

## “BEING FREE”

Matthew 7:21-28; Mark 12:28-31; John 8:31-32

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It often happens when we are looking at a piece of art depicting a scene in the life of Jesus, especially if that art is by a painter of the Italian Renaissance or one of the Dutch masters, or another artist inspired by those traditions. Somebody will point out that it's not very realistic - that the green hillsides in the picture don't look like the middle east, the city in the distance looks more like Rome, Jesus and his family or disciples wouldn't have dressed in those ornate robes, and certainly wouldn't have been so fair-skinned. And they are absolutely right. But I usually respond by saying that we shouldn't let those details distract us from what the art is about.

Historical accuracy and realism aren't the point of art. When Leonardo da Vinci created “The Last Supper” or when Domenico Ghirlandaio painted the Nativity, they may or may not have known what those scenes in Bethlehem or Jerusalem would have looked like. But it doesn't matter, because that's not what they were after. Artists often situate their depictions of Jesus life within their *own* culture not just because that's what they know, but often because they are creating works of faith and devotion. They want those who see their works to relate to them, and connect the stories they represent to their own lives.

Of course, historical context is important when we study the Bible. It helps us understand the meaning of the words and make sense of things that might otherwise not make sense in our world today. But *faith* isn't primarily an exercise in facts or history. Faith is about embracing the presence of the living Jesus in our lives. Imagining the Biblical story in a world that's familiar makes it real and relevant, not a thing of the past but something alive with meaning now. A picture of Jesus who looks like you says that Jesus is someone you can relate to.

But... there's a limit to this. It's also possible to appropriate Jesus to our own image in a way that is problematic. We don't have to think very hard to come up with examples. Christian missionaries went to all over the world bringing not just the gospel, but European/American culture as if the two were one and the same. It wasn't all that long ago that virtually all Sunday School materials depicted Jesus as a white man. Still today, for many people, that famous “Head of Christ” painting by Warner Sallman – which was distributed all over the world in every imaginable way - *is* what Jesus “really” looks like – blue eyes and all.

Where is that line between “culturally relevant” and inappropriate? I guess it could be wherever any image or idea encourages us to forget that Jesus isn't “ours,” that he doesn't belong just to us or people like us. But we should also probably consider that being part of the dominant culture makes a difference. There's a troubling history that should make us choose

our images for Jesus with extra care – whether in churches or children’s Bible story books or private devotions.

This danger doesn’t just have to do with physical images, or explicit conflation of Christianity and our culture. It also operates in subtler ways. Being able to relate to Jesus can easily get a bit turned around: it’s easy to assume (without hardly thinking about it at all) that Jesus thinks like we think, likes what we like, shares our aspirations. It seems to me that American Christians have a particular penchant for this, and that we don’t exercise enough critical thinking about it.

Probably most of you listening to this sermon would not subscribe to the most egregious forms of this – pictures of Jesus carrying an American flag, for example, or claims that Jesus loves Americans more than people of other countries. But somewhere in the back of our minds we just kind of assume that Jesus values such things as positive thinking, hard work, competition, family, country, personal responsibility, democracy, economic growth, the American dream. Because we value them. But, in fact, it’s difficult and questionable to locate any of those values in the Jesus of the gospels. Now, I’m not necessarily saying that we don’t have good reasons to value some or all of those things. Just that *Jesus* might not be one of those reasons. And that we ought to be cautious when it comes to attributing our values to Jesus – who isn’t bound by the values of any culture. In fact, he seems to resist being appropriated by just anybody when he warns that using his name is not the same as knowing him and following him.

I believe we need to be especially cautious about invoking Jesus’ name when we talk about freedom, which is sort of the word of the day, on July 4, isn’t it? Our ideas of freedom tend to be ... pretty broad, and largely about individual freedoms: to speak our minds, make our own decisions, practice our faith, have a say in our society. Good things. I’d like to think that Jesus would agree. But I’m not so sure, when it comes to some of our other ideas that reflect a more individualistic worldview not shared by the gospels: free enterprise, self-reliance, freedom from rules or obligations to our neighbors. And I just can’t see Jesus encouraging freedom to amass as much wealth as you can or to believe and promote ideas that have no basis in facts.

A lot of the things we associate with freedom sit rather awkwardly beside folks who say they follow Jesus. Jesus who said things like “The first will be last.” “Love your neighbor as yourself.” “The truth will make you free.”

It’s that last thing that I particularly want us to think about. The notion that freedom comes with truth. It’s not, first and foremost, about what I want for me or my group, and at its most basic, it doesn’t come from having resources or power. It’s grounded in truth.

If you think about it, it makes complete sense: Being in denial about our pain or our problems keeps us mired in them. Telling lies usually commits us to telling more lies to cover up the first ones. Being dishonest breaks the trust that a good relationship requires. When truth is withheld, we feel used. When you feel you have to hide your true self, you feel trapped. Many

an organization has eventually collapsed under the weight of cover-ups rather than acknowledge mistakes and abuses.

But *truth* is freeing. Jesus not only said that, he lived it, not shying away from saying difficult but true things, not amending his message or his mission to make it less challenging, never being anybody but who he was.

So it puzzles and disturbs me that so many people who say they follow Jesus seem to not care much about truth, or are even offended by it.

It's hardly news anymore that most of us were taught a version of American history that leaves out a whole lot, especially with respect to all the people who didn't get to – weren't intended to – share in the gift of freedom. As disturbing and heartbreaking as it is to learn about the rest of the story, many of us feel grateful for the opportunity to fill in those gaps. We can see that the fuller, truer story helps us understand where we have come from and why we are where we are. We can feel the truth freeing us, just a little bit.

And yet, many Christian people are out there fighting to keep what they call “traditional American history,” which they assert is more “compatible” with Christianity, for reasons that seem to center around an individualistic view of both the gospel and human society. They're quite angry at those who say we need to tell a more complete story that includes people who have been excluded and doesn't leave out the violence they suffered. They especially object to efforts to shed light on the how broadly and deeply the history of slavery is woven into the history of nearly every institution, every system, every part of our society. That this is thoroughly documented seems to make no difference.

It doesn't fit the narratives we've inherited about freedom and progress and exploration and opportunity for all, about pilgrims and pioneers and soldiers and the founding fathers. I get that.

What I don't get is *Christians* being so uncomfortable with truth, so averse to it, so fearful of it. Making it controversial. Adhering so firmly to a perspective that's unabashedly a perspective of privilege.

I can't see why we would feel the need to respond that way. Don't we follow Jesus, who told us truth brings freedom? Don't we believe in forgiveness? In the capacity for change? In reconciliation? In God's justice? In the Spirit who gives us courage to face... anything?

Maybe it comes from a fear that if we admit to *knowing*, we may have to do something with that knowledge. Maybe there is reluctance to acknowledge the church's participation in some of the worst parts of our history. Maybe some of it is just basic human resistance to changing our ideas, once we've adopted them. Maybe it's the misguided idea that to love your country means to only say good things about it. Maybe it's just so much easier and more comfortable to have a simple, inspiring narrative that's more readily explained to children.

But life is never simple.

Today, when we commemorate the signing of the statement that declared the colonies independent of Britain, we remember Thomas Jefferson, who drafted most of that declaration. And when we remember that Thomas Jefferson wrote “we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness,” we remember, too, that in his lifetime Thomas Jefferson enslaved over 600 people including several of his own children. And he did so, not because he didn’t understand that slavery was wrong or that those he enslaved were human beings, but because of the economic benefit.

Now, we can get all offended and defensive about the mention of the less-than-admirable truths about one of our greatest presidents. Or we can think about how tellingly the contrast reflects who we are.

Author Clint Smith says this about Jefferson,

“He’s a microcosm of the ... contradictions of this country in the sense that America is this place that has provided unimaginable, unparalleled opportunities for millions of people across generation to build wealth and [gain] upward mobility, and has done so at the direct expense of other people who have been subjugated and oppressed across generations. And the story of America is both of these things. And we have to hold both of those things at once to recognize the totality and complexity of this country.”

I really believe that folks who follow Jesus can manage that, if anybody can. We have been called to truth, and to freedom in Christ. And we have the capacity to situate our freedom, not in self-interest or in overly simplistic patriotism, but in the richer ground of love for God and neighbor.

We can celebrate today with cook-outs and parades and flags and fireworks. And why not? Serious, important occasions need to be marked with traditions that bring people together and lift us up. We can celebrate today, too, by mulling over Thomas Jefferson’s words and the dreams they express for our nation, however incomplete the realization of those dreams. An even better way to love our country, though, would be to embrace our complexity, our contradictions, our humanness, our brokenness and our possibilities – understanding that truth is the necessary foundation for a different future. Most importantly, we can mark today with a renewed commitment to doing whatever we can do to make justice and freedom and equality and equity not a dream but an American reality.

Resources:

Clint Smith (author of *How the Word Is Passed*), NPR interview, June 1, 2021.