

“Taking Jesus Seriously”

a sermon by

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Text: “But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, ‘Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man’” (Luke 5:8).

This past week Frye Gaillard published an article in *Creative Loafing*, entitled “Holy Wars: Liberals, Conservatives, and Gray Areas in Charlotte’s Christian Churches.” Gaillard, who has lived in Charlotte for a number of years, has witnessed a great shift in the Charlotte churches. Fifty years ago ministers like Carlyle Marney of Myers Park Baptist Church and Warner Hall of Covenant Presbyterian preached against racial segregation to a city that was struggling for its conscience, when blacks were sitting in at local restaurants or demanding the total integration of the schools.

As Gaillard astutely notes, Charlotte today is a very different city and the issues today have changed. Even a conservative Southern Baptist such as Dan Burrell insists that the “Scriptures scream racial unity.” Today the divisive issues are not racial equality, but same sex marriages, abortion, and the War in Iraq. Gaillard notes that there is a “holy war at work in the

Charlotte churches today between those who believe that there are eternal truths that have to be imposed on society and those who do not view the world in such black and white terms. He quotes a Charlotte minister who expressed great alarm at the arrogance of the new fundamentalists coupled with a great apathy that is spreading through our city.

Walker Percy once described the South as a “Christ Haunted Landscape,” and there is a sense in which that is true. As I read Frye Galliard’s article, I was struck with the sense that religion plays an enormous role in our city, and that whether the issue is busing, affirmative action, or even gay rights, we are never very far from the question of how our faith in Christ effects the way we live our lives.

I.

There is something compelling about the description of Jesus’ call to Peter that is preserved for us in Luke’s Gospel. Both Mark and Matthew give us an account of Jesus’ call to a group of fishermen by the Sea of Galilee (Mark 1:16-20: Matthew 4:18-22), but Luke spells out in some detail how Peter came to follow Jesus.

According to Luke’s gospel Jesus was teaching by the Sea of Galilee. A great crowd surrounded him to the point that he got into a boat so that he could address the crowd. When Jesus saw Simon Peter, he told Peter to take his boat back out into the water. As the men did so, they caught a miraculously large number of fish. Peter, when he saw what had happened, said to Jesus, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.”

At first, that might seem like a strange response to make to Jesus. We might have thought that Peter would have expressed admiration, amazement, or even appreciation. But that was not Peter’s response.

Peter understood what everyone who has come face to face with Jesus understands. He is the most disturbing personality we have ever faced. We do not instinctively run to him. We run from him. Give him his way and he will upset our world, change our lives, and we will never be the same again. Anyone who takes Jesus seriously begins where Peter began, “Go away from me Lord for I am a sinful man.”

Take, for example, the teachings of Jesus. Sometimes people say to me, “I am not much of a Christian. I just try to live by the Sermon on the Mount.” When was the last time you read the Sermon on the Mount? Who among us could live by that?--turning the other cheek, going the second mile, loving our enemies.

Or consider Jesus as a personal example. Some years ago Charles Sheddon wrote a book, entitled *In His Steps*, in which he described the Christian life as following in the footsteps of Jesus. In fact, Peter was the one who coined this notion. In the Epistle that bears his name he said that Christ suffered for us, leaving us an example that we should follow in his footsteps. But he did not say that at first. When he first encountered Jesus he saw too clearly the gulf that separated him from the Christ.

Or consider the fact that some have described following Jesus as “catching the spirit of Christ.” Often we hear Christianity so described. Jesus once took a towel and washed the feet of his disciples. No one had seen that before. He blessed the children, welcomed the downcast, and forgave his enemies. How do we catch that spirit?

Do you see what I am trying to say? When a person comes face to face with Jesus and tries to take him seriously--his teachings, his example, his spirit--Jesus can be one of the most intimidating and difficult figures that ever walked the earth.

The New Testament, however, offers us a way out. It starts where Simon starts but it does not end there. All the way through the New Testament is the notion that encounters with Jesus have a profound way of changing people’s lives.

II.

To begin, these first Christians saw that Jesus represented something more than himself. He was the revelation of the eternal.

That is always the nature of genius. In Peter Schafer’s play *Amadeus* the Austrian court composer Salieri recognizes in the boy Mozart something that creates a great fury in him. There is a genius in Mozart that completely eludes Salieri, who is tormented by Mozart’s brilliance. In one scene Salieri cries out, “Tonight at an inn somewhere in this city stands a giggling child who can put on paper, without actually setting down his billiard cue, casual notes, which turn my most considered ones into lifeless scratches.”

That is true not only of Mozart but of other geniuses as well: Galileo, Newton, Einstein. They reveal realms of truth and power which, when opened up, allow ordinary people new insights into the world around us.

So it was with Simon Peter. Jesus was more than Jesus. He was the revelation of the eternal God. “The God of all grace,” wrote Peter in the Epistle that bears his name, “who called you into his eternal glory in Christ... shall himself perfect, establish, and strengthen you.”

That is how the early Christians understood Jesus. They called him the “logos” which means Word. He was the Word of God, the revelation of God in the flesh.

That is why the church has spoken on Jesus as “fully God and fully man.” Jesus is fully man in the sense that like us he endured all of life’s joys and sorrow. But Jesus is fully God in the sense that he reveals the Spirit of the living God who lives and moves and works in our lives. That is gospel. Peter, when he first encountered Jesus, was overwhelmed by him. “Depart from me,” he said, “for I am a sinful man.” But at Caesarea Philippi Peter saw something else. He saw the revelation of God. “Thou art the Christ,” he said, “the son of the living God.”

III.

Then, too, those first Christians saw in Jesus something more than a great example or even a great teacher. They saw in him the pioneer of a new age. That is what the writer of the Book of Hebrews called Jesus. He was more than a teacher, more than an example; he opened the gates of a new world. He showed us a new dimension to life that we had never before seen.

This past week *The Christian Century* featured a review by Harvey Cox of a biography of William Sloane Coffin, who for a number of years was the Dean of the Chapel at Yale University for a number of years and minister of the Riverside Church in New York City. Next to Martin Luther King, Jr. Coffin was the most visible minister during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and the Anti –Viet Nam War protests in the 1970s. Coffin has a flair that few people can match. He was a social activist who enjoyed being in the forefront of many of the great movements of his time.

But Coffin was more than an activist. He was a great human as well. When his son died in a tragic automobile accident, he preached a sermon, entitled “Alexis’ Death.” In that sermon he addressed a question that perplexes many people, namely, is a tragic death such as the death of a young man the will of God. In that sermon Coffin made the point that God doesn’t go around this world with his finger on triggers, his fist around knives, his hands on steering wheels. God certainly does not intend these unnatural deaths. Coffin went on to claim that his own consolation was that it was not the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God’s heart was the first of all our hearts to break.

Simon Peter saw in Jesus Christ something that we long to see as well. It came that we might have life and have it more abundantly. In that sense he was a pioneer.

If Christ were only a teacher, telling us what we ought to do, if he were only a great spirit, we would all be discouraged. But he is more than that. He is, as the New Testament calls him, “the pioneer” of our salvation.

IV.

Then, finally, those early Christians who sought to take Jesus seriously saw him as something else. He was not only the revelation of the eternal God. He was not only the pioneer of a new age. He was something more. He was also the savior.

Sometimes I wonder what Jesus might have said to Peter when Peter said to Jesus, “Depart from me for I am a sinful man.” I can imagine Jesus saying to Peter something like this:

“Simon, that is the reason I have come to you. That is why I am here. You tell me to leave you because you are sinful, but I am like a physician. I have come not to heal those who have not diseases, but to heal those who are sick.”

One of the characteristics of the gospel of Luke is Luke's emphasis on the fact that Jesus associated with sinners. That was one of the criticisms his opponents leveled against him. Jesus associated with prostitutes and tax collectors.

The Gospel of Luke has a section in it that is sometimes referred to as the "Gospel of the Outcast." It is peculiar to Luke. His is the gospel that gives to us Jesus' parables of "The Prodigal Son" and "The Good Samaritan."

Luke understood that being "lost" wasn't just reserved for the outcasts of society, but that it applies to you and me.

One of the most famous sermons ever preached was a sermon delivered by a Scottish minister whose name was Arthur John Gossip. In 1927 while he was pastor of the Beechgrove Church in Aberdeen, his wife died very suddenly. Then next Sunday Gossip preached a sermon he entitled "When Life Tumbles In, What Then?" At the conclusion of the sermon Gossip speaks these words:

"I don't think you need to be afraid of life. Our hearts are very frail; and there are places where the road is very steep and lonely. But we have a wonderful God. And as Paul puts it, what can separate us from his love? Not death, he says, pushing that aside at once as the most obvious of all impossibilities."

That is what people who have taken Jesus have always found. He shows us God. He shows us the possibilities of life. He shows us the power over sin and death.

Thanks be to God! Amen!