

"HOW DOES JESUS SAVE US?"

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After hearing me preach for a half-dozen years, you know I don't wander far from Jesus, his stories, his teachings, his miracles, and mainly his death and resurrection. In fact, my singular goal for FCC is to put Christ at the center of our praise, service, business, all of it.

Yet as keen as I am on Jesus, I also admit, I can't relate to those who only relate to him in sweet, intimate terms as warm buddy and huggy friend. Like Jesus' purpose is to soothe me and make everything all right. Don't get me wrong, I derive much comfort from Jesus. Still, my relations with him are more complex and prickly than that. Why? Jesus is always asking me to do things I don't think I should have to do, love rude neighbors, even love hateful enemies. That gives Jesus and me some distance to go along with our closeness.

The truth is neither Jesus nor the body of Christ that is his church is finally about meeting my needs, allaying my cares, healing my hurts, and fixing my ills. That is a consumer version of the gospel, a distortion of the proclamation Jesus brought. Don't get me wrong, the hurting, the sick, the forgotten, the disenfranchised, the addicted, the alienated, the broken are all of special interest to the church and clearly belong at the top of our agenda.

But church isn't where we are meant to come so we can get what we want out of God. Church is God's means for getting what God wants out of us to build up his new reign. And what God wants of me often involves my painful sacrifice, which I heartily resist. Simply put, Jesus Christ, sweet, mild, and tender is not God's plan to save me and the world.

So then, what is Jesus' plan save us, you ask? He gives us outrageous assignments that defy common sense and frequently set our teeth on edge. He sends us out to feel the pain of others, much greater than our own. He bids us to take responsibility for outsiders not of our family or clan. He expects us to welcome weird strangers like he welcomes us. And no, he doesn't wait until our lives are all together, we are completely healthy, without fear and anxiety, and free of distress before expecting us to follow in this way of his cross.

Jesus' plan for saving the world is forgiving and loving those wanting to hurt us. Do not return evil for evil, he said. Heap coals of *love* upon their heads, Paul the apostle said. Blessed are you when they revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil falsely against you on my account, is his final Beatitude. Rejoice and be glad? To be perfectly honest, I am not so happy about it, never mind rejoicing over this seeming impossibility.

Why am I willing to try this at all? Because I look to the life of Jesus and I see the way, the truth, and the life we are all meant to lead. Because he doesn't politely request it but he actually commands it. Because I know that I am not so good at meting out justice. I lack proportionality, and punish too severely because all I can feel is the hurt been caused me. Because only God is capable of judgement and I am willing to leave all of that to the Lord.

An example is in order. When a young white criminal walked into a Bible study at Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, SC, and gunned down a group of African-Americans, a little, a mostly white Methodist congregation in South Carolina made immediate plans to go to the victims' funerals to show solidarity and outrage at the murders. But they didn't stop there. They further engaged the shooter's family, living two miles from the church to offer support, understanding, and relief, living within their own hellhole. That second leg, not just reaching out to victims, but also to the murderer, is Jesus' plan to save the world.

Why did they do such a counterintuitive thing that flies in the face of common sense? Because Jesus commands it. And if you always see the Jesus commanding such things as warm, sweet and embracing, you're a much better person than I am. For while I want to honor him, as I've gone to my enemies in his name, it still bothers me. I even mutter under my breath about what a wacky and lousy plan this is to build God's reign. Sometimes it feels like Jesus creates as many personal dilemmas for me as he solves. And he doesn't care. He doesn't wax sentimental about throwing me into those dilemmas. He is hard in doing so because he knows that loving enemies is God's way of saving the world.

If you don't believe me, then notice the enemies reconciled in Isaiah's vision that Liz read. If you don't believe me, then hear how in Romans Paul is gripped with a sweeping vision of God's reign bursting beyond one small chosen people, an inheritance to be shared with all the earth. Many of the other nations God intended to embrace were enemies of Israel.

We like to make our rigid distinctions between the clean and the unclean, hard and fast separations between the blessed and the unblessed, between us and them. Then along comes Jesus to blur the lines by saying God made the sun to "rise on both the evil and the good" and sends his rain on both the "righteous and the unrighteous." (Matthew 5.45)

Given how we see the church as holy and want to picture everyone sweetly getting along, it might surprise you that I have had my share of enemies in my years of ministry. Currently, thanks be to God, I'm enjoying a nice reprieve. But I've learned not to be surprised.

In my last sermon in Columbus, I had a short paragraph forgiving my enemies and asking their forgiveness. Why did I do that? Well, Jesus commanded it. Not the sweet, mild and tender Jesus, but the tough, adamant and unsentimental Jesus. He commanded it and I did it because it is essential to his plan for the salvation of the world. A lady named Sarah said at Coffee Hour that I had probably overstated and meant opponents or adversaries. She wished I hadn't used that ugly word, "enemy." I told Sarah Jesus used the word, so I felt free to do the same. He said to forgive and love enemies. Well, that's true, she said.

Then I asked her, "when certain members go to new members I have just brought in and tell them, 'We are trying to drive Dale out of the church, and wonder if you want to help,'

what do you call that?" She gasped at the very idea...Going through my divorce in Ridgefield, that loosened up some nasty vitriol. Before meeting with an agitator in my study, someone who had attacked two previous pastors, I met with our associate pastor to pray.

After Tessa prayed over me, she held my hands, looked me directly in the eyes, and said, "Remember, Dale, in the upper room, before Jesus' followers abandoned, denied, and forsook him, knowing they would reject on him, Jesus took a towel and washed their feet. *Even the feet of the man who was about to betray him with a kiss to suffer upon a cross.*"

Do you see why my relationship with Jesus is not just sweet and idyllic intimacy? Why it is more complicated than that? He saves the world in a way I would never choose. And I feel awe at his power and even dread, sending me out to do such things as that. Since our country seems ramping up toward confrontation with enemies we identify anew, such as Iran, I should mention that Tessa Afshar, praying over me, is an Iranian woman. She might be the only ordained Iranian woman in the USA, now serving in Wethersfield, CT. Tessa, from that hated terrorist enemy land of Iran, typifies God's plan to save the world.

Not only are enemies included in God's embrace, God is great enough to use enemies—like the Assyrians in Jeremiah—to rescue God's people when they forgot who they were. Martin Luther King, Jr often told African-American congregations they had a special call to help white Christians--you know, the people persecuting them--to be more faithful to God.

The church, embodying God's plan for saving the world, is such a very curious gathering. The Greek word for church in the New Testament is *ekklesia* meaning, those called out of the world. We are called out of a world of natural-born, instinctual xenophobic fear of the stranger, the unclean, the unblessed so God can assemble an alternative to deep fear.

We exist to remind the world that Christ has kicked down the walls that divide us and is miraculously gathering us as one body with many members whose unity is not uniformity. Every time the church gathers, this diversity testifies that God's house has room for all. That God's heart is big enough to contain us all, where nationalism or prosperity cannot.

God wants the church to showcase his determination to rule the world with his love as the final power. We are uniquely ordained for this, letting the Holy Spirit subdue our innate tendency to divide the world into us and them, those "in" and those "out." Where should all this begin? Why not at the table where Jesus fed the 12 after washing all of their feet. Amen.