

THE OFFENSE

I am grateful that many of you were able to come on Ash Wednesday. We recognized and began Lent together. Now, early in Lent – the First Sunday in fact – I am hopeful that we can get a few things out on the table. It seems to me that I can never do that as clearly as I want to. But if we are unclear about what we are unclear about, it makes it harder for the Spirit to help us see what we *can* see. Already you can tell that I will most likely blow it again. But if I say something wrong, Jesus will still love and bless you.

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If you still come around here, you are probably already past the first layer of “make-believe” Christianity that is still being peddled by much of the culture around us. Jesus was not a nice, sweet man that everybody loved. Jesus was so offensive and so frightening that we crucified Him. The Tooth Fairy and Santa Claus versions of Jesus are pure nonsense. If we end up at Easter with no awareness of how much Jesus changes our perceptions of Life, of God, of ourselves, of our future, then we will end up with Easter bonnets and bunnies again, like most of the culture around us. The Resurrection is staggering in its impact and implications and applications. But that is all at the other end of Lent.

Let’s walk into the confusion first, here at the beginning of Lent. One of the most confusing things about Christianity is that the institutional church tries to pretend that there is no confusion. It even tries to give the impression that there never has been. Catholicism tells the story in a seamless, unbroken line. The Popes, from Peter on down the line, have guided the records and orthodox views, and it is all preserved for us in the church’s traditions and creeds down to the present day. No honest church historian, even in the Catholic church, will try to claim such a fairy story, but the general impression is still held and perpetrated by millions. What about the millions in the other wing of Christendom: the Eastern Orthodox church, whose center was never Rome, but Constantinople, and whose Patriarchs claimed authority equal to or superior to the Pope?

The institutional church has creeds, official positions, and official explanations for everything. We even have clear statements about where the mystery begins and ends. A lot of our certainty comes

from the fourth century A.D., when great church councils met to decide once and for all what was and was not the Christian TRUTH. They fought and argued for over a century in various councils, often hating and persecuting each other. Every decision was questioned by a group that passionately disagreed. But the church ended up declaring that we now know the TRUTH and that anyone who disagrees is a heretic – not a true Christian – and is therefore damned to Hell.

In most churches where the people *we* know go – Catholic, Lutheran, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, and the like – members are asked to reaffirm their certainty in solemn worship by reciting these creeds (the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed, for instance). And though I try, in my way, to be a true follower of Jesus, I am always aware that most of Christendom (if it cared) would have to declare that I am no true Christian. I am often grateful that we do not live in a time when heretics are burned at the stake. But apparently almost everybody in Christendom today loves Jesus and loves God more than I do. Unless they are lying, they all believe in the Virgin Birth, the Second Coming, the fires of Hell, and the physical resurrection, and they believe that in the realms beyond ours, Jesus has turned out to *be* God: "... Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father" (That's from the Nicene Creed.) There is a lot of certainty from the eternal realms, and from people who do not even know that the earth is round and circles around the sun. The ancient Christological formula says that Jesus is "fully God *and* fully man."

I am drawn to Jesus by the story of a man who really lived – a drama that actually took place in our world. I am fascinated by what Jesus said, the parables He told, and the things He taught. I am amazed by the choices He made in real life. I am undone by the way we treated Him, by what we did to Him. And I am dumbfounded by the number of people who encountered Him in one way or another after our world thought it had killed Him. But I am more annoyed than inspired by those who decided – three hundred years after He lived among us – that they knew all eternal truth; knew His true identity in this world and the next; knew everything we are supposed to believe about Him and what His life means to us – so that nobody has to wonder about it or ponder it ever again.

I don't even know what it means to be fully human – never mind what it means to be fully God. And I don't know what it means to be fully human even in *this* realm – never mind what it might mean in the realms to come.

So without any intention of doing so, I have contributed to some confusion of a different kind. I often insist, especially in Disciple Bands, that we have to start with the assumption that Jesus is human rather than divine. If we begin our efforts to understand Jesus with the assumption that He is divine, it closes down all our questions and gives us easy answers that do not mean anything. “Oh well, Jesus already knew everything. He didn’t have to learn anything because He came straight out of Heaven knowing all the answers.” “Oh well, Jesus was not really making any choices. He was just following the script that was handed to Him before He was born.” “*Of course* the Pharisees could not trap Him in theological debate. He was divine and already knew all the Scriptures by heart.” If Jesus is not born into our world as a normal human being, His life among us is essentially irrelevant to us. So I urge Disciple Bands to start with the assumption that Jesus is a man – a human like we are.

And if people start to equate Jesus with God, I object. That is not a New Testament perspective. Jesus *prays* to God. He struggles more than we do to *discern the will* of God. Jesus is constantly *pointing beyond Himself* to the God He loves and obeys – who is Author of all things and Source of all Life, in this world and the next. Jesus is constantly talking about the Kingdom of God and urging us to trust God far more than we ever have before. The real purpose and Message of the Christian Faith is for us to trust *God* – not Jesus. We only trust Jesus insofar as we come to recognize Jesus as God’s true Messiah.

So where is the “disconnect”? The more deeply we study Jesus’ life, the more it becomes difficult – even impossible – to explain or understand Him as just another human, as a mere man. Jesus’ role as God’s true Messiah takes Him beyond the category of “mere human.” Jesus’ awareness of His mission and purpose leaves us stunned by His confidence, and it leaves us struggling to comprehend His level of awareness. “*I am the way, the truth, and the life.*” “*This cup is the new covenant in my blood.*” “*And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all people unto me.*” “*You must be born anew.*” “*Whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.*”

We cannot conclude that Jesus is merely a man, but we cannot understand the true magnitude of His life among us unless we start out there. Yet the real surprise is not that we suddenly understand the true identity of Jesus or that we know His true name, rank, and serial number in the heavenly realms. The real surprise is that we do not know our *own* identity either. You are loved by the Omnipotent

God; you have a destiny and a purpose far beyond anything that fits comfortably in this physical realm; you are forgiven, healed, uplifted, saved over and over again. In fact, you are called into Everlasting Life. But you are a “mere human”? By what definition that we have ever heard of are you “merely human” if those things are true of you too? The wonder of Christianity is not just that *Jesus* is so special; the wonder of Christianity is that *you* are too! The wonder is that Jesus keeps trying to tell us this, but we do not really listen. “*Whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.*” “*I came that you may have life, and have it abundantly.*” “*You are the light of the world.*”

Jesus is our Savior. No mere man can be our Savior. Only, we are not mere men and women either. That is a lot of what Jesus came to tell us. But who is listening?

I do not know Jesus’ true identity and stature in the Kingdom of Heaven. It offends me when other humans pretend *they* know, because I suspect that they have finite minds just like I do and that they have not spent much real time in the realms beyond this one, any more than I have. Pretending we know things way beyond our pay scale is not helpful or honest. But what we *can* know about Jesus as God’s Messiah and as our Savior is wondrous indeed, and already far more than we can assimilate or live up to. God’s Kingdom is Bigger, Better, Beyond what we know or experience here; that is clearly what Jesus believed and what He kept trying to tell us and show us. Wonder of wonders, we can begin living for God’s Kingdom whenever we are ready and willing to switch allegiance from this world to God’s Kingdom. “*Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.*” Have we ever heard that before? How old do we want to get before we start to believe it? That’s not fair; some of you do believe it, and you have for years.

My suspicion is that Jesus’ true identity is higher than our very limited human vocabularies can deal with. The Book of Revelation thinks Jesus has a name beyond what any of us can yet know. “*Written on him was a name known to none but himself.*” (Revelation 19:12) If we call Him “divine” or “Son of God” or “God Incarnate,” are we sure and certain that this does Him justice? For all we know, it is an insult for us to call Him things so small. We have no name for the “Numinous Other” – the “Holy One” we refer to as “God.” But “God” is a title, not a name. Even God’s reply to Moses – “I am that I am” – is not a name. It is a comment in response to Moses when Moses asks, “What is your name?” “I am that I am” is the recorded response.

THE OFFENSE

In those days, a true NAME carried the essence and the power of the thing it named. So Yahweh replies: “My real name would blow you to smithereens in a nanosecond. It is enough for you to know that I exist.” So we call it “Yahweh” – an ancient form of the verb “to be” – and let it go at that.

So what does it mean to be the Son of the Holy One who is beyond all comprehension? Does that clarify anything? We often end our prayers with “In the Name of Jesus,” but are we so shallow and dull that we think “Jesus” is the name by which we want to pray? Jesus, Yeshua, Joshua. Does that contain His essence and true identity? Sad enough that we are so ignorant, but have we also lost all humility? We do not *know* Jesus’ true name. But whatever it is, that is the name of power by which we hope our prayers will be heard.

Jesus says to us, *“In very truth I tell you, if you ask the Father for anything in my name, he will give it to you. So far you have asked for nothing in my name. Ask and you will receive, that your joy may be complete.”* (John 16:23) Why have we asked for nothing in His name? Because we do not know His true name yet! We can hope for it, guess at it, try to point toward it. But we do not yet know His true name. What we do know about Jesus comes from experience with His Holy Spirit – not from ancient creeds pretending knowledge that nobody has.

I do not know Jesus’ true identity and stature in the Kingdom of Heaven. But the truth is, I do not know what your true identity and stature will be in the Kingdom of Heaven either. I do believe that one day I will find out – and so will you. This is not the offense; this is not a current problem. I do not really know Paul’s true identity in the Kingdom, or Luther’s or Augustine’s or Mary Magdalene’s. I have some glimmers and some expectations, but that is hardly knowledge.

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It is the beginning of Lent. As always, lots of people are telling us things they act very clear and certain about, but most of them have no notion of what they are talking about. They cannot even recall who first told them, or why they believed what they were told. They only know that we are supposed to believe some things, and it is safer to believe what we are told than to ask why, what does it mean, or what difference does it make.

Thousands of people have already decided to give up chocolate for Lent, or sweets or swearing or coffee or something really significant. Wow, the world will be so greatly improved by the end of Lent. Jesus will be so proud. And all the men have decided to give up sex, and the women have sworn to give up talking. Would Jesus like that any better? Why?

What would happen if all the Christians decided to give up *lying* for Lent? That would make a difference. Jesus recommended it. “Let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes’ and your ‘no’ be ‘no’.” Right out of the Sermon on the Mount. Here, between us and among each other, let us make a pact to give up lying for Lent. Keep eating chocolate if you like; give it up if it makes you feel noble. But let us give up lying for Lent. If we are a faith family, we help each other most by being genuine and real with each other, especially when it comes to how we are doing on the Path – on the Christian Journey. What do we really believe? What have we truly experienced? How is it going on the inside?

We tell the stories we have – not the ones we wish we had. We express the depth or the shallowness of the faith we really have. How much do we really trust God so far? What we *pretend* – in church or beyond church – is neither honest nor true nor helpful. Most of you have more trouble with the other side of honesty. You stay silent when you should speak, rather than speaking when you should stay silent.

In any case, we still get to listen to and learn from Jesus. God’s Kingdom is Bigger, Better, Beyond what we know or experience here. This is clearly what Jesus believed, what He kept trying to tell us and show us, and how He Himself lived. Wonder of wonders, we can begin living for God’s Kingdom whenever we are ready and willing to switch allegiance from this world to God’s Kingdom. But pretending to believe things we do not grasp does not help. Sometimes we wait. Sometimes what makes no sense to us at the moment, or maybe even for years, will suddenly come into view, bright and beautiful and crystal clear.

THE OFFENSE

So we do not leave Jesus easily. That does not mean we have all the answers. It does not mean we think we understand everything. I do not think Peter was past all his confusion or indeed certain about anything that was happening at the moment, certainly not this far before the crucifixion and the Resurrection and Pentecost. He has not yet experienced the Last Supper, and what John imagines or knows has yet to be punctuated by the Rooster's Cry. But even if Peter does not know all the fine points, all the theories, all the formulas, or all the creeds that will be developed by the church in years to come, he *does* know the source.

So when Jesus asks if the twelve want to desert – like many others have done and are doing – Peter answers: *“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.”*

There are lots of things we do not know. But there are also some things that we *do* know. Being honest and staying true always has two sides.

Happy Lent. The Journey is for real. If we had all the answers, we would not need to trust God. People who have all the answers love themselves a lot more than they love Jesus.