

Sassy Jesus and the “Divine Heart Transplant”

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May my words give glory and witness to the God of love, Creator, Redeemer, and Inspirer. Amen.

In our discussions of Scripture and the faithful life, some members of the 20s and 30s group have shared their experience of “Sassy Jesus” who shows up occasionally in our Gospel stories— one example is Jesus’ exchange with his mother when they were both guests at a wedding in Cana. Mary tells Jesus that the wine has run out, and Jesus says “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.”

This is sassy Jesus. Woman, I’m just a guest at this party, and its not yet my time to be glorified, but you know what? I’ll supply miraculous wine for the guests anyway.

This is Jesus, welcoming us with arms of love open wide and also weaving a few surprises into the tapestry of our life, to prod us out of our complacency and to help us grow. Today, I read some sass into Jesus’ words to his disciples. These are the insiders, the ones who have committed the most to his movement, and the ones who he is training to lead. After giving them power to heal and power to banish evil, he sends them out, warning them that they will face resistance in their work. But he also reminds them of their infinite value in God’s eyes, and of the infinite value of faithfulness— challenging them and us to hold to our faith, even when it is challenged by those closest to us. We each have our own journey, and we are each called to share our truths in community. The passage crescendos to the warning:

“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.”

Yikes. Sassy Jesus is in the house. He is using extreme language with his disciples for an extremely important topic. In the verses following, Jesus reminds his disciples that they will be rewarded, in the life to come if not in the present life. But the Gospel reading today still comes with a lot of conflict and division, and the challenge to be “worthy” of Jesus. How can anyone possibly be “worthy” of the Son of God? Haven’t we all fallen short at one time or another? And aren’t we all already God’s children by virtue of being made in the image of God? I see Jesus challenging his disciples, and doing what he can to prepare them for what is to come. The early church faced immense persecution—the truth was dangerous, and it still is. But what can these words mean for us today, in the United States, in the twenty first century?

This is where Paul’s writings today bring some crucial perspective. Paul’s magnum opus, the Epistle to the Romans, brings us deep into the mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection.

Paul was an incredibly brilliant theologian, trained by the best thinkers of his day. Years ago, before Seminary, I tended to discount Paul, and Romans because of my own disagreements in terms of a life-giving and faithful approach to gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation in the church. Thankfully, I was challenged to delve into his writings more deeply, to see beyond my cultural distance from him and not let my own perspective get in the way of gleaning wisdom from his theological reflection.

Paul writes:

We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

This is our Baptism. Jesus taking up his cross is God with us in all our experiences of loss. And we are called to take up our cross because we are baptized into Christ's death and resurrection, to let everything that would separate us from God be put to death. And we find, as we are freed of those desires and behaviors that are not in accordance with God's will, that we are walking in newness of life. Being free from sin and death means that we can understand something more about Jesus's words in John's Gospel (10:10) that "I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly"

We repeat our Baptismal vows every time someone is baptized because the journey through death to resurrection is an ongoing process. I don't know about you, but I find it very uncomfortable when I am being freed from a desire or behavior that is not in accordance with God's will. Nadia Bolz-Weber has called God's intervention to remove her heart of stone and give her a heart of flesh "The Divine Heart transplant". As she describes it, "it is not a comfortable process". When it has happened to me, it has felt like a part of me is dying. A comfortable little life that I wanted to have for myself is being opened up to reveal a deeper, more complicated picture. I wanted to write Paul off as a misogynist, and a superfluous to my spiritual life. And yet, as I read more deeply into his life and perspective, I saw a brilliant and deeply caring man who wrote to give life to the communities he nourished in his own first-century world. It was an experience of spiritual death that leads to new life. When I recognize my mistakes, or my mistaken attitudes, I am free to make a different

choice the next time around. And God is gracious, redeeming our mistakes once we are able to recognize and confess them. Of God's graciousness, Paul writes famously:

Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means!

His answer has also been translated in the King James as "God forbid!" One might say today, "may it never happen!" In Greek, it is two words, "me genoito," could be read as "may it not be." It is a wish, a prayer and an affirmation. The Septuagint has translated it as a non-amen, or an anti-amen. After all, the Hebrew word Amen, means truly or surely. We say amen to express our assent to what we hear, with the implication of "may it be so!"

Should we continue in sin so that grace may abound?

Can I get a not-amen? A may it never be so?

Jesus said:

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

Amen.