

The Offensive Jesus Who Sends Us As His Offense

**A Sermon by Pastor John W. Bengston
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Henry G. Brinton, a Presbyterian Pastor serving in Fairfax, Virginia, has suggested that perhaps the WWJD bracelets that were quite the rage a few short years ago could have a different meaning than the original wording which was “What Would Jesus Do?” He thinks we should let WWJD stand for “What would Jesus Drive?” Considering the cost of fuel, the environmental impact, the challenging economy, “What Would Jesus Drive?”

Then what would you think if Pastor Pederson or I stood in this pulpit and gave an answer to that question? Would you listen? Be offended? Consider it meddling? Would you think to yourself, “I’ll decide what I drive, and I don’t need any help from you.” Or, “It sounds like you’re one of those crazy environmentalists, and that’s far too political for this church.”

When Jesus began to preach in his hometown synagogue... Oh, by the way, answer this question to yourself: what is his hometown? Did you come up with Nazareth? In any event, when he did begin his teaching in that synagogue, people took offense at him. They said, “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon and are not his sisters here with us?” The social structure in Palestine two millenniums ago was far different than what we know. Asking the question about Jesus being a carpenter is a key to understanding this passage. What the people were saying is that, “He was born into the family of a carpenter which means that all the males of that father are carpenters just by their birth. His brothers are named implying that they, too, are carpenters. His sisters are not named, but by custom they would all have been married to carpenters. One’s social station and means of making a living were prescribed by the condition of birth, not by individual choice. The response of the people could be stated in a more vernacular something like, “Who does he think he is?”

For Jesus to presume to take the role of a rabbi violated the predictable patterns and roles in Nazareth, Palestine, and the entire Middle East of 20 centuries past. And the people took offense at him. The original word translated as “offense” is the word for “scandal.” Jesus teaching in the synagogue was a scandal; that’s how it struck the citizens of Nazareth. This is not the only incident in which Jesus experienced rejection and resistance. Earlier in Mark, the same people in Nazareth responded to Jesus by saying, “He’s gone out of his mind” (Mark 3:31) or as translated in the Today’s English Version where we read, “He’s gone mad.” When we read these texts, it is difficult for us to really get into the dynamics of the setting and appreciate the offense felt by the townspeople.

We have so much more latitude. The American myth is that “You can be anything you want to be.” We know that’s not really true, but we do know that some have reached rather exalted positions in government, business, education, medicine, and other fields that had

no family ties or “ins” to those fields of endeavor. If I followed my father, I would have been a carpenter on the railroad in the Bridge and Building Department which was my father’s employment from the time of his immigration until his retirement. I had other choices as did you. In this society, we are encouraged to weigh our options.

The example in today’s reading from Mark which contains the offense taken serves to point ahead to the rejection of Jesus demonstrated by his crucifixion at the conclusion of Mark’s Gospel. The Word of the Lord which offers us so much comfort, hope, and peace, frequently also causes resistance, consternation, and conflict, even in us.

From Nazareth, Jesus walks to other villages and then sends his disciples out two by two with some specific instructions. Jesus gives them authority to carry out the ministry of the Gospel and also tells them not to take any bread (or food), no bag (extra clothing), and no money. They were to take a staff. Those items that would ensure their comfort they had to leave behind, had to relinquish. That which signified a responsibility, they were ordered to carry: a staff.

What’s a staff. No doubt, it would have referred to a shepherd’s staff, for they were to be shepherds caring for the flock, in this case, God’s children. The word we use to refer to the ordained in our Lutheran tradition is “Pastor” which means “shepherd.” Jesus wants all of his disciples to be shepherds, bearers of the Gospel and caretakers of others.

When I served Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Falls Church, Virginia, the Bishop came to officiate at a special service one Sunday. A member of that congregation who came from Germany after WWII and carried a beautiful German accent asked me when she learned that the Bishop was coming, “Is he going to bring his “schtick? I don’t like his “schtick.” We Lutherans have just lately come to use some of the ancient symbols of the church, the Bishop’s staff being one of them. But all disciples are to take with them a staff, if not literally, then at least in their minds and hearts as a reminder that we are all shepherds, representatives of Christ to our neighbors near and far.

All of this points to the culmination of Jesus’ ministry where the Good Shepherd gives his life for the sheep, for us. He loves us so deeply and dearly that he willingly died for us that we might be forgiven and restored to the Father Almighty. It took the cross to accomplish our redemption. It was no easy road for the Lord Jesus, nor should we expect the Christian life to be without challenges, struggles, and conflicts.

Clarence Jordan, a visionary pastor of the middle part of the last century, a Biblical scholar and determined leader, established Koinonia Farm, an interracial agricultural community outside of Americus, Georgia, about 60 years ago, in the 40’s. Clarence Jordan wore overalls most of the time, for he was out in the fields at Koinonia Farm working with this newly formed community. As you can imagine, his neighbors were not very happy about the work he was doing. One day, Clarence Jordan went to visit a seminary friend who had just lead the congregation he served in a major building program of which he was very proud. That evening the pastor gave Clarence Jordan a tour showing him all the fine things incorporated in the building. They had architecturally

designed pews not selected from a catalogue, imported stained glass, the latest in lighting and sound. As they stepped out the front door, the pastor was very pleased to point out the illuminated cross on top of the steeple and proudly announced to Clarence Jordan, "That cross alone cost us \$10,000."

Clarence Jordan replied, "You got cheated. Time was when Christians could get them for free." Meaning, of course, that many Christians have been martyred for the faith.

It's not just the crosses we look up to or even wear that we need, but we are to take that cruciform shape in all we do. Christ Jesus invites us, calls us, to go out on a faith journey daily, taking with us not the trappings of the world, but only his staff demonstrating our trust in him alone. We are in the green season of the Church Year, the six months when we are to continually ask ourselves: how are we growing in grace and discipleship? What deeper understanding fills my mind and heart as a result of my life of prayer and contemplation? Do I devote time to exercise my faith in study and service? Do I take offense at the Gospel of Christ Jesus?

All our growth in faith does not make God's love any greater nor our salvation any more secure. That's already been completed in Christ Jesus. In this green season, our growth enables us to be more consistent so that our words and deeds match, our "I believe" and our "I do" look the same. Or as we have heard, we walk the talk.

Lord, open our minds and hearts to hear your Word with new ears and a fresh mind. Give us the power to carry your staff and be caregivers in your name. Transform us into your new creation, and help us not to take offense when you work on us making us more like Christ Jesus. Amen.