



Grace Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins
Rector

I Love Jesus

Sermon for Epiphany 7, February 19, 2017

Readings: Leviticus 19:1-2,9-18; Matthew 5:38-48;

Sermon text: The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy. (Lev 19:1-2)

Jesus said, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matt 5:48)

I love Jesus. Let me just say that.

Holiness is not what I love about him, though. At least not in the usual sense of the word, in which someone is holy who is wholly clean and pure, set apart for God, and who thinks about God pretty much all the time. Someone who never does anything wrong. A person who never sins.

As orthodox Christians we claim that Jesus, alone of all humanity, is without sin, the unblemished lamb, the perfect Son of God the Father. Jesus alone fulfilled the commandment to be holy, as the Lord God is holy.

But again, his holiness is not what I love about him. He may have been without sin. I however am a sinner. And here I am quoting the current pope, Francis, who in the first days of his papacy was asked to describe himself, and he said, first, I am a sinner, a sinner who has been redeemed.

Which reminds me of the joke about Jesus and the woman caught in adultery. Remember the story? How Jesus said, “let the one without sin cast the first stone.” And nobody moved. And Jesus was about to say, then neither do I condemn thee, go and sin no more, but then, whack, Jesus gets hit on the side of his head with a small stone. He looks over and yells, “Mom!”

I think you have to be Catholic to get that joke—something to do with the Immaculate Conception.

But seriously, as all comics say, I love Jesus. He is my man, my guide my rabbi my guru my guide to the Way. I have come to believe that he is the Son of God, not only fully human but fully divine as well, as we say in the Creed: “God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one being with the Father, through whom all things were made.”

Or, as Paul writes in the letter to the Colossians (1:14-16): The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him.

The Cosmic Christ as well as the innocent man who suffered on the cross to save us all.

I believe all that about Jesus. But it is not his divinity that I love about him.

It is his perfection. “Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect,” Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount. Now this sounds a lot like be holy, be powerful. But I think what he meant was be completely open and vulnerable and self-giving. Be complete (the Greek word translated as perfect (*telios*), through emptying of self.

Look at it this way. If Jesus is the image of the invisible God, then God is not a patriarchal tyrant ruling from a throne in the sky deciding who lives and who dies, who deserves reward and who punishment. Rather God is something or someone completely different from that image. More like the one whom Jesus call perfect. The one whose sun shines on both good and bad, whose rain falls on the fields of both the righteous (those without sin) and the unrighteous (those caught in all nets of sin).

A God whose mercy extends to all. A God who declared all creation good, very good. A God who is infinite in attributes of goodness power and knowledge, the one to whom the angels archangels and all the hosts of heaven sing, “Holy holy holy Lord, God of power and might.” Heaven and earth are full of this God’s glory—shimmering from the depths of being, pouring out over all that is, the whole universe, and giving life and continuing creation, evolution, consciousness, love. Love, that is what Jesus is getting at. A God who is love, who created and continues to create out of love and the desire for all creation to return raised up into God’s life.

Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect. Imagine being a person of such love and light such that your words and actions would flow from you on all you encounter as forms of mercy and grace. Benevolence and compassion. Power disguised as humility and even weakness.

Then you might be able to make more sense out of Jesus’ teaching about turning the other cheek. We were talking about this in our Wednesday Bible study class and I told them the story of Lonnie, a person I met when serving as chaplain intern at the federal pretrial prison in downtown Manhattan when I was a seminarian. Lonnie was a Nuyorican gang leader awaiting trial for something—I forget what. He talked, as many do in prison, about getting right with Jesus and seeing the light. I took all that with a grain of salt but Lonnie had some story. He said he has been in and out of jail since he was a kid, always in gangs and dealing drugs. He came to be a leader, not because he was physically impressive but because he was fearless. He wasn’t afraid of dying. If someone was shooting at him he

would walk right toward them shooting back. He said he could always tell the guys who were leaders that way—they used big guys to scare people but those guys really depended on the gas from the leader. Take him on and you could take over.

Well, Lonnie told me that he used to let go of his girlfriends when he went to prison, but this last time, he said, she wouldn't let him go. She had given him a Bible and he read it. He already was pretty well versed—it is useful to get over in prison if you know the Bible he said. But this time he got it. He traced his turn around to a fight he got in with his younger brother. They were arguing about care for their mother and, in their usual style, it came to blows. But this time his younger brother refused to defend himself. Seems he had become a Christian. And Lonnie said he literally turned the other cheek. “Go ahead and hit me,’ he said. And I couldn't keep hitting him. He had the power over me.”

And, he said, it works in prison too. “If I'm on line for the phone or something and one of the gang leaders with his sidekicks wants to butt ahead I tell him no. Go ahead and hit me, I don't care. You'll just end up in the hole and I don't care what happens to me. And it works.” There's spiritual power in turning the other cheek. Lonnie now has a new understanding of the old verse about sparing the rod and spoiling the child. “Used to be,” he says, “that I beat my children if they didn't listen. But now I understand, it's a spiritual rod you have to use.” A spiritual rod.

There is power in the Way of Jesus, the way of self-emptying, the way of agape love.

But it is not for the power that I love Jesus. it is because in his openness, his offering of himself even to the most despised, the worst sinner, I know that I am also included. If I have not sinned as terribly as some that is not my credit but God's blessing and grace, that I have been raised with love, privileged with education, given opportunities and allowed to exercise my gifts. Who knows what else might I be, for truly there but for the grace of God go I.

God is full of grace and love. Jesus taught us that. He showed the Way. And that's why I love him.

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins Rector
Grace Church, Millbrook NY