

The Uniqueness of Jesus (Part 7/7)

Jesus alone asks lovingly for our hearts

Soren Kiekegard, the great Danish theologian of 19th century tells a story of a prince who wanted to find a maiden suitable to be his queen. One day while running an errand in the local village for his father he passed through a poor section. As he glanced out the windows of the carriage his eyes fell upon a beautiful peasant maiden. During the ensuing days he often passed by the young lady and soon fell in love. But he had a problem. How would he seek her hand?

He could order her to marry him. But even a prince wants his bride to marry him freely and voluntarily and not through coercion. He could put on his most splendid uniform and drive up to her front door in a carriage drawn by six horses. But if he did this he would never be certain that the maiden loved him or was simply overwhelmed with all of the splendor. The prince came up with another solution. He would give up his robes, move into the village, entering not with a crown but in the garb of a peasant. He lived among the people, shared their interests and concerns, and talked their language. In time the maiden grew to love him for who he was and loved him because he had first loved her.

This simple story captures for us the essence of the Gospel. We have been considering the uniqueness of Jesus over the past two months. What makes Jesus unique among the founders of the worlds dominant religions is that he shows us the character of God in ways that tell us that God is in love with us. God wants to win our hearts so that like the maiden in relation to the prince, we may grow to love him.

I ask you to keep before you this morning the following question: Has Jesus won your heart?

I was thinking of this question in relation to Matthew's Gospel because the reading Stephen did this morning is from its ninth chapter. Before we think of the passage I want to draw your attention to the beginning and end of Matthew. In Matthew the angel Gabriel announces to Joseph, quoting from Isaiah 7,; "Look the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name

Emmanuel," which means "God is with us." Then at the close of this Gospel account Jesus says to the disciples: "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age"

Here is the language of the prince moving into the village in a way that is then captured with wonderful clarity in the passage we heard read this morning. Let's set these verses in the context of chapters eight and nine. A cursory glance at the subheadings make it clear that these chapters concentrate on healing stories. In total we are told of eleven individual healings and there is a summary statement of many who are healed.

In each of these two chapters there is a quote from the Old Testament. In chapter eight the quote is found at verse 17 and is taken from Isaiah 53:4. "He took our infirmities and bore our diseases". In quoting this verse Matthew is saying that these acts of healing are the fulfillment of a prophetic utterance spoken hundreds of years earlier.

Then in chapter nine the other Old Testament quote is drawn from Hosea chapter 6 verse 6. Here Jesus says to the religious leaders of Judaism at verse 13: "Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice". Compassion and merciful action on behalf of those around him was the essence of how Jesus lived when he moved into the "village." The absence of mercy is a sign of unbelief and a rejection of God. The Jews were reprimanded for emphasizing cultic Acts and ignoring mercy toward one another in Hosea 6. Jesus took up this reprimand to denounce the legalistic practices of the Pharisees. True Christian faith produces genuine compassion and fruit in the form of Acts of mercy toward those in need. It was this characteristic of mercy that caused Christ to go among all kinds of people to help. Believers are to respond to the mercy shown them in the same way. When this happens Jesus is winning our hearts or we are in the process of being converted.

There are several kinds of conversion in the Christian life. All of them are important, and they are all connected. They happen in a somewhat different order and way in every person. And the process is never quite finished. God's mercy keeps changing people--or at least trying to do so--because to build on a familiar saying, God isn't finished with any of us yet.

I'd like to focus on three kinds of conversion, different ways in which God's grace changes us The three ways are: conversion to God and to Jesus,

conversion to the church, and -- here's a surprising one -- conversion to the world.

At chapter nine verse 9 we read another story. Rather than being a healing story this is a conversion story. "As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him "Follow me". And he got up and followed him." Here is mentioned a particular person who having been shown mercy by Jesus will learn mercy and so is in the process of being converted.

Now let's think about Matthew for a minute.

Matthew's job was collecting tolls on such things as the transportation of goods. He worked for a boss who had bought a contract for tax collection, but left the actual work to poor slobs like him. Matthew worked out of a crummy office in the commercial district.

People in general despised him, and had their reasons for doing so. He was seen as a collaborator, a stooge for the Roman Empire that dominated the Holy Land. He was a living reminder to his neighbors of their heavy tax burden: Jews were forced to pay both civil and religious taxes. Worst of all, it was widely known that many in Matthew's position were out-and-out cheats. In both the popular mind and in religious writings they were lumped together with thieves, murderers, and other wholesale sinners. Tax collection appeared on the lists of despised occupations that no practicing Jew should follow. People like Matthew were regarded as lost souls.

Then one day, as Matthew is working away in his office, grace enters his life in the person of Jesus. Jesus doesn't ignore or condemn him, or otherwise treat him as he was accustomed to be treated by so many others. What Jesus does is invite him.

"Follow me," is what Jesus says. Matthew is astounded, yet he knows a good deal when he hears one, so he leaves the tax office behind and follows Jesus, hardly stopping to lock the door behind him.

Unaware of what he's getting himself into, Matthew follows Jesus. He experiences grace. He is touched by mercy. His conversion begins as he turns

his back on sordid rip-offs and follows someone who gives him all he needs for free.

Matthew follows Jesus, and follows him, and follows him. He walks with him along dusty roads, and, however unfaithfully, through the events of Holy Week. Yet still Jesus calls, and still Matthew follows.

Grace remains in the air, even stronger than before. Matthew becomes a witness to the resurrection. He becomes responsible for the book that bears his name, the Gospel according to Matthew. It's been said that of the four Gospels, this one has been the most influential throughout the Church's history.

Still Jesus calls, and still Matthew follows. Look at the church calendar for September, and see St. Matthew's Day on the 21st. The numerals for that day are red, the color of blood, indicating that Matthew was a martyr, someone led by grace to offer his life in the cause of Christ.

Cheat. Collaborator. Greedy. Shameful. That's how people saw Matthew as he took in money dishonestly, unjustly, there in his little office. But one day grace knocked on the door, and he was converted, turned around.

The change was manifold. Converted to God, the Lord of mercy. Converted to Jesus, who loves the unworthy. Converted to the church, those early Christians. And even converted to the world, for Matthew, the sometime cheat, whose heart was once as hard as silver coins, records that Jesus story where the King on judgment day announces: "Whatever you did to the little people, you did to me." [Matthew 25:31-46]

What about in your life? Is your heart being won over to Jesus in ways that see you responding to mercy as you are being converted to him, the church and the world? Have you heard grace knocking on your door, opened it up and discovered the Prince asking for your hand? Stories like Matthew's, stories like those found in Matthew eight and nine are unparalleled in the Sacred writings of the world's religions. You will not find these stories of mercy in the writings of Mohammad. They are not present in the Vedas of Hinduism. These kinds of narratives of God with us are unique to Christianity. For it is only here that we read stories of people who are trapped, estranged and rejected. It is only here that we read of people who have nowhere to turn. On their lips, a desperate

prayer. In their hearts, desolate dreams. But before their eyes a never-say-die Galilean who majors in stepping in when everyone else steps out.

These stories are here to show us that this is what God is like. And when he begins to touch our hearts mercy breaks in.

Towards the end of his life, after he had conquered much of civilized Europe but was now exiled on the rock of St. Helena Napoleon Bonaparte said this about Jesus Christ.

Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne and I myself have founded great empires; but upon what did these creations of our genius depend? Upon force. Jesus alone founded His empire upon love and to this day millions will die for him... I think I understand something of human nature; and I tell you, all these were men, and I am a man: none else is like Him; Jesus Christ was more than man... I have inspired multitudes with such an enthusiastic devotion that they have died for me.. but to do this it was necessary that I should be visibly present with the electric influence of my looks, my words, of my voice. When I saw men and spoke to them, I lighted up the flame of self-devotion in their hearts... Christ alone has succeeded in so raising the mind of man toward the unseen, that it becomes insensible to the barriers of time and space. Across the chasm and eighteen hundred years, Jesus Christ makes a demand which is beyond all others difficult to satisfy; He asks for that which a philosopher may often seek in vain at the hands of his friends, or a father of his children, or a bride of her spouse, or a man of his brother. He asks for the human heart; He will have it entirely to himself. He demands it unconditionally, and forthwith His demand is granted. Wonderful! All who sincerely believe in him experience that remarkable, supernatural love toward Him. This phenomenon is unaccountable; it is altogether beyond the scope of man's creative powers. Time, the great destroyer, is powerless to extinguish this sacred flame; time can neither exhaust its strength nor put a limit to its range. This is it, which strikes me most; I have often thought of it. This is what proves to me quite convincingly the Divinity of Jesus Christ.

And so you see even Napoleon realized at the end of his life that we are the maidens with whom Jesus has fallen in love. He wants your heart. He wants mine.

Does he have it?