame; it has threatened social ostracism; it has played the violins for every known human emotion.

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These techniques have not been without their results. I have tried them all, and they each bring results with some people. The problem is that while they can be used so sell “churchism” and to swell the church rolls, they unfortunately produce church members rather than Christians.

Down through the ages, the church has been forced back to the conclusion again and again that the only way a person can genuinely come into the Christian Faith is to be confronted by the *man* Jesus – His deeds, His teachings, His personhood – and then left to come to their own conclusions.

It will be my purpose to draw your attention to various incidents, deeds, and teachings that raise questions and suggest some common and some not-so-common conclusions about what manner of man Jesus really was. Insofar as possible, and for as long as possible, I will stay away from the end of the story and from the conclusions that various groups and individuals have come to regarding Jesus. It is my hope, of course, that all of us will feel again the strange experience of being confronted by this man.

What manner of man was Jesus? To bring the question into sharper focus, I return to the Scripture reading which speaks of a few events in one day in the life of Jesus. He healed His friend’s mother-in-law of a fever by touching her. They brought to Him people who were sick and troubled, and He healed them of whatever was wrong with them. In these deeds, Jesus showed Himself to be a man of great compassion and concern for individuals who had no tie or hold on Him of any kind.

As a consequence of these deeds, however they took place, some people were drawn to the power and quality of life which Jesus displayed. But though Jesus had awakened in them their best and highest motives, He also repelled many of them. The scribe who would have followed Jesus was confronted by Him with a way of life necessary to any sincere follower. Jesus could not offer him security or safety in this world; He Himself had “nowhere to lay his head.” To the sick and troubled, Jesus was compassionate and kind. For Himself and His followers, He often seemed quite harsh and unyielding, ruling out the search for security, the gathering of possessions, and the owning of property as life’s primary goal.

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A second man was ready to follow Him, having only to care for one last obligation: to bury his dead or dying father. To the sick and troubled, Jesus had been full of kindness and tireless in His aid. This man could only have expected sympathy and understanding to greet his announcement. But for Himself and His followers, Jesus had a very different code. He turned on the man with what sounds to us like some of the cruelest words we can imagine: *“Leave the dead to bury their own dead, and come follow me.”*

No matter how many spoons full of sugar you pour on that medicine, it is a hard word to say to a man with a dying father. It stabs deep, not only into the sorrow of one person, but also into the honor and respect that civilization teaches us to have for our parents. It even seems to contradict one of the Ten Commandments. If we think we know this Jesus, tell me: Why didn't Jesus heal the man's father? Would that not have solved the whole dilemma?

Many people had cause to bless and thank this man from afar, but only a dwindling handful could stand to stay near Him for very long. Has that changed very much in the last two thousand years? Some of us are still guilty of trying to believe only in the half of Jesus that we approve of.

So off Jesus went in a boat with His closest followers. And onto this sea of Galilee there came a great storm. In fear and panic, His friends awaken Jesus from His sleep. But the kind and sympathetic preacher of love turned on them in disgust and derided them, saying, *“Why are you such cowards, O men of little faith?”*

“Then he arose and rebuked the wind and the sea, and there was a great calm.”

I present to you Jesus of Nazareth – not the Christ of the whole vast drama, but Jesus of Nazareth – and a few incidents reported about one day in His life. They reveal Him to be a man we hardly know. They highlight many things about Him which we consistently dismiss when we think about following Him. Hopefully I leave you today precisely where Jesus' own disciples found themselves at the close of this day. And it was with this query on their lips, as talking to each other they said with both wonder and urgency: *“What sort of man is this?”*