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Is There a Place for Jesus in the Church?

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Jeremiah 7:1-7
Luke 9:28-37

This strange story of transfiguration is a reflection of other stories in scripture: Moses and Joshua Mt. Sinai, Elisha watching the prophet Elijah being taken to heaven, the baptism of Jesus with the same voice and same pronouncement.

And it prepares us for the thunder and clouds surrounding the crucifixion and the resurrection with its blinding light of a new creation in Jesus Christ.

(Read Luke 9:28-37)

The disciples knew they had experienced something special, something wonderful, something good. Then Peter gets all caught up in the moment and starts blabbering about a building campaign, and this is as close as it ever comes for God telling someone to ‘shut up’: “This is my Son, my Chosen, my Beloved; LISTEN TO HIM!”

Walter Brueggemann helps us see that this story is really all about Jesus’ true identity as the Son of God – fully human, fully God, and Jesus’ mission on earth when he says: “What the disciples (and we) need to understand is that Jesus is both the Son of God, powerful agent of healing and subject of dazzling glory, and the Son of Man, who will be betrayed, and persecuted and crucified.”

He goes on to say that we Christians often miss the point of it all because like Peter and James and John, we “want to have the glory that (we) can see without the message that (we) must hear, but the two cannot be separated.”

In other words, like Peter, James, and John on the mountain, it is often tempting for us to be more devoted to an experience of Jesus, erect a monument, or create a holiday or take up an offering than it is to be devoted to following Jesus himself.

Maybe we have come down from that mountain as Richard Rohr describes us, *"We worshipped Jesus instead of following him on his same path. We made Jesus into a mere religion instead of a journey toward union with God and everything else. This shift made us into a religion of 'belonging and believing' instead of a religion of transformation."*

Which explains a survey I read a couple of years ago that generated not only a list of favorite verses, but also favorite books of the Bible and even favorite chapters within those books. The final tally was very interesting.

The favorite verse list includes the ones we might expect – John 3:16 and such. In fact, though, there are only four quotes from Jesus at all in the list of top 10 verses.

What really caught my eye was that not a single Gospel – Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John – was listed among the favorite books. Not one.

The four gospels are the books that tell us what we need to know about the life and teachings of Jesus. You would think that people who regard themselves as "followers of Christ," would live in these books as the way to listen to Jesus! I find all of this troubling. I don't understand how Christian people think they can be followers of Jesus if they don't listen to what he said.

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It underscores the truth of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer, says in his classic book on the church, Life Together: “*Christians have forgotten that the ministry of listening has been committed to them by Him who is Himself the great listener and whose work they should share. We should listen with the ears of God that we may speak the Word of God.*”

We should listen with the ears of God that we may speak the Word of God.

That was the force of the command to Peter and John and James with the voice from heaven saying about Jesus, “*This is my Son, my Chosen, the Beloved...Listen to him.*”

But then, as they come down from the mountain, here is one of the most staggering statements in the New Testament: “*...they kept silent and in those days told no one of any of the things they had seen.*”

On that mountain they had seen the mystery of God in this man Jesus that revealed that inner quality of sacredness, of being holy, worthy of adoration and worship. But the sound of their silence fills the space of so many sanctuaries even today. It’s almost as if there is no place for Jesus in the Church.

Henri Nouwen identifies what’s at stake in the transfiguration: *The issue is no longer how to express the mystery of God to people who are no longer accustomed to the traditional language of Church...The issue is whether there is anything in our world that we can call ‘sacred’.*

I think, without meaning to, we have somehow rewritten our understanding of just who Jesus is and what Jesus does and can do.

We are glad to have Jesus die for our sins and secure us a place in heaven, but do we want him sitting next to us in church or hanging around our office or looking over our shoulder as we text a friend; is there a place for Jesus in our conversations while we eat cookies in the Welcome Center or making decisions about our household budget?

Although the United States remains the country with the largest number of Christians in the world, even here Christianity is experiencing a decline in demographics.

The absolute number of Christians rose from 1990 to 2014 as the overall population increased, but the actual percentage of Christians dropped from 86% to 71%.

In a recent survey, the Barna group polled 16-29-year olds asking the question, "What do you think of when you hear the word 'Christian'?" 91% of these young adults replied, "anti-homosexual;" 87% responded "judgmental;" 85% said "hypocritical;" 72% reported that Christians were out of touch with reality; and 68% pegged us Christians as "boring."

Put simply, the word "Christian" has very high negatives right now, especially with the generations that represent America's religious future. While the United States remains shaped by Christianity, an increasing number of religiously unaffiliated people, a steady drop in church attendance, and the growing tensions over social issues all point to a decreasing influence of the Christian faith.

I suggest the best picture of our current situation is actually over a hundred and thirty years old: Vincent Van Gogh's beautiful painting "Starry Night". The bold yellows in the night sky and in the windows throughout the city capture our

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attention and I've read that yellow is Van Gogh's way of pointing to the presence of God.

But if you look closely at the picture, the one place where there is no yellow, no light, no presence of God - it is the church with its steeple piercing tall into the dark. Is it easier to find Waldo than it is to find Jesus in our churches?

Because when you listen to Jesus, some of the things Jesus taught and did simply do not fit with the way many of us want to live our lives today.

For instance, Jesus taught that we are to have compassion for the poor and to provide for the needs of the "least of these" in our midst. Unfortunately, that doesn't fit a current economic agenda, so who's listening to Jesus on this matter?

Also, Jesus taught about truth and peace and told us that we must love our neighbors and our enemies. That however does not fit the way as we say, 'the way the world works', so who's listening to Jesus on this matter?

And Jesus taught that prayer and acts of piety are best done where God alone sees them. But that does not fit our current gospel of success or church growth agenda, so who's listening to Jesus on this matter?

You have to wonder where Jesus' place is in some of the current racial or religious or political conversations; listen to what's being said and how it's being said as it compares to what Jesus says.

Several years ago, during one of the presidential debates, candidate Ron Paul suggested that the foreign policy of the

United States would do well to follow the Golden Rule: *do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*

Now this isn't about Ron Paul's foreign policy. But the response of a significant portion of the audience, most of them, I would hazard to guess, Christians, was to boo. These are the words of Jesus to his disciples on loving others, on how to live; and they were booed!

Have we stopped believing that Jesus really is the Son of God, the Chosen, God's Beloved? Have we stopped believing that Jesus' mission on earth is our mission as his disciples? I don't know what else to call it except a crisis of faith. I don't mean this is a lack of faith in Jesus, but is there a lack of Jesus in our faith?

Transfiguration is about more than a shiny face and dazzling white clothing. It's what Jeremiah had said centuries before: That God will move into our neighborhood, dwell with us, as we clean up our act, the way we live, the things we do, the way we treat other people.

It is all about the reality of who Jesus is and the impact of Jesus Christ on our lives, and the foundation of Christian character in our lives, with whether or not Jesus Christ is powerful to us, the motivating force in our lives.

This means we should be inspired, perhaps transfigured might be a more accurate and forceful word, to walk among our brothers and sister as a blessing:

- bringing light into dark places,
- hope to displace despair,
- and love that casts out hate.

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Our world is hurting and the followers of Jesus need to make sure there is a place for Jesus; and maybe then we will hear God's voice speaking to us saying, "listen to my Child, the Beloved!"

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.



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