

The Forgotten Radicalism of Jesus Christ

First-century Christians weren't prepared for what a truly inclusive figure he was, and what was true then is still true today.



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“Get used to different.”

That line comes from a marvelous new TV series on Jesus' life, “The Chosen,” in which Jesus, played by Jonathan Roumie, invites Matthew to become one of his disciples. Simon Peter, already a disciple, registers his fierce objection. Matthew is a tax collector, who were viewed as tools of Roman authorities, often dishonest and abusive. They were therefore treated as traitors and outcasts by other Jews.

“I don't get it,” Simon Peter says to Jesus about his decision to invite Matthew, to which Jesus responds, “You didn't get it when I chose you, either.”

“But this is different,” Simon Peter answers. “I'm not a tax collector.” At which point Jesus let's Simon Peter know things aren't going to be quite what his followers expected.

First-century Christians weren't prepared for what a truly radical and radically inclusive figure Jesus was, and neither are today's Christians. We want to tame and domesticate who he was, but Jesus' life and ministry don't really allow for it. He shattered barrier after barrier.

One example is Jesus' encounter, in the fourth chapter of the gospel of John, with the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus and the woman talked about Jesus being the Messiah, why he was even deigning to talk with her, and the unnamed woman's past and present, which she initially sought to hide from Jesus. (It included her five previous husbands, according to the account in John, and the fact that “the one whom you now have is not your husband.”) Yet not a word of condemnation passed the lips of Jesus; the woman felt heard, understood, cared for. Jesus treated her, in the words of one commentator, “with a magnetic dignity and respect.”

The encounter with Jesus transformed her life; after it the woman at the well became “the first woman preacher in Christian history,” proclaiming Jesus to be the savior of the world to her community, according to the New Testament scholar Kenneth Bailey.

This story is a striking example of Jesus' rejection of conventional religious and cultural thinking — in this case because Jesus, a man, was talking earnestly to a woman in a world in which women were often demeaned and treated as second-class citizens; and because Jesus, a Jew, was talking to a Samaritan, who were despised by the Jews for reasons going back centuries. According to Professor Bailey, “A Samaritan woman and her community are sought out and welcomed by Jesus. In the process, ancient racial, theological and historical barriers are breached. His message and his community are for all.”

This happened time and again with Jesus. He touched lepers and healed a woman who had a constant flow of menstrual blood, both of whom were considered impure; forgave a woman “who lived a sinful life” and told her to “go in peace,” healed a paralytic and a blind man, people thought to be worthless and useless. And as Jesus was being crucified, he told the penitent thief on the cross next to him, “Today you will be with me in paradise.”

Jesus was repeatedly attacked for hanging out with the wrong crowd and recruited his disciples from the lower rungs of society.

And Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan, a story about a man who helps a wounded traveler on the road to Jericho, made the hero of the story not an influential priest, not a person of social rank or privilege but a hated foreigner.

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For Christians, the incarnation is a story of God, in the person of Jesus, participating in the human drama. And in that drama Jesus was most drawn to the forsaken and despised, the marginalized, those who had stumbled and fallen. He was beloved by them, even as he was targeted and eventually killed by the politically and religiously powerful, who viewed Jesus as a grave threat to their dominance.

Over the course of my faith journey, I have wondered: Why was a hallmark of Jesus's ministry intimacy with and the inclusion of the unwanted and the outcast, men and women living in the shadow of society, more likely to be dismissed than noticed, more likely to be mocked than revered?

Part of the explanation surely has to do with the belief in the *imago Dei*, that Jesus sees indelible dignity and inestimable worth in every person, even "the least of these." If no one else would esteem them, Jesus would.

Among the people who best articulated this ethic was Abraham Lincoln, who in a 1858 speech in Lewiston, Ill., in which he explained the true meaning of the Declaration of Independence, said, "Nothing stamped with the Divine image and likeness was sent into the world to be trodden on, and degraded, and imbruted by its fellows."

Yet another reason for Jesus' connection with outcasts undoubtedly had to do with his compassion and empathy, his desire to relieve their pain and lift the soul-crushing shame that accompanies being a social pariah and an untouchable.

But that is hardly the only reason. Jesus modeled inclusion and solidarity with the "unclean" and marginalized not only for their sake but for the sake of the powerful and the privileged and for the good of the whole.

Jesus must have understood that we human beings battle with exclusion, self-righteousness and arrogance, and have a quick trigger finger when it comes to judging others. Jesus knew how easily we could fall into the trap of turning "the other" — those of other races, ethnicities, classes, genders and nations — into enemies. We place loyalty to the tribe over compassion and human connection. We view differences as threatening; the result is we become isolated, rigid in our thinking, harsh and unforgiving.

Jesus clearly believed that outcasts had a lot to teach the privileged and the powerful, including the virtues of humility and the vice of supreme certitude. Rather than seeing God exclusively as a moral taskmaster, Jesus understood that the weak and dispossessed often experience God in a different way — as a dispenser of grace, a source of comfort, a redeemer. They see the world, and God, through a different prism than do the powerful and the proud. The lowly in the world offer a corrective to the spiritual astigmatism that develop among the rest of us.

It's easy for us to look back 20 centuries and see how religious authorities were too severe and unforgiving in how they treated the outcasts of their time. The wisest question those of us who are Christians could ask ourselves isn't why we are so much more humane and enlightened than they were; rather, it is to ask ourselves who the modern outcasts are and whether we're mistreating them. Who are the tax collectors of our era, the people we despise but whom Jesus would welcome, those around whom are we determined to build a "dividing wall of hostility," to use the imagery of the Apostle Paul?

"How Christians, including me, responded to the AIDS crisis in the '80s haunts me," my longtime friend Scott Dudley, senior pastor of Bellevue Presbyterian Church in Bellevue, Wash., recently told me. "Had we, like the first Christians, cared first and cared most for modern day 'plague' victims, I think we'd be in a whole different conversation with the L.G.B.T.Q. community. We may still have significant differences of opinion. However, I believe the dialogue would be one of more mutual respect, and I believe the L.G.B.T.Q. community would feel less afraid of the wounds Christians can inflict." But even if the conversation were not different, as Scott knows, caring first and caring most for those victims of a plague would have been the right thing to do.

No society and no religious faith can live without moral rules. Jesus wasn't an antinomian, one who believes that Christians, because they are saved by grace, are not bound to religious laws. But he understood that what ultimately changes people's lives are relationships rather than rule books, mercy rather than moral demands.

Jesus' teachings are so challenging, so distinct from normal human reactions and behaviors, that we constantly have to renew our commitment to them. Every generation of Christians need to think through how his example applies to the times in which they live. We need our sensibilities to align more with his. Otherwise, we drift into self-righteousness and legalism, even to the point that we corrupt the very institution, the church, which was created to worship him and to love others.

The lesson from Jesus' life and ministry is that understanding people's stories and struggles requires much more time and effort than condemning them, but it is vastly more rewarding. And the lesson of Christmas and the incarnation, at least for those of us of the Christian faith, is that all of us were once outcasts, broken yet loved, and 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?

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