

WE ARE GOD'S CHILDREN: HUMAN BECOMINGS, BECOMING LIKE JESUS

SERIES—COMPLETE JOY: THE MESSAGE OF FIRST JOHN

A SERMON PREACHED AT THE CHURCH OF ST JOHN THE EVANGELIST, HAMILTON, BY DAVID J. ANDERSON. THE SECOND SERMON IN THE SERIES: 1 JOHN 3:1-7.

The title of the book that I saw on the shelf the other day caught my eye. It said, **THEY LIKE JESUS BUT NOT THE CHURCH**. Dan Kimball wrote this book two years ago describing a phenomenon that he saw in his city, but which is true across North America. What Kimball studied and detailed in his book rings true with conversations that I have with people all of the time, and probably with your own experience in talking with people outside of the church. That experience is that while people out there in our culture generally have many positive things to say about the person of Jesus, they just don't like the church.

Now, it is important to acknowledge, that many of the “nice” things people have to say about Jesus lack depth of understanding or reflection. Jesus is not thought of as so much as the Son of God as a good spiritual teacher. But it is nice to have the Jesus bobble-head doll around. Jesus was a nice person.

While we might say that the popular idea of Jesus is a bit shallow, it is the accuracy with which the critique of the church is given that makes us nervous. And so it doesn't take long until you hear questions such as,

- Isn't the church just organized religion that is politically motivated?
- Isn't the church homophobic?
- Isn't it ridiculous that the church takes the entire Bible literally?
- Don't you have to give up thinking in order to belong to a church?
- Doesn't the church repress women?
- Hasn't the church oppressed all sorts of people?
- Isn't the church judgmental and negative?
- Isn't the church arrogant in its relationships with other religions?

To us, inside of the church, the nature of these questions may seem unfair. We hear these questions and as Anglicans we may want to distance ourselves from others who

seem to be indicted by these questions more than ourselves. We want to answer by saying, “Well, yes. You are talking about those other Christians over there. We are not like that, actually.” But we stumble over other questions. “Isn’t church boring? Isn’t the church just a holy club that keeps to itself? Isn’t the church out of touch with what is going on in the real world?”

The people out there like Jesus, but they do not like the church. We do have to admit that we have something of a credibility gap.

The comedian, Bill Maher, released his film *RELIGULOUS* recently. In an interview with Harry Smith of CBS’s, *THE EARLY SHOW*, Maher explained that he is not an atheist as much as a representative of the vast majority of people who just say, “I don’t know.”

In the interview Maher reflected upon eight years of rule by the Bush administration and faith-based government initiatives and made a reference to the “Sarah Palins of this world,” asking the question whether the nation really wants to turn such people loose.

Smith then made the observation that a central and serious thought in the film, is Maher’s wish that Christians, (quoting Smith now) *“if they are really going to be Christians, would be more Christlike.”* And Maher answers, *“Don’t we all. That is not something that is even controversial. The message of Jesus,”* Maher continues, *“is very good. It is all about love and forgiveness. It is certainly not about shooting wolves out of an airplane.”* That was the conclusion of the interview.

All of this tells us that in the culture at large, we—the Church, the Christians, the baptised, the children of God—have a credibility gap. There is a perception out there among people in our culture that there is a gap between those of us who call ourselves followers of Jesus and the person of Jesus.

The Rev’d Guy Sayles, in a sermon on our text for today, reminds us that fifteen years ago this month, a campaign of vicious genocidal slaughter began in Rwanda. In just three months, 850,000 Rwandans were killed. On the tenth anniversary of these events, theologian and ethicist David Gushee asked how such brutality could have occurred in “the most Christianized country in Africa.” Churches, seminaries, schools and benevolent organizations were scattered all over the country. Ninety percent of Rwandans claimed to be Christians. “And yet,” Gushee writes, “all of that Christianity did not prevent genocide, a genocide which church officials did little to resist, in which a large number of Christians participated, and in which, according to African Rights, ‘more people died in churches and parishes than anywhere else.’” (David P. Gushee, “Church Failure, Remembering Rwanda” in *The Christian Century*, April 20, 2004, p. 28).

What are we to make of this? It is not just the Rwanda’s, but the Nazi Germany’s, the slave-trade, apartheid, the Crusades. On and on could go the list of failures of Christians and of the church. Gushee writes, “The presence of churches in a country guarantees nothing. The self-identification of people with the Christian faith guarantees nothing. All of the clerical garb and regalia, all of the structures of religious accountability, all of the Christian vocabulary and books, all of the schools and seminaries and parish houses and

Bible studies, all of the religious titles and educational degrees—they guarantee nothing.”

Why is that? Why is there such a gap between what we profess to believe and how we actually live? Well there are some possible reasons.

- It may be that not everyone who claims to be Christian is putting into practice the commandment of Jesus that “we love our neighbors as ourselves” and has not understood the lesson of Jesus’ Parable of the Good Samaritan: everyone is my neighbor.
- It may be that we can never be absolutely sure of the motivations that bring people to worship, we are here for more reasons than we know, probably for more reasons than we can imagine.
- It also certainly has to do with the fact that Christian people are influenced, not just by Jesus Christ, but by social, economic and political systems and by assumptions, ideas, loyalties and feelings that are at odds with the gospel in ways that our eyes have not yet begun to open.

In other words, it cannot be assumed that Christians are actually following Jesus. It must be admitted that there is a gap between the faith we profess and the life we live.

I’ve said this many times before in preaching and I promise that you will continue to hear this message from me probably as long as I have breath. **The very greatest need in the world today is for Christians to be Christians and for the church to be the church.** It is urgent that we who been baptized into Christ, made alive again in him, who profess to be his followers and who have covenanted together to be his body in the world today, live out our high calling. We need to be the people who are using every energy of our lives to become more and more like him and as we do we will be agents of reconciliation and understanding, of healing and hope, of love and mercy.

It is God’s intention to make us like Jesus. That is the clear message of our text from the First Letter of John: “When he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.” God intends to work in us, with us, and on us until we fully reflect the spirit and character of Jesus.

In an often cited story, from what is essentially her autobiography, Gertrude Stein described an exchange she had with Pablo Picasso. Even though he had painted a portrait of her some time earlier, he did not immediately recognize her. Stein wrote, “I murmured to Picasso that I liked his portrait of Gertrude Stein. Yes, he said, somebody said that she does not look like it, but that doesn’t make any difference, she will.”

You and I are growing into the image of Jesus; and even though there are days when we do not seem to be very much like him, we will be one day. In the end, as Carroll Simcox has beautifully put it, “You and I shall be our real, complete selves for the first time ever. We think of ourselves now as human beings. We really aren’t that—not yet. We are human becomings. The fetus conceived only yesterday is a human becoming. If you are

living in Christ, believing in him and trying to follow and obey him as the master of your life, you are by his grace, becoming ever more and more like him.”

This does not mean that God is making us into clones and exact replicas of Jesus of Nazareth. Actually, the wonderful paradox is that the more we become like Jesus, the more we become our truest selves. The question is, as Jean Vanier might put it, “How can we become as human as Jesus?”

The real good news in all of this is that this is not a self-help exercise or a do-it-yourself project. This is not a message about pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps. What we are talking about here today is God’s work.

The kind of transformation we are talking about here happens as God convinces us we that we are loved. It happens when we become convinced that, like Jesus, we are God’s beloved children. St John could not contain his wonder at that truth in our reading today: “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called the children of God, and that is what we are.” The words God spoke to Jesus at his baptism are words God speaks also to us: “You are my beloved child. With you I am well pleased.” We are God’s children. We are loved. In that relationship we are set free to become who God has called us to be.

When we are set free from seeking love, assurance and security in all of the wrong places, the love of God empowers us to join Jesus in his compassion for our broken world, his passion for peace, his hunger and thirst for justice, his welcoming embrace of the excluded and his tender mercy toward towards all those who are broken. Beloved children of God, remember who you are.

The transformation of the creation is bound up with our transformation. “Beloved,” St John wrote, “we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: When he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.”