

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
Jody McDevitt, Co-Pastor

January 31, 2010  
*4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time*  
Luke 4:22-30

## Jesus on the Edge

It's hard not to preach a domesticated Jesus.

Some of you know that I am taking a course that is teaching me to be more visual in my preaching, and so I tried to imagine what image I might choose to convey this idea. If we had screens or monitors, I know exactly what I'd want projected on them. Warner Sallman's "Head of Christ." It's the most well-known portrait of Jesus in America, more than 500 million copies sold. Jesus, with his shoulder-length wavy light brown hair, full beard, solemnly and serenely looking heavenward, as if asking for guidance and confirmation—I think most of you know the picture well. See it in your mind's eye.

Perhaps at one time that image had an edge to it, but no longer. It is a domesticated Jesus, and as I said, it is difficult not to preach a domesticated Jesus.

A domesticated Jesus is a dog rather than a wolf, a house cat rather than a cougar, a cow rather than a bison. A domesticated Jesus is predictable and tame, dependent on humans for survival. A domesticated Jesus does what we want him to do, says what we want him to say, is quiet when we want him to say nothing, and comes and goes at our bidding. He is made in our image, rather than the other way around. He sells well at Christian bookstores. A domesticated Jesus is easiest to identify when he's someone else's pet.

But it's the "edgy" Jesus who makes us uncomfortable, who is harder to preach and harder to hear. We'd rather just hear "love one another" and ignore it the part about loving our enemies and praying for those who persecute us. We'd rather hear "come, follow me" as an invitation to a party complete with favors than the advice to a would-be disciple to give away all his worldly goods in order to follow. We'd rather hear "blessed are the well-off and the middle class" than "blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of God." But Jesus was more often edgy than tame. He preached and taught from the margins, not from the center.

So on that day when he came home to Nazareth and the hometown crowd proudly invited him to sit in the teaching seat and show them what he knew, he didn't last long. He wasn't a boy, he was about 30 years old, and he was getting quite a good reputation away from his home, so naturally there was some pride and interest in him. The synagogue was the community's spiritual center, and the scriptures were at the heart of the synagogue, and of the law, the prophets and the writings, the prophet Isaiah was right in the middle. They put Jesus in the center, and asked him to teach.

And for a little while their pride colored their hearing. "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth." I imagine that if Ryan Mandeville were invited to preach here, the reaction would be much the same. "I remember when he was baptized." "Yes, I taught him in Sunday School." "When he spoke at Youth Sunday, I knew he'd be a minister someday." At the same time, there would be a bit of, "Isn't that Lloyd and Charlie's son, the one who used to get into mischief with those other boys?" And if after speaking with charm and talent he continued to teach and preach words

that challenged the way of life of this congregation, the pride might give way to anger and rejection. Suppose Ryan were to tell us that we're way too self-centered, that we're keeping the gospel to ourselves and killing the good news by reserving it for the well-off and middle class instead of living it among the poor. Suppose he were to say that God's favor is not on America, but on the people of Haiti, and our charity is not good enough, we need to do more. Suppose he were to insinuate that he was chosen by God to do marvelous things that we would have none of. The sentiment of the crowd might easily turn, and there could be a mass movement to get him out of the pulpit and back to Alaska where he belongs.

Well, something like that happened to Jesus in Nazareth. He went too far in challenging his hometown crowd, and they didn't want to hear it from him. They put him in the center, and he moved himself to the edge by pointing out that God doesn't always choose the chosen ones for favor, but often favors the outsider, the people on the margins. He put himself on the edge, and they pushed him to the edge of town, to the edge of a cliff, to a nearly-violent end to his life. But it wasn't time for that yet. He still had ministry to do. So he gave them the slip and walked away.

He wasn't who they thought he was, and he wasn't who they wanted him to be. He was not going to be domesticated, either. He had a message from God that put him on the edge.

At this point I might change the projected image. Instead of the Sallman Jesus, I might put up a photo of a guy who, when he takes his horn-rimmed glasses off, actually looks a little bit like that image of Jesus, only edgier. He has a scraggly beard and light brown shoulder-length hair—but it's in dreadlocks, held back by a bandana which shows off his earrings. He's tall and skinny, in his early 30s, and his name is Shane Claiborne. He's a published author, a public speaker and preacher, and one of the founders of a Christian community in an impoverished neighborhood in Philadelphia. They call their community "The Simple Way." Some of our church youth have been reading one of his books, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living As an Ordinary Radical*. He says that Jesus wrecked his life, and describes it this way:

I had it together. I used to be cool. And then I met Jesus and he wrecked my life. The more I read the gospel, the more it messed me up, turning everything I believed in, valued, and hoped for upside-down. I'm still recovering from my conversion. I know it's hard to believe, but in high school, I was elected prom king. I was in the in-crowd, popular, ready to make lots of money and buy lots of stuff, on the upward track to success. I had been planning to go to med school. . . .

But as I pursued that dream of upward mobility preparing for college, things just didn't fit together. As I read Scriptures about how the last will be first, I started wondering why I was working so hard to be first.

(Claiborne, Shane, 2006, *The Irresistible Revolution*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 41-41)

And then I might show some pictures or videos of the adventures of Claiborne's Christian journey.

- Learning from the homeless people of Philadelphia and the dying people in Mother Teresa's shelter in Calcutta,
- standing before a judge wearing a t-shirt that says "Jesus Was Homeless,"
- traveling to Baghdad with a peace team in March 2003 and worshipping with Iraqi Christians as their city was being bombed.

It's a life his family never imagined for him, though they were good Christians. When he returned from Iraq, a woman came up to him wagging her finger in his face and saying "How dare you be so careless with your life and put your mother through all that? Jesus would be shaking his finger in your face, saying 'how dare you be so reckless?'" (p. 225) And he thought to himself, which Jesus is that? Not the one who died on a cross.

Or the one who dared to challenge his hometown friends. Or the one whose life and call has led Christians over the centuries to be beaten and jailed, assassinated and even executed because they stood up and said things like "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim that "this is God's year to act!"

My friends, I believe that Shane Claiborne and others like him are calling us to un-domesticate Jesus, to listen again to what the scriptures really are saying to us, to live more boldly and more bravely as followers of a radical Christ, not a tame one. Jesus' words and his actions were never timid, designed to please the people or endorse the status quo if the people were ignoring God's ways or the status quo was unjust or founded on violence. Jesus didn't settle for being kind to the poor—he chose to be poor. He didn't draw a line between "our kind" and "others," whether that line divides people by nationality or color or gender or creed or into "saints" and "sinners," because he himself was the sign that God's love is for all the world. And he never settled for a faith that lets people profess godliness one day and then live in the world oblivious to the needs of others six days a week. Claiborne's prophetic voice and witness remind us that it is possible to live the radically different life that Jesus calls us to live. He says, "Let us begin to be Christians again. Jesus, give us the courage." (p. 356)

One step at a time. And now it's time to put up a mirror on the screen, if that's possible. We can grow toward this Christ-like life. Earlier this week I read the testimony of a lifelong anti-hunger activist, who said that his conviction was rooted in the sermons he grew up hearing his father, a Methodist minister, preach, sermons "steeped in social concern for those who struggled." (Bread for the World newsletter, Jan. 2010, p. 7) It made me think, years from now, what themes will anyone remember from my preaching? A domesticated Jesus sure won't make a difference, a Jesus created to reinforce the way we already live and think and act. But a Jesus who calls to us from the edge, from the margins, where people are struggling and needy and close to God—that's the Jesus whose life pulls the world nearer to God's dream for us all. So today I renew my commitment to try to preach and try to live like that Jesus on the edge, the one who risked offending for the sake of telling the truth that God loves all people, the one who trusted that God would be with him when he lived dangerously, the one who gave up his life for me and you and everyone else, too.

Do you see yourself in the mirror, too? Will you make a new commitment? For, with Jesus, I challenge you to grow your life toward his edgy life, one small step or one giant leap at a time. And at the heart of that commitment is a commitment to transforming love. Mother Teresa used to say, "We can do no great things, just small things with great love. It's not how much you do, but how much love you put into doing it." (Quoted by Claiborne, p. 78) And the world takes her seriously because she lived it. Dorothy Day, another radical Christian, wrote, "Love is a harsh and dreadful thing to ask of us, but it is the only answer." (Claiborne, p. 136) And St. Paul wrote, "The greatest of these is love." Love stretches us towards the margins, beyond ourselves, a risky way to live. It is the Christ-like way.

And by his grace, we all can walk it.

Shane Claiborne, one more time: "The revolution begins inside each of us, and through little acts of love, it will take over the world." (p. 356)

Praise be to the God of love.