

Pat Conover: The Unappreciated Jesus

Seekers Church

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The Unappreciated Jesus

Text: [Luke 4:14-24 \(Lectionary\) and Mark 6:1-5](#)

Some of you know that I tend to think dialectically, particularly on matters of spirit and theology. This means that I aim at trying to hold onto multiple truths at the same time, including truths that initially appear to be opposite to each other.

For example, you know that I am one who has repeatedly urged that Seekers be radically inclusive. Part of that is pure selfishness. Without a commitment to radical inclusiveness there would be no room in Seekers for me. But a radical inclusiveness that is not engaged with a radical centering leads to confusion, a loss of identity and direction. Among other things, radical centering keeps bringing me around to the need to understand Jesus, to hold up the Jesus story as a central gathering point for our conversations. It leads me to frame some of our most important questions so that the light of the gospel can shine on them.

For example, in my transgender journey, I repeatedly held up my journey before God in prayer, and, as I worked with the Bible, as I faced the hostile texts in Deuteronomy, it became very important to me how Jesus worked with the purity laws. It was very good news for me. Some of you heard my [sermon](#) on that subject.

What are the questions you need to bring to Jesus? What would Jesus say? It might matter a whole lot to you.

While I am more interested in life giving questions than fixed answers, we all have to live, at any moment, with the answers that we have achieved so far. The trick is not to get stuck in mindlessly defending our answers so that we end our capacity to grow.

I wish we knew a whole lot more about the life of Jesus as he actually lived it. It is sad to me that some of the most important things we know about Jesus come from the defensiveness of the gospel writers.

Mark, Matthew, Luke, John and Thomas all carry the story that Jesus did not get any respect in Nazareth. Mark tells us that it was not only his neighbors, but also his family, that did not appreciate Jesus. Each of the five gospels tells this story a bit differently. Looking at the different gospel versions help us understand the different agendas of the gospel writers. Luke, for example, stands with Paul, in emphasizing the rejection of Jesus by many Jews and the importance of carrying the gospel message to the gentiles.

I'm going to offer one example of how our knowledge that his neighbors did not appreciate Jesus can make a difference on a specific concern. Then I am going to move to some questions for Seekers that may help us with our own community building.

These linked gospel stories tell us that the power of Jesus as a faith healer was reduced or eliminated by familiarity with him as a person. How could Jesus...

This helps us understand an important thing about Jesus as healer, and, as our youth learned in their first Christian Growth retreat, one important thing we know about Jesus is that he was a powerful source of healing. It seems that the healing of Jesus depended on faith and not on magic. If Jesus was just some magical aspect of God visiting earth, as one

theme in Christendom would have it, then he should have had the capacity to heal everywhere, to override any resistance. But, if the healing of Jesus depended on mobilizing the faith resources in those he touched, or in the women who touched him, we have a different picture. If familiarity made it hard for Jesus to mobilize the faith resources in others then it raises the question for us, "What may block me from being open to the healing potential of Jesus?"

We are living in the middle of a stress epidemic. Individually our distress brings us disease and discomfort. As a society, it costs us an immense amount of money and more in lost potential. Sin is not so much our intent to do what is wrong, as it is our unwillingness to follow what is right. Our bodies try to let us know about our distress and so often we just don't want to listen.

If distress has so much capacity to contribute to making us sick, is it so unthinkable that moving to centered wholeness could have a big impact on our bodily lives as well our spirit consciousness? A lot of our problem comes from the mechanical metaphors that modern science has taught us about our bodies. For example, I grew up thinking that germs cause disease. My mother believed that deeply and gave over enormous energy to house cleaning. Now science has made it clear that even for the infectious diseases, germs are only one part, often the small part, of becoming ill. Lots of things contribute to disease.

So I ask you, *what healing question do you need to bring to Jesus?*

Today's gospel story can similarly help us create and sharpen other interesting questions when we think of Jesus as teacher or radical, when we think of Jesus as prophet, priest and king, when we think about Jesus through the lenses of atonement or the apocalyptic end of the world.

But the serious Seekers question I want to lift up today is the question posed by the unresponsive Nazareans.

How is familiarity with each other within Seekers blocking us from appreciating what may be of God in each other, what may be of God in our common life. How are we shutting ourselves off from receiving God's best gifts?

I have come to believe that the worst hurts I give to others come not from my bad intentions or my ignorance, but from misapplying my strengths. For example, I want to figure out and explain things at times when I should be standing with or appreciating.

Seekers is proud of itself as a community. We have the word community in our official naming of ourselves. It is a word I love and fight for as a focus for interpreting our life. But, since Jesus had to *escape* from his community to follow his calling, I feel moved to ask how our strong sense of community might be killing us and hurting those we most want to help.

Nazareth was a little village set on a modest hill in a fertile valley. In such a small village people would know each other very well.

Nazareth was an hours walk from an important city, Sepphoris. Soon after Jesus was born, a rebel named Judas Ezekias gathered some Jewish friends and attacked Sepphoris which was sort of the royal city of Galilee. He looted the royal palace and fled. Varus the Roman governor of Syria sent General Gaius and his troops to put down the uprising. Gaius set fire to Sepphoris and took its inhabitants into slavery. Then Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great, King of Jerusalem, was set up as governor of Galilee and Perea. It was Herod Antipas who killed John the Baptist. Herod Antipas lived in Sepphoris throughout the early life of Jesus and it is very likely that Joseph and Jesus, as "tektons" or builders, found work in rebuilding Sepphoris, perhaps building the city walls, the

theater or the mansions.

But Nazareth was the place where people knew the kinds of things about Jesus that many of us would like to forget about in our own lives: all our failings, the ways we haven't met expectations, the things we wished we had understood but didn't, the things children in the synagogue know about each other.

Think about one of the people you know in Seekers for a moment. What is it about them or about you which blocks you from taking them seriously? Is it one of their failings or shortcomings? Is it your jealousy? Are they more introverted or extroverted than you? Do they remind you of someone else who hurt you? Is it because you feel that they don't take you seriously? Are you embarrassed about an unacknowledged sexual attraction? Do you dislike the way they raise their children? Are they avoiding their share of the work in Seekers? Is it because you think they see your failings?

Whatever the real or perceived fault in you or them, if it blocks you from connecting with what is of Christ in that person it is a loss to you, to them, to Seekers. The path through such negativity is well known. Some of the landmarks are confession, honest conversation, forgiveness, and humility. All of which are easier said than done. But each is a guide to releasing great spirit power within Seekers.

The other real challenge in opening ourselves up to what is of Christ in each other is that another Seeker may be modeling a truth you need very badly and are therefore intent on resisting. Saving truths can be dangerous business. They may make you vulnerable, poor, unsuccessful in the society, or shamed. If it were not for the inner peace, the sense of meaningfulness in life, the hopes you carry beyond the opportunities you see, the love that can flow from heart-to-heart, the helping hand when you most need it, you wouldn't bother with the tough parts of the Christian journey. All it

costs and gives you is your life.

Seekers is not a community like the village of Nazareth. We do not have the same level of familiarity with each other though we put a lot of energy into trying to get to know each other. For Seekers adults, we live in the community we have *chosen*. For our children, we do a lot to help them not make an idol of Seekers while still hoping they will discover what is good about Seekers. So, in addition to concerning ourselves with the sins of familiarity, we might also ask, "What are the sins of intentionality?"

People in Nazareth were just living. Seekers name itself as a community that is committed to *ministry*. This means we put in a lot of time on things like discerning gifts and callings. What are the sins related to having a high commitment to ministry? Could it be, in part, that we don't want to pay as much attention to what we need to heal in ourselves?

I find Seekers to be committed to the Truth with a capital T. This is opposed to a lot of Christendom that settles for repeating and defending memorized answers. That is what my confirmation class as an adolescent tried to do for me, or to me. I was supposed to memorize the Westminster shorter catechism and then I would be presumably set for life, as measured by the fact that I could then join the church as a full member. On reflection, I have found such an approach to life to be not only terrible educational theory but also worse theology. Such an approach tries to establish an independent place in our lives or our souls that can never be challenged and defeated. It sets different flavors of Christendom to fighting against each other in terrible wars. It oppressed women, racial minorities, and people like me. Sharing this consciousness, Seekers tolerates a lot of questioning that would be nipped in the bud as heresy in other Christian settings. What is our failing in such tolerance? Is it a willingness to let some of the hard questions slide?

Some people in our society, perhaps even one or two Seekers, have reacted against the sins and shortcomings of their communities and families of origin, by embracing the superheated individualism of contemporary culture. Some seem to hardly have a sense of community at all. Some seem totally disabled from the capacity to make commitments that would limit their individuality. Marriages, families, sports teams, businesses, and our government all suffer mightily from such unchallenged individualism.

People who are solely focused on individual answers to their personal questions may make progress with the agenda of becoming free *from* important barriers and burdens. Unless Seekers also engage the questions and concerns we carry as a community they will receive no help from us in facing the important questions that have to do with *investing* their hard won freedom in new relationships.

We have many ongoing questions to answer as a community, questions we must keep renewing and reanswering, centering our life, extending our life. I like to think that we are the kind of community Jesus would not have to turn away from to pursue his calling, a place where we could meet and find understanding. I wonder if Jesus would agree?

I wonder if Jesus went to Jerusalem because no place could be home for him? At least there were some that joined his journey.