

## Jesus, a Scandal



Matthew 10:36 "Jesus said, 'Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will

lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.'"

In her book, entitled "*The Way Up Is Down: Becoming Yourself By Forgetting Yourself*," the author Marlena Graves writes that no matter who you are, where you are, or what you believe, Jesus will scandalize you! The 'real' Jesus, the one in the Gospels, not the one that they taught us about in Sunday School! We see that again and again in the readings at church! Like today's Gospel with its talk of not bringing peace, but a sword, and of family members becoming pitted against themselves. Similar words are echoed in Luke's Gospel (Lk 12:49ff).

Jesus simply scandalizes. He was, for example, repeatedly attacked by his own fellow countrymen for hanging out with the wrong crowd, with sinners and tax-collectors, and women of ill repute, and eating with hands defiled, and breaking the Sabbath laws. Jesus actually touched lepers and healed a woman who had a discharge of blood for years, both of whom were considered wholly impure and religiously outcast in his day. He forgave a woman who others thought ought to be stoned to death because she was caught in the act of adultery, and he told her to "go in peace." Jesus healed the daughter of the Syro-Phoenician woman, an enemy of his people, and the slave of a Roman Centurion, the

occupiers of the Jewish State. He healed a paralytic and a blind man, thought to be worthless in that society. He healed a man possessed with a demon whose neighbors sought to keep him in chains among the tombs. And as Jesus was being crucified, he told the penitent thief on the cross dying next to him, "Today you will be with me in paradise."

Jesus was a scandal. He recruited his disciples from the lower rungs of society, like illiterate Galilean fishermen. He even called a tax-collector to follow him, for God's sake! He allowed a woman thought to be a prostitute to be a leader among the group of Galilean women who went about with him and provided for his care. Elsewhere Jesus allowed a woman who was a known sinner to bathe his feet with her tears and dry them with her hair and then kissing them all the while he is at dinner in the house of a Pharisee, Simon the leper. Jesus publicly criticized and mocked the religious and political leaders of his day, violently overturned the merchants' tables in the Temple, and chased out the moneychangers with a whip. He questioned the rulers of the Jewish faith, pronouncing woe to the scribes and Pharisees, the righteous ones in their society. He performed healings and miracles on the Sabbath, his disciples did not fast, and ate without washing their hands, and drank too much. No wonder that his fellow Jews thought Jesus was possessed with a demon, with Beelzebub!

And Jesus told scandalous stories too. Think of the parable of the good Samaritan, a story about a man who helps a wounded traveler on the road to Jericho. Jesus made the hero of that story not an influential priest, not a person of social rank or privilege like a Levite, but a hated foreigner, a despised half-breed. A 'good Samaritan' was an oxymoron in his day. Or the story of the Prodigal Son who squandered his father's wealth in dissolute living, and yet when his father saw him returning with nothing, was filled with compassion, ran to him with open arms, kissed him, and killed the fatted calf, much to the dismay of his obedient brother. Recall the parable of the landowner who hired laborers for his field throughout the day, and then at the end of the day paid the ones who came at the last hour, the same amount as those who had been there working since morning!

Jesus' teachings are scandalous too! His whole Sermon on the Mount turned the Jewish traditions and laws seemingly upside down. When someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other cheek? What happened to the biblical standard of an eye for eye and a tooth for a tooth? Give to those who ask of you, asking nothing in return? Take up your cross and follow me? Blessed are the poor, blessed are the meek, blessed are those who mourn, and those who are persecuted, says Jesus? Where he also teaches that simply looking at a woman with lust is committing adultery, and getting angry with your brother is

equivalent to murder. If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out, he says! If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off! Jesus says love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you!

Jesus' own personal life was scandalous. He was a thirty-something Jewish man who never married or had children, in a Jewish culture that highly valued family. Remember that Jesus was conceived out of wedlock, and was estranged from his own family, whose father was absent in his later years, whose brothers openly admitted they didn't believe in him and mocked him, and whose recorded conversations with his mother, whom he always called just "woman," are few and abrupt. Indeed, on one occasion Jesus' own family actually tried to physically restrain him, believing that Jesus was literally out of his mind. And Jesus' remarkable response to this was to declare, "Who is my mother and who are my brothers?" And pointing to his disciples at his feet, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.'" On another occasion Jesus scolded a potential follower for wanting to first go back and bury his father. Let the dead bury the dead, he said. Don't tell the "Family Values" Christians about this, or they would be scandalized.

Remember the story of Jesus talking to the Samaritan woman at the well from a few weeks ago. Even his own disciples were

shocked that he was talking to her alone! Yet the encounter with Jesus transformed her life. She became "the first woman preacher in Christian history," telling her whole village in Samaria about Jesus, then bringing them to meet him, where many believed in him, we are told, and thus Jesus shockingly stayed with them for two more days in Samaria. Don't tell that to Southern Baptists who just threw out two large congregations for simply having women preachers!

The simple answer is that Jesus was a scandal, that his words and his actions are so distinct from our normal human reactions and behaviors, that he shocks us! Jesus crossed accepted boundaries of his day, defied social norms, and engaged with people as individuals, regardless of their rank or class or disease. He thus causes each one of us and each generation constantly to reassess our views about him, and to reconsider what it means to follow him. Every Christian needs to think through how Jesus' example applies to the times in which we live, and to the personal lives we live. For we need our sensibilities to align more with his, if we truly want to be his followers, but dare we do that? And how do we do that in this time and place? Should we be openly welcoming into our midst of LBGQ+ individuals, the trans, illegal immigrants, foreign refugees, the poor and ignorant, that neighbor we despise, or

the stranger we fear, the sick and lonely? What does it mean to follow Jesus in this day and age? That is the question.

If we don't reconsider our choices in comparison to Jesus' scandalous life, we will drift again into self-righteousness and legalism, such that we corrupt the very institution, the Church, which was created to worship him and fulfill his commandments, the Church which persecuted the Jews around the world, endorsed slavery again and again, suppressed women for centuries, authorized the killing of infidels and homosexuals, and disinherited native peoples from their own land around the globe, all in the name of Jesus' God.

The real lesson from Jesus' life and ministry is this; that engaging with people's individual stories and struggles, seeing them, the "other," as children of God, and thus worthy of our time and love, is scandalous, and requires much more effort from us than simply condemning and excluding them, but it is also vastly more rewarding, for us and for them, and more in keeping with the real Gospel. Thus, the lesson of this scandal, at least for those of us of the Christian faith, is that all of us are unworthy, all of us were once outcasts, all of us are broken and yet loved by God, and all of us are worth reaching out to and redeeming.

If God did that for us, why do we find it so hard to do it for each other?