

## No More “Mr. Nice-guy”                      Message for January 31

For most of us, whenever we hear or say the name Jesus, an image comes into our minds: there are many of them to choose from!

Some of us see a gentle shepherd, gathering up the flock one by one, or hiking out into the desert to find the lost lamb. He looks peaceful as he goes about his work.

Others of us see an earnest young healer, bent over a lifeless body and deep in prayer, intensely willing the body to life. He looks focused in caring concentration.

Or, we might see Jesus as a patient teacher – of children and adults – sitting just high enough to look over the heads of anyone who is listening to the story or lesson he tells with enthusiasm and conviction. He looks animated – he speaks from a deep well of knowledge and belief.

Then some might see Jesus filled with frustration and righteous rage – turning over tables of goods for sale in the temple. He looks annoyed because the people should know better.

Ultimately, we all see Jesus sadly draped on a cross in death – asking God’s forgiveness for the two robbers on either side of him as his own life slips away. He looks broken, older and tired. This Jesus is hard to remember, because it hurts us, too.

Today, we hear about a different kind of Jesus – one who doesn’t fit into the usual images we see in our minds. He’s not nice – he’s not gentle or patient – he’s purposely determined and willful.

Today, we learn of a Jesus who draws a line in the sand against the Pharisees, and who removes himself from the usual patterns of his life to begin God’s work.

Last week in our Scripture lesson, Jesus claimed his heritage while worshiping in the temple. He read scripture from the prophet Isaiah pronouncing the blessing of the Spirit upon “the anointed one,” describing what the Messiah would do - and he declared himself in the company of the Pharisees and other church leaders to be the fulfillment of that scripture.

He had just come from 40 days in the desert, where he resisted three forms of temptation of the Dark Spirit, Satan, and he was ready to step up to the first stage of his ministry in God’s service. You’ll remember that the men in the synagogue looked at him in astonishment...and that’s where we left it last week – to be continued.

Well, in the very next verse, we find that they are amazed at his “gracious words” and we are told they speak kindly (patronizingly?) of him - they murmur to one another, with perhaps a sense of disbelief at the audacity of his statement.

“Isn’t this Joseph’s son?”

(In other words, “Come on, this is just Jesus, the carpenter’s son. Yeah, he’s smart and he knows the Torah and all about the prophets, but we all know the Messiah wouldn’t come from such common stock – he would be a prince or at the very least, a brave and decorated soldier.”).

True to form, the Pharisees and scribes puff up with their own importance – as “educated” men, they know all there is to know about the coming of the Messiah, and they aren’t convinced.

Their cool reception to his announcement stirs up an immediate and indignant reaction from Jesus. He's just delivered his first real message from God that they should heed with interest; they should be thankful that God finally followed through with that promise to bring them the Messiah.

Instead, there is doubt and disbelief in the crowd – in response to it, Jesus does something we might consider uncharacteristic of him. He bristles at the implied doubt that what he claims about his relationship with God is true, and he proceeds to put the Pharisees and scribes in their places.

Actually, he tells them off.

He first acknowledges that they could demand he earn and prove his place among them, and teach in Nazareth as he had been doing recently in Galilee. But he reminds them that past experience proves prophets aren't successful in their home towns...he gives very specific examples of incidents where leaders like themselves had an opportunity to embrace the prophets' messages and do some good, but they chose not to.

Jesus boldly speaks the truth about how these leaders have fallen short up till now by their inability to recognize those prophets in their own midst – and because they failed, innocent people suffered.

In other words, Pharisees and scribes – “you blew it.”

The word used in the Bible to describe their reaction to his accusations is rage...no one likes to receive blame, especially when it's true.

So, as a body, the scribes and Pharisees grab Jesus and take him to the edge of a cliff – their solution to his insubordination is to toss him over the edge!

But – and this is literally and figuratively where the schism between Jesus and the leaders of his own faith occurs – Jesus “passed through the midst of them and went on his way.”

With this single act, Jesus separates himself from everyone in the organized church and officially begins God's ministry. Up until now, he's been part of the community, someone the people of his town knew pretty well. So, when he finished claiming his rightful place as God's son, announcing that he'd come to bring good news to the poor, free the captives and oppressed, and bring sight to the blind because he's the anointed one, he crossed a line that he could never step back from again.

A level of intimacy that he shared and possibly enjoyed with the people of Nazareth was replaced with what I could call “professional distance” – his work from this moment on will require him to be more objective and focused. He will care about others and even love them – but he won't be able to get deeply involved, because to be effective in his work, he'll have to keep an emotional distance.

If we think about it, this makes sense. People who serve – whose work involves long hours with others, helping, teaching, healing – can't really get too involved because strong emotions can cloud good judgment and decision-making.

I can give you an example from my own experience:

As a new educator in my late 30s, I found that I had to develop this gift of professional distance early on in my teaching career. I'd become a teacher to give back to the world – it sounds lofty, but I was

sincere in my purpose. I figured, if I couldn't be a pastor, then at least I could work with children in the classroom and bring God to them by example. Hopefully, my feelings of how we should be with one another would rub off on them – I believed I could effectively blend my moral teaching with my content instruction.

What I wasn't prepared for, however, was how my heart could get involved. The school in Avondale was full of very poor children, most of them from migrant worker families who came and went from one year to the next.

I was a middle school teacher, and this was before the school adopted a dress code, so it was obvious each day who had money to buy clothes for school and who did not. Often, the nurse would invite a student to come early to shower while she washed his or her clothes for the next couple of days. Most of the students received free or reduced lunches – for many, this was the best meal of the day. In spite of the poverty, they were hard working students who knew that an education would be the way they could improve their lives, and largely, my heart accepted the poverty piece...we all worked together to help them learn.

But as I became more involved in the workings of the school, and eventually taught a "human development" class (really, it was sex ed with abstinence), the girls became more open with me and they trusted me - too often I heard stories about relationships they had within their families that I'd never experienced before in my own naïve life. Of course, I'd have to involve the nurse and principal to get help for them, but my heart suffered for the new education I'd received from these girls. At the end of the day, I'd be in tears over the loss of their innocence so early in life.

As my teaching career led me to other districts with other populations (always low socio-economic, once in the heart of gangland in Phoenix), I found that I had to learn to develop a whole new set of skills – I had to learn to listen with empathy, and care just enough to be able to act on behalf of my students – but I needed to keep my heart out of it, or it would rip me up. It took some practice – but over time, I got much better at it.

Maybe it's a skill I was destined to learn, because in my new role as pastor, the same holds true. When I was granted the license to serve you, members of the pastoral selection committee of the Southwest Conference gently told me that relationships I had before with the people of the church would be different now...of necessity, they would have to change. I would learn about people's secret lives, which would require confidentiality, which would allow no room for judgment...and trust, as a result of these elements would be the most important gift I could give the people in my church. I would know everything, but I would need to keep my heart safe so I could tap into the other skills I possessed to be of service.

It didn't take long for me to realize that they were right.

In order to serve the people properly, a pastor needs to have some boundaries, some different levels of involvement – and keep a little space between their hearts and the hearts of each member of their church family for everyone's common good. There's even a course pastors are required to take called "Boundary Training" to ensure they remember how relationships should be created and maintained within a church.

When we think about it, we find that others who deal with the emotional side of the people in the world – doctors, nurses, counselors - have to learn this same skill of professional distance. Even on

a personal level, among our own friends and family members, there are times when we ourselves need to step back just a bit in order to effectively assist someone in need.

So Jesus did the same, but for him, the investment was much greater. He removed himself from the comfort and intimacy of his family, friends and those he served – to be more effective, to have clearer understanding of issues, to lead. In a day when people had to depend upon one another for so many basic human needs, he couldn't be concerned with those details – and as a result of this, his life would likely be lonely, though he would gather twelve men and others who would travel with him to help him with the basic necessities.

Jesus must have intuitively understood that he had to separate himself from everyone and step into his true status of being God's Son in order to do his work - the forty days he'd just spent in the desert prepared him for the next three years of life he would essentially live alone. He must have realized that from this moment onward, all of his concentration, all of his experiences, all of his understanding of God and God's purpose would require him to be more objective – to be separated – to live a solitary life - because emotions felt too deeply could get in the way.

As we heard in today's Scripture, before the Pharisees, scribes and other leaders of his temple, Jesus boldly demonstrated confidence in his mission and took control of his future. By challenging their short-comings and reminding them of hundreds of years of corruption within the history of the Jews, Jesus crossed over from being a young man who was well-liked and familiar to many in the little town of Nazareth, to the status of "enemy of the church."

From this moment onward, they will watch his every move. They'll skeptically observe crowds of people, monitoring reactions to his message, and calculating the damage he will do to their long-established, crooked practices. He will be considered dangerous and a threat to their lives...they failed to throw him over the cliff this time – but another opportunity to get him would surface.

All they have to do is watch and wait...

As we journey with Jesus in the coming weeks, let's pay particular attention to the "under-stories" that lie beneath the familiar tales we all remember. Let's consider how Jesus must have felt in this role, how challenging it must have been for him to live out God's promise, knowing that the end depended upon his dedication and ability to stay focused on his ministry each day - alone.

And as we move closer to Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent, let's consider how our lives parallel his, if we, too are to serve God. How do we measure up? Would Jesus take us in as part of his ministry on the road, or would he turn away from us as he did the Pharisees of Nazareth.