

Amazing Jesus

Following his run-in with the Pharisees in last Sunday's text, Jesus spends the rest of chapter 6 in Luke's gospel healing and truth-telling, including Luke's account of the Sermon on the Mount, or on the Plain in this case. Luke's version offers blessings, such as "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." Luke also includes woes or warnings such as, "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation." He proclaims, "Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return." And then in verse 46, in what I hear as frustrated aggravation, Jesus asks, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I tell you?" On the heels of these challenging words, Jesus is still drawing awestruck and devoted crowds when we meet him at the beginning of chapter 7. [Luke 7:1-17]

As we gathered for our weekly bible study on Wednesday, we heard little voices across the hall. One of our First Kids classes was in the children's library coloring as they reflected on a book that they had been reading about how each one of them—and us—is unique. I caught a glimpse of crayon creations of children's faces with big wobbly smiles, curly hair, and open, curious eyes. I was tempted to stick around and color with them—I know you're surprised, but I had grown-ups who had gotten dressed and driven to church to talk about this text, so I decided I should stick with my day job. I did find myself wondering how those grownups and I would answer the question: What makes me unique? We say it all the time, no one human being is exactly like another. We're all snowflakes in the very best way, uniquely created in the image of God. If I were pressed to name why I am unique, I'd be hard pressed to name any one thing. I am a GenX, lady preacher, who likes bright colors, who loves to laugh, and who yells a bit too loudly at basketball games (or at the television while watching basketball or football games). I'm a pushover for babies and dog videos. I'm shrinking in height by the second. I know the difference between a Romanian deadlift and a sumo deadlift, and I can do both...sort of. And I am a beloved child of God. No one of those things makes me unique on its own, so maybe it is the combination of these things and more that goes into making me me.

A colleague from a different denomination recently confessed that she's not a fan of the Apostles' Creed because of the line about Jesus being the only Son of God. "We're all children of God," she insisted. She's right of course. However, the church has declared for centuries that Jesus is actually unique in that he is THE Son of God, the only begotten incarnation of the one true God. I'm not Jesus. Beloved child of God? Yes. Jesus? No. So the author of Luke, along with the other gospel writers draws on stories about Jesus' life, ministry, preaching, and teaching to paint a picture of the one and only Jesus. This gospel and the others give the church in the first century and every century since a clearer understanding of who Jesus is, and by extension, who the church—Christ's body—is shaped to be and called to follow.

Thus far in Luke we have seen angels and shepherds celebrate this One who is born to save the entire world—princesses and paupers and everyone in between. We've overheard the twelve-year-old Jesus question and discuss the scriptures with Temple leaders. He has refused easy power in the desert. He has infuriated his hometown by refusing to be their—or anyone else's—pet prophet. He has called fishermen and tax collectors to be his disciples, to learn, follow, and be sent out in his name. He has repeatedly pulled away to pray alone. He has debated at least a few Pharisees about the meaning of sabbath. And he has healed more people than Luke can name. In today's text we witness Jesus healing a beloved slave from a distance and raising a mother's only son back to life.

Having heard about all that Jesus has done, a Roman centurion decides to ask for Jesus' help. The centurion's slave is near death, and he decides that Jesus is his best hope. It is striking, however that this Roman official, a powerful man with hundreds of soldiers under his command, does not approach Jesus himself. Initially, he asks some of the Jewish elders, the respected leaders of the community to go to Jesus on his behalf. They make the case that this one who could be put in the enemy-oppressor-occupier category is actually a good man, a friend to the Jewish community who has built them a place to gather for worship and study. "He loves our people," they insist. This outsider, this Gentile, this Roman official has loved them with *agape*, selfless love. He may not call Jesus Lord; he has however done what Jesus has asked. And then, just as Jesus is heading toward the centurion's home, he is met by another group. This group is made up of the

centurion's friends who share that the man does not want Jesus to come to his house; in an expression of profound humility, the centurion—again a man with tremendous power and authority himself, insists he is not worthy to have Jesus enter his home. And Jesus—Lord of all, savior of the world—is amazed. Surprised. Astonished. Marveling at this man's faith, saying out loud that he who has seen stars flung into the cosmos is moved and amazed by the faith of one man. This man does not have a stellar religious pedigree. He does not know the stories of the prophets, nor does he even make a full profession of faith. And yet, his humility and his trust amaze Jesus.

Then Jesus finds himself in the town of Nain where he encounters a mother walking with a funeral procession for her only son, and he is moved with compassion. The word for compassion does not describe a safely-distanced or smug pat-on-the-head kind of pity. The Greek word for compassion comes from the same word for intestines or guts. In other words, the woman's grief makes Jesus' stomach hurt. He feels pain in witnessing hers. Again, this Son of God, this one who can heal without even speaking a word and raise the dead without lifting a finger does not stand at a distance above it all. He feels compassion and empathy for the suffering in front of him AND he acts to alleviate that suffering. It is who he is. It is what he does.

Too often I am tempted to make Jesus a flat character, to re-create him in my image or the image of who I think I want him to be. I'll kid myself into thinking I want a Savior who is among the superheroes, a new member of the Justice League or DC Comics or the Marvel Universe. I want him to zap the bad guys, or—to be honest—the ones I have decided are the bad guys and save the good guys, the ones on my side. Or I will try to reduce Jesus to an afterthought almost, a gentle and passive bystander, one who only cares that I say the right words or pray the right prayers, a secondary character in my life's story, one who leaves my preferences and biases untouched.

And then I return to who the Holy Spirit and the scriptures tell me Jesus actually is, the ways he is uniquely suited to save me and everyone else. He prays; he weeps; he confronts those who abuse their power; he seeks out and eats with Pharisees and others who see God and the world differently than he does; he gets angry when the poor, the weak, and the left out are trampled, neglected, or overlooked. He calls me to love my

enemies and worship God alone. He heals people who are not on my radar and refuses to let death have the last word. He feels human pain on a visceral level. He also manages to wonder, to be amazed by this stunningly exquisite world and those who live here. And he ultimately gives up his life to show us just how deeply every human being is treasured. And he dies, not in a blaze of glory but on a lonely Roman cross.

This is the Jesus of scripture. This is the Lord who claimed me in my baptism, the same Lord who loves me without fail. I know he is exasperated with me fifty times before breakfast, every time I refuse to do what he asks of me, every time I do the very things he has told me not to do—especially in his name. I know I wear him out with all the ways I try to make him into someone he is not and never will be. AND I know that Jesus loves me more than I can begin to imagine, that he will never let me go, and that he graciously refuses to leave me alone. I suspect that he will forever be urging me to let down my guard, to admit when I am wrong, to confess when I let cynicism, fear, spite, suspicion, or pride blur my view of the world he gave his life to save. And by the grace of God, I am also fairly certain that he will keep pressing me to open my eyes, my mind, *and* my heart, to be both amazed and compassionate in his name.

Jesus is uniquely amazing. Why would I try to make him into anything or anyone else?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.