

Protagonist Corner

He Meant to Pass Them By

Mark 1:40-45 and 6:45-52; Matthew 25:31-46

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We think we know Jesus, but do we? How well do we know anyone? Think about the person you know best—perhaps your spouse, a good friend. How well do you know that person? Just when we think we know Jesus, something he does or says makes us wonder.

The disciples are at sea. They've been rowing for hours. After putting them in a boat and sending them across to the other shore, Jesus goes aside to pray. That evening Jesus returns only to find the boat still at sea, barely halfway to the other side. Walking on the wave-tossed sea, we are told that Jesus "meant to pass them by." Pass them by? Why?

We cannot ignore that "to pass by" is the way in which God manifests himself to humans in the Old Testament. Keeping that in mind, we should still wonder if there are times when Jesus means to pass us by, to leave us to struggle alone against the forces of life that keep us from reaching our destination. Are there times when he's close enough to reach out and touch us, and in his heart he means to pass us by? What might make Jesus consider doing such a thing?

There are other times, maybe more than those recorded in scripture, when Jesus doesn't seem to want to get involved. When we think of the Good Samaritan, it's hard for us to imagine Jesus being the priest who, when he saw the wounded man, crossed over on the other side, or the Levite who, like the priest, just passed him by.

No. That's not the Jesus we think we know. The Jesus we know is the Good Samaritan, who, when he saw the man beaten and left to die, gave him aid and paid for his needs. Jesus, we might think, would never have passed him by, but might he have wanted to? Do we know the mind of Jesus well enough to know for sure?

Think about another reading from Mark's gospel, the one we heard earlier about the leper who came to Jesus, who said "If you will, you can make me clean." Is it possible that Jesus "meant to pass him by"? There are two readings that describe Jesus' response—the first is the more accepted, but probably the less accurate, which says that Jesus was "moved with pity." The second, and the less accepted but probably the more accurate, says that Jesus was "angry." Now there's a world of difference between being "moved with pity" and being "angry."

What would make an ancient scribe change the text as he copied these words from one parchment to another? Isn't it the same thing that makes us preachers tailor the gospel to our audience. We do it to make our message more acceptable. Yes. We do it all the time. We fail to address critical issues of hunger and homelessness and greed and a miserable war in Iraq that's killing more than our supposed enemies—a war that's killing our nation. Instead of helping you feel the hurts of the world, we preachers absolve you of any responsibility for reaching out

and touching those who are unacceptable. We make it easy for you to pass on by. In fact, we escort you.

What Jesus may have meant to do, “to walk on by,” we preachers do without a second thought, and for the most part, that’s the way you want it. Whatever prophetic voice may have once resonated through God’s word is left mostly unspoken by us preachers. Whatever Jesus may have felt—even anger—we preachers wipe away with cheap grace. I want to be thought well of by you. My ego is a powerful detriment to my preaching the gospel. I don’t want to pay the price of your rejection.

But being accepted is not the only reason I’m tempted, like Jesus, to pass on by those issues that I don’t want to deal with. I have already been expelled from one church for my attempt to bring a prophetic voice to the pulpit. I failed in my first pastorate for being too prophetic. When my wife Charlotte was dying, we spent many hours together the last three months of her life, reliving moments in our life together that had special meaning—happy moments, sad moments. “Remember our wedding night?” I would say. “How could I forget; could there ever have been two more awkward people?” she would respond. “And the time Amy turned on the clothes dryer with the cat in it?” I would say. “Yeah I remember, Ling Ling was never the same after five minutes at 300°F,” she would say. We remembered the night our fourteen year old daughter Annette had a stroke while babysitting and hung by a thread between life and death for ten days. Sad moments that we relived for the sake of our love for each other. We talked about the painful days and months leading up to our expulsion from my first church. Statements of pain, followed by periods of silence, and then Charlotte gazed into my eyes as she said softly, “You were a prophet, my love, and you were beautiful in your prophet days.” I didn’t feel beautiful, but more than that, I didn’t feel like a prophet. I felt more like an Isaiah, who at the end of his ministry said, “I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity.”—Isaiah 49:4. For those of you who don’t like me now, you would have liked me less in my prophet days.

I know from reading my Bible and from experience that to be successful as a pastor I cannot preach the Word as it comes to me—not in this society—and that I must dance around certain issues or ignore them altogether. Like many other preachers, I give in to the need to succeed or risk the consequences of your going some place else to hear a message more to your liking. Even when you do not tell me face to face, I hear whispers. For anyone who speaks ill of me, let me assure you, I speak ill of myself. For any who hold me in contempt, I hold myself in contempt. I struggle within myself to preach what needs to be preached without the risk of losing you.

And that’s why I dread saying what I’m about to say. In fact, I’m angry that it’s a subject I feel I can’t avoid. I’m ready to give up preaching because of what I’m becoming. I’d much rather just pass it on by, leave it alone, not to have to say things that are sure to make many of you unhappy. You can’t imagine the struggle that has brought me to this moment. The whole cultural, and yes, religious reasons that kept lepers at the edge of society, are at work among us to keep a whole class of people at the edge of our faith.

The reason Jesus was angry when asked to heal a leper is that it interfered with his agenda. He was on his way to the city to preach. If he took notice of this

leper, he would not be able to continue on. He would not be allowed to preach in the cities of Judea because his contact with the leper would make him unclean. The leper stood between Jesus and his mission, and the leper's cry made him angry. What we see is a glimpse of humanity struggling with divinity. It was like Jacob wrestling with the angel on the banks of the Jabbok River. It was like Delacroix's painting of Jacob and the angel locked in embrace. It almost worked because we are told that Jesus was angry. But just when humanity was about to have its way, Jesus reached out and touched the leper and said, "Be clean."

In doing this, Jesus was flying in the face of both his culture and his faith. Levitical law prohibited anyone from touching a leper. A leper was banished from normal society, was required to remain outside the city, wearing rent clothes, head bared, with a covering over his upper lip. And wherever he went, he was required to give warning of his presence by crying "unclean, unclean." The leper was untouchable. By touching the leper, Jesus crossed the boundary of his Jewish faith.

The great irony in Jesus' action is that at the very point where faith leaves Jesus no room, Jesus makes room for the one person most excluded by faith—the leper. The human urge to do what's expected almost kept Jesus from doing what he came to do. Doing what Jesus did set him on a path that would end with his own death. Doing what's expected is a powerful motivator to keep us preachers from doing what we are called to do.

And who is the leper among us? It's the gay male and the lesbian female. I suspect that one or both or more are worshipping with us today, trying to find a place for themselves in the faith that the Christian Church does not give them, sitting among us with secrets that if revealed would threaten their place in the pew next to us.

I know what the scriptures say about homosexuality. I also know what the scriptures say about divorce and a lot of other things that society and religion have taught us to pass on by. And I know how we pick and choose those scriptures that support our world view and how we pass by those who don't. I know how we used the scriptures to support slavery. I know how we used scripture to burn more than a quarter million people at the stake during the Inquisition. I know how we used scripture to oppose the Civil Rights Act of 1964. I know how we use scripture to support our political ideologies. We come to scripture preconditioned to hear what we want to hear. We are not always at our best when we open our Bibles, so I do not intend to proof text today's sermon. So what I intend to do is to speak theologically. Mind you, theology, if it's good theology, is based on the correct understanding of all of scripture, not just on a few isolated passages. And while my theology may not be perfect, if I err, I want to err on the side of grace rather than on the side of judgment.

So let me begin with the affirmation that Christian anthropology defines our identity in two ways and in two ways only: first that we are created in the image of God, and second that we are sinners for whom Christ died. That and that alone gives us our identity. Being gay or being straight does not give us our identity. My question to you this morning is this: if we are all defined by the same identity, how can we give Christian privileges to some and not to others? How can we give full church membership to some and partial church membership to others? If our defining identity is that we are created in the image of God and that we are sinners

for whom Christ died, how can we judge some as worthy and some not?

Maybe you saw the news clip on MSNBC which began with the words, “A mega church canceled a memorial service for a Navy veteran twenty-four hours before it was to start because the deceased was gay.” The pastor of the church, in response to the media attention said, “We declined to host the service—not based on discrimination, not based on hatred, but based on principle.” They can bury an atheist, you understand, but they can’t bring themselves to bury a gay Navy veteran who professes faith in Jesus Christ. Shame on that church and its 5,000 members. The way you get to be a 5,000 member church is to tell the people what they want to hear rather than what they need to hear.

There’s a scene in the New Testament in which Jesus describes the last judgment. It speaks of the Son of Man, surrounded by angels, sitting in full glory upon his throne, and before him are gathered all the people who have ever lived, and they are divided on his right and left. And this is what Jesus says to those standing before him: “Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me. I was gay and you accepted me’” (Matthew 25:34-37).

Now I know the words I was gay and you accepted me are not in your Bible. They’re in mine only because I penciled them in. My urge is to erase them, but I fear that if I tried, the words would be like Duncan’s blood that Lady Macbeth could not wipe off her hands. Because these words are in my Bible, even though they are penciled in, I cannot ignore them.

If this is the anger Jesus felt as the leper blocked his path into the cities of Judea, it’s the same anger I feel. If this is what Jesus felt when he saw his disciples making no headway against the wind and the waves and he meant to pass them by, then his humanity and my humanity are in lock step. Fortunately for us, his humanity did not win the day. Fortunately for us he rose above his humanity to do what he came to do. His humanity paid the price, but his divinity won the victory. He was angry because he had to make a choice he didn’t want to make. He meant to pass them by, but he didn’t. He meant to pass the cross by, but he couldn’t. I have no cause to think that Jesus would do anything different today than he did two thousand years ago. Given the circumstances, I have every reason to think that we do not know Jesus as well as we think we do, that we do not know his heart. If Jesus were with us today, who would he reach out and touch, and who would he just walk on by?

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