



Renegade Gospel: The Rebel Jesus
“BEYOND THE FROZEN CHOSEN!”

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Scripture: Luke 9:23-25, 14:26

Then he said to them all, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?”

“Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.”

When I lived in Grand Rapids I became well acquainted with the term “Frozen Chosen.” I don’t hear it around here at all. But Grand Rapids is different. It’s the home base for Reformed Christianity in the United States, the home of the Christian Reformed Church and the Reformed Church of America, both of stalwart Calvinist heritage. When we would hold our “Taste and See” membership classes in Grand Rapids, we would inevitably have a large number of people coming from these churches that wished to join good old First Methodist downtown. And oftentimes, these good Christian brothers and sisters would refer to themselves, or their heritage, as the “frozen chosen.”

Now, “Frozen Chosen” can have multiple meanings. It can mean those Christians who are very reserved in how they worship in contrast to those churches that used to be called “holy rollers.” Some use it to describe those Christians who are glum and dour despite the knowledge that salvation should be a joyful and happy state. And it has also been used to describe Christians who live in places that get extraordinarily cold – such as Wisconsin or Canada, although it could apply to most of North America right now.

However, that’s not how these CRC and RCA people meant it. To them, the “Chosen” referred to those Christians who believed that they were the “Chosen people of God,” the “Elect” in Calvinist terms. You see, if you’re not one of the Elect, chosen by God, then you were a Reprobate – one of the millions of people in God’s disfavor who were not going to heaven but to someplace very warm.

The “frozen” referred to the fact that those who considered themselves “chosen” or “elect” thought that they did not need to do anything more. God had chosen them, they were saved, so they could just sit “frozen” in their pews and did not need to do anything to merit God’s grace.

The Frozen Chosen: those people who thought because God had loved and saved them they did not need to do anything more. They did not need to feed the hungry, cloth the naked, house the homeless, nurse the sick, give water to the thirsty – even though Jesus commanded it – because they already “had it made.” God loved them: they could just sit frozen in their pews. So those people who chose to join First United Methodist in Grand Rapids were precisely those people who wished to become “unfrozen.” They felt that their faith called them to unthaw and engage; to care for God’s children and God’s creation; who felt called to put their faith into action and get up out of their pews to serve the least, the last and the lost. They saw themselves on a journey toward giving their lives away for Jesus Christ.

Consider this. Is salvation meant to freeze us in place, or does it call us to change? Is salvation an escape from this world, an excuse to excuse ourselves from doing anything? Or does salvation send us back into the world, as Christ came into the world, to do God’s loving will – just as we pray for God’s will to be done on this earth and pray for God’s kingdom to come here?

I’m so glad that First Methodist, Birmingham, is a warm and welcoming community of faith. From the very first, it has been evident to Laurie and me that you are not frozen. You put faith into action. You welcome whomever comes through our doors – remembering, as Jesus said, “Whosoever will, let them come.” When someone is in need, you do not stay stuck in your pews. So many of you care for one another, call on others, help those who are in need. And your loving embrace does not end at the confines of these walls. You extend Christ’s love throughout the Detroit area and around the world. When someone asked John Wesley why tens of thousands of people came to hear him preach, he reportedly said, “I set myself afire and people come to watch me burn.” Just so, you’re not the “frozen chosen,” you’re aflame with God’s love. And thanks be to God for it.

Still, that tendency to put restrictions on our love and build barriers around our circle of concern is an ongoing temptation for people within the church. Mike Slaughter, in our Lenten study book *Renegade Gospel*, reminds us how the renowned 19th Century British preacher, Charles Spurgeon, once noted, “There are no crown bearers in heaven that were not cross bearers on earth.”

He also quotes Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who echoed that truth, saying, “Christianity has always insisted that the cross we bear precedes the crown we wear.” Those are hardly feel-good messages meant to attract a crowd. That insistence that we walk the way of the cross caused many people to turn away from Jesus even during his earthly ministry. In John’s gospel, chapter 6, remember, we hear that many of Jesus’ disciples, after listening to Jesus’ hard teachings, “turned back and no longer followed him.”

Mike Slaughter correctly reminds us of a few of those difficult instructions Jesus gave to those following him. One of his most radical replaced the “eye for an eye” justice of the Old Testament. Instead, Jesus taught that if someone punched you in the face, turn the other cheek and let your antagonist blast the other side as well.” Jesus taught it. Are you practicing it? Jesus also gave us a lesson in self-control, reminding us how Roman law required a passerby to carry a Roman soldier’s heavy pack for one mile if asked, aiding in the movement of the occupying armies. Jesus said that while we’re only required to carry it one mile, those who follow him are

to carry it a second mile as well. So also, in the winter cold – and Jerusalem just had their second major snow storm of the year – if a Roman soldier asked for our coat, we’re to give them our shirt as well. Not a pleasant prospect, is it? But, hey, who am I to question Jesus?

These actions are not natural ones. They don’t serve our self-interest. They just reflect Jesus’ teachings, the Jesus who said, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but forfeit their souls?”

Being faithful is hard. It’s perhaps the most difficult challenge you’ll ever face. But that doesn’t excuse us to just go sit in our pews because the cross of Christ is heavy. Carrying the cross is hard, especially after we’ve served faithfully for so long, in so many ways, and we start to think that “Now! Now I can take my rest!” But we are always called to be faithful, even when we can no longer walk unaided. What we can do will change with our age and capacities, but we are to be faithful within the confines of our current abilities.

Still, even within the most able people, I often discover those who want our religion to be a holy space apart from the challenges of the world, a safe sanctuary from difficulties, rather than a commandment to put our love to work. We say things like “Religion and politics don’t mix,” “The world out there is too messy, too dirty, too ambiguous, too conflicted and compromised,” “We come to church to get away from that stuff.”

One of the oldest expressions of that dynamic is the early church traditional legend of *Quo Vadis*. I know some of you are old enough to remember the motion picture *Quo Vadis* or have seen it on a classic movie channel. Remember how it starred Robert Taylor and Deborah Kerr? And how Peter Ustinov played the Roman Emperor Nero who madly fiddled while Rome burned and then blamed it on the Christians? In the legend of *Quo Vadis*, the apostle Peter is running away from burning Rome, where many of his fellow Christians are undergoing the horrors of Nero’s persecution. Peter is moving as quickly as he can along the Apian Way, away from the city, when he encounters an apparition of Christ himself, heading in the opposite direction. “*Quo vadis, Domine?*” – “Where are you going, Lord?” – he asks. And Jesus answers, “Into Rome, to be crucified again.”

According to the legend, Peter turns around and makes his way back into the burning city, where ultimately he will be martyred, crucified upside down. The Judeo-Christian tradition, Judaism and Christianity, at their very best are remarkably world-oriented and deeply involved in and willing to be responsible for the life of the city, the life of God’s world. But our temptation, always, is to imitate Peter – to run away from the city with all its dangers and challenges. And the lesson of the movie is “There is no crown for those who do not carry the cross.”

So the gospel of Jesus Christ is a renegade gospel. It’s Good News with a bite to it. Christ refuses to let us become frozen in faith even in the coldest of winters. He intends God’s love to heat our blood so that we can warm the hearts and lives of God’s children near and far.

He came to show us that we are beloved children of God. He came to show us that there is a God who loves us. He died for that love. And he came to show us what authentic, genuine human life looks like. He came to expose all the idolatries, all the misguided schemes to produce the wholeness and happiness and salvation for which all of us desperately long. He said, "Follow me." He said to give your life away in love and you will save it. Give your life away and you will be utterly alive.

And, he warned, if we are simply frozen in place, if we hold tightly to what we have, if we don't give our love and passion and energy and resources, but instead try to save it, hold it, hoard it, then as surely as the night will come, we will lose the life we are so desperately trying to save.

Christ's promise is not that if we give we will prosper. It's significantly more important than that. The promise is that as we give ourselves away, we will become alive. That is why the symbol of Christ's Table is so powerful for us when we come to receive communion, as we will do in just one minute. Jesus did not hold himself back. He did not stay frozen in fear in the synagogue in Capernaum when the going got hot. He did not head back out into the desert to escape from the world when he ran into those who raged against him. He gave himself. He emptied himself of his divinity, as Paul said, and gave his life for us, dying even on the cross. He gave himself away for you and me and is alive forever more. We participate in that life when we receive the bread and the wine and choose to follow in his Way.

The Christian secret, the miracle Jesus promised, is that in giving ourselves in passionate love for God's world and for others, in deciding to live each day out of that passionate love, we find our deepest self. We discover our best and truest self, the very self God created us to be. For "Those who want to save their life will lose it," Jesus said, "and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."