

Know Jesus. No Peace?

Joe Hill

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This Sunday's texts:

Deuteronomy 30:11-18

Romans 5:6-11

Luke 12:49-53

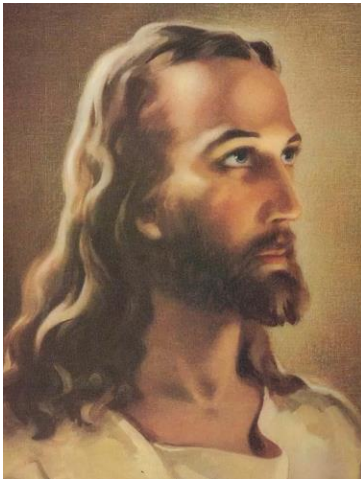
The gospel reading this morning comes first from Luke 12:49-53:

[Jesus said,] "I have come to bring fire on earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to undergo, and what constraint I am under until it is completed! Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

The gospel of the Lord. Good morning! And greetings in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Now I have a question for you, to think through this morning, as we get started. What does Jesus look like? Just mull it over in your head. What does Jesus look like? I'm going to guess that some particular things come to mind. We often have things that we think of when we think about what Jesus looks like. And perhaps, we picture something like this:

1



He's got soft features. There's the hair. There's the beard and the robe. For some reason, we think that Jesus is a well-manicured white guy with a beard.

2

That's why many people can look at this next picture here and just as likely see Jesus as they can Obi-Wan Kenobi from Star Wars.



¹ Painting by Warner Sallman, "Head of Christ", 1941

² Ewan McGregor as Obi Wan Kenobi in *Star War: Episode II – Attack of the Clones*, 2002

This is really interesting to me and here's why. Because the Bible does not say anything about what Jesus looks like. Yet, we all recognize this [Sallman painting] as Jesus. What that means for us is that the picture we have in our minds of what Jesus looks like comes entirely from sources that are not the scriptures. Here's why I bring it up.

This is not just something that happens with the way we think about what Jesus looks like - the picture we have of Jesus in our minds, not just of what he looks like, but also of who he is and what he was like. Sometimes stuff from outside of the Bible gets mixed in, from the culture we live in, from the world around us, and from the media we consume. And for us, it's easy to end up with a picture of Jesus who likes all of the things we like, agrees with the things we think already, condemns the things we don't like, and isn't all that much like the Jesus of the scriptures.

So what's important for those of us here today who have faith, who proclaim faith in the Jesus of the Bible is that we would be humble enough to let the Bible and the Bible alone be the thing that teaches us who Jesus Christ is. And that when we come across things in scripture, perhaps like today's text, that seems at odds with the picture of Jesus you have in your mind, we would all have the humility together to recognize that when who we think Jesus is and what the scriptures say he is are at odds, it is us, and not God's word, that is off-base.

My invitation to you today is if you are here and you have doubts, you're not sure about Jesus, or maybe you wouldn't even consider yourself a person of faith, you don't believe, I'm glad you're here. I want to extend the invitation to you to open up your mind and consider whether or not this Jesus that you have questions or concerns about is really the Jesus of the scriptures and perhaps not something else.

Wherever you are today, I suspect that today's text might sit in a little bit of tension with the picture you have of who Jesus is in your mind. And that's actually a really good thing for us. It's why throughout all of the reading through the S.O.A.P. Bible reading plan that we've been doing over the course of this last week, I zeroed in on this particular text, instead of brushing over it for something that might have felt easier to preach. This is important for us because it's a great opportunity for us to conform the picture we have of Jesus more and more to who he really is, who he really claimed to be.

So, today let's get into this teaching of Jesus. I've got to be honest. As we do, you might be thinking that this saying of Jesus, this teaching, this scripture doesn't seem like he's all that "Christ-like." Right? On the one hand, we hear the

Bible talk about Jesus as the Prince of Peace. And yet today, we hear him say “Did you think I came to bring peace? No! Not peace, but division. To separate mother from daughter, father from son.”³ Now that’s a verse you’re never going to see on those inspirational Christian coffee mugs. Right? And yet, my hope for us today as we dig in, is that these challenging words of Jesus, as we look into them, we would see that there is good news to be found. That in these challenging words of Jesus, we would find a message of hope for all people. So let’s get in. This text is perhaps a little troubling for you. It might seem out of character for Jesus, the Prince of Peace to make himself the point of division. But here’s what’s happening. It’s not just happening in this specific text. It’s a theme throughout all of the gospels. It points to a greater truth of who Jesus is. And it is this.

We aren’t allowed to be indecisive about Jesus. He doesn’t give us that option. And he never intended to. The things Jesus did in his life, the things he taught, and the things he said caused people to ask the question over and over again. Who is this man? It happens all over the gospels. I’m going to highlight only a couple of examples, just a few among many.

In Mark 4, Jesus calms a stormy sea and the disciples who are there are witnesses to his presence. They say, “Who is this? That even the wind and the waves obey him.”⁴ In Luke 5:21, Jesus heals and forgives the sins of a crippled man and the Pharisees who were in his presence wondered to themselves, “Who is this man who speaks as if he is God?” In Matthew 16, Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do people say I am?” and then more directly, “Who do you think I am?”⁵

This is the most divisive question in all of history because it comes to each and every one of us and the answer we absolutely cannot give is “I’m not really sure it matters one way or another.” Either he is or he is not who he claimed to be. The most important question and the most consequential question ever asked because he claims that eternity depends on it. Because Jesus doesn’t just claim to be a wise man or a good teacher – someone who makes nice suggestions that you can apply to your life if you feel like it. He says he is the one through whom all things were created, the one who would redeem the world, and that only through him could people find forgiveness of sins, and new and everlasting life. Jesus claimed to be king over all of creation. The one who would overcome sin and conquer death. And I’m here to say that I believe those things are true about Jesus Christ, whether someone believes them or not.

³ Luke 12:50, 53

⁴ Mark 4: 39, 41

⁵ Matthew 16:13, 15

We often hear this phrase used. “Have made Jesus the lord of your life?” But I want to say today, in no uncertain terms, that it is not our job to make Jesus the lord of our life, because he already is. He is the lord and the savior of our lives and what we do then is respond in faith and recognize the rightful claim he has over our lives.

So we come to that divisive question again. Who do you believe Jesus is? Do you recognize his claim over your life? Jesus says some will and some won't. There'll be five in a family. Two will and three won't. A father will, but his son won't. A daughter will, but her mother won't. Jesus said I came to bring division. These words seem harsh. I know. They can even seem un-Christ-like. And yet the reality is they're actually good news for you and me. They're good news for all people. And here is why.

The life and teachings of Jesus, his death, his resurrection, and his ascension, draw a line. And we don't get to stand on that line and be indecisive. The claims that Jesus made about himself, they're either true and they are THE truth, or they are lies. If they're lies, then none of this matters. The apostle, Paul, himself, says “if Jesus was not raised from the dead, ... then those who put their faith in him are to be pitied the most of all people on this earth”⁶ But if he did rise, if his words are true, then nothing matters more. Jesus draws a line and says some people are on one side, and some are on the other. Some are in and some are out. And if Jesus is who he says he is, then the most important question in this life is which side of that line are you on?

That's the question I want you to think about today. Do you know which side of the line you're on?

There are many people in this culture, in this world that we live in. I've heard it from Christians too. They believe something like this about that line. They say “I'm going to heaven because I've been a good person.” But here's the problem with that way of thinking. How do you really know? History is covered with the scars of people who have done horrible things with all of the best intentions, thinking all along the way, “I'm the good guy.” Yet, when we draw that line for ourselves, when we imagine where we fall, most people are going to imagine themselves on the “I'm a good person” side of the line.

But the teachings, the word, and the work of Jesus speak good news into this way of thinking. How can you really know if you've been all that good?

Here's a thought experiment for you. You can do it for yourself and see “do I have confidence in the good life that I'm living?” Each one of us here one day is

⁶ 1 Corinthians 15: 14-19

going to stand before God. We're going to stand before the creator of all things, the inventor of justice, the one who authored this life that we live, the very life that we have been polluting and perverting with sin and evil ever since. Which one of us is going to stand with confidence before the lord on that day and say "The life that I lived was so good that I deserve to go on living it for all of eternity in your perfect kingdom, Lord. So let me in."?

I suspect that the words that Jesus spoke to his disciple Peter as he knelt down around the table of his last supper and washed his disciples' feet are relevant in this situation. He said to him, "Unless I wash your feet, unless I wash, you have no part with me."⁷

The gospel is divisive because it draws that line. It says that some people are in and some aren't. And yet, the gospel is good news because it says that no matter who you are, where you've been, what you've done, no matter how much of a screw-up you may feel like you have been in this life, maybe even how much of a screw-up you have no idea you really are in this life, there is a way you can know with 100% certainty which side of the line you are on. How do you know?

Jesus gives us two ways. The first was with his words. We can know because of his words, what he said. He said, "For God so loved the world, he gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in him might not perish but have eternal life."⁸ Jesus says if you have faith in me, then you are saved, that you are his. According to John 10:28, he says no one can snatch you from his hand. If your faith is in Christ, then your eternity is secure in him.

The second way is this. We can know because of his sacrifice. Jesus gave his life for us on the cross. His body was broken. His blood was shed. It was a perfect sacrifice that paid the price for our sins, a price that you and I can never pay for ourselves. And because he paid it, in the words of Luther, "not with silver or gold, but with his holy and precious blood"⁹, we can know that we are forgiven. That forgiveness is for all those who have faith, for all who trust that what Jesus did, he did for you.

So when you come to his table today, when you hear those words spoken – "the body of Christ given for you," "the blood of Christ shed for you," when you take and eat, it isn't just bread and wine that you take, it is Christ himself, his real presence there in your hands. He invites you to his table and he gives himself entirely and unreservedly to you for the forgiveness of your sins.

⁷ John 13:8

⁸ John 3:16

⁹ Luther's Catechism, The Creed, The Second Article: Redemption

And the good news of the gospel of Jesus is that when you take that sacrament in your hands and you hear those words and you believe, you can know with 100% certainty that you are a child of God and that you know where you stand with your lord. And the point of that certainty is not that we can find some smug satisfaction in knowing that we are the ones who are right and the others are the ones who are wrong. The point of that certainty is that we are a chosen people, God's holy people, set apart for the divine purpose of inviting others into the abundant riches of the love and grace of God that are ours in Jesus Christ. We get to point out the way to others. Martin Luther described it like this. "We are like beggars, getting to tell one another where we found bread." We get to share the good news with others that Jesus extends his free gift of love, his grace and forgiveness, of abundant life and eternal life, life that can begin today and last for all of eternity. And that is good news.

To wrap things up today, Jesus isn't someone that we can sit on the fence about. He never gave us that option and he didn't intend to. This, at its core, is a divisive truth. And yet the good news of the gospel is that we don't have to be indecisive. We get to reach out our hands and take hold of the Lord Jesus Christ, the very son of God, holy and precious who gave his blameless life for us, so we could know with all certainty that we are forgiven of our sins, washed clean of our guilt and shame, and given abundant and eternal life through the power of the Holy Spirit through the name of Jesus Christ, our lord. You, my brothers and sisters in Christ, are children of God and citizens of heaven, through Jesus Christ, our lord. Amen.