



Renegade Gospel: The Rebel Jesus **“IT’S SUPPOSED TO BE DIFFICULT”**

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Scripture: Luke 4:14-21

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Meet Adeeb Joudeh and Wajeeh Nuseibeh. Adeeb and Wajeeh are Jerusalem Palestinian Muslims whose families have been the custodians of the entrance to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre since the 12th century. The church of the Holy Sepulchre was built in Jerusalem in 325 A.D. over the traditional site of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. It is the most sacred place in the world for Christians.

But the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is also one of the most contentious sites in all of Christendom because six different groups share jurisdiction over the church: Greek Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic, Roman Catholic, Coptic Orthodox, Ethiopian Orthodox, and Syriac Orthodox. Unfortunately, these groups have found it almost impossible to refrain from throwing punches at each other over the most minor offenses in order to protect their turf.

Adeeb and Wajeeh’s job is to unlock the door of the Holy Sepulchre Church every day in an elaborate and ceremonial ritual, and then close the door at night. Of course, Adeeb and Wajeeh, who are Muslims, cannot prevent the six Christians groups from feuding over their part of the church. For instance, during Easter prayers in 1970, Coptic (Egyptian) monks momentarily left their post on the rooftop monastery of the church, which allowed the Ethiopian monks to swoop in, change the locks, and take it for their own. Since then, the Coptic Christians have protested by posting at least one monk outside the disputed area at all times. In 2002, when that one monk happened to move his chair eight inches into the shade, eleven holy men were hospitalized from the resulting brawl.

And in 2008 a scuffle broke out between Greek Orthodox and Armenian believers, who fiercely protect their hold over sections of the shrine. Police said a fist-fight took place after Armenian worshippers yanked a Greek Orthodox cleric away from a tomb in the Church. “There is always tension there between the different sides,” police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld said. “That’s why police were on scene ahead of time to prevent any arguments or disturbances from breaking out.” No injuries were reported, but two Armenians were briefly detained.

We’re all aware of great tensions in the Middle East among Palestinian Christians and Muslims and Israeli Jews. But can you imagine this kind of fighting among Christians themselves? Lest you think this is a special circumstance and that other Christians don’t act that way, let me remind you that every day in this world disciples of Jesus Christ injure, harm, dismiss, reject, scream at and write nasty notes to each other. Why? Because we haven’t yet grasped the renegade nature of Christ’s radical love.

Several weeks ago, our Holy Land pilgrims were walking along the Via Dolorosa on one of our last days in Israel. The Via Dolorosa follows the path Jesus likely took after he was sentenced to death, scourged, flogged, and a crown of thorns placed upon his head. To add insult to indignity, Jesus was made to carry his own cross, at least as long as he could in his physically weakened state.

Every single day for centuries Christian pilgrims have retraced the steps Jesus took to Golgotha, stopping along the way at the fourteen Catholic Stations of the Cross. The Via Dolorosa, or Way of Sorrow, follows a path through the Old City of Jerusalem to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. It’s a very moving experience.

As we walked along the path that day, we stopped at a little pharmacy in the market area of the Old City because Kathy Dalton and I had colds and needed cough medicine and cough drops. Actually, by this time most everyone on the trip had a cold! At this point we were walking uphill, and it was not an easy path for some. As Kathy lamented to the shopkeeper, he said, “The Via Dolorosa, walking in the way of Jesus? It’s supposed to be difficult.”

Being a disciple of Jesus Christ is supposed to be difficult. If living as a Christian did not demand radical grace, suffering love and single-minded obedience to God’s will, everyone would want to be a Christian, right? That’s exactly why Mike Slaughter named our Lenten study book *Renegade Gospel: The Rebel Jesus*.

Now you may wonder about these words, “renegade” and “rebel,” because they refer in some people’s minds to those who resort to violence or killing to get their way. But, remember, Jesus was thought of as a renegade because he challenged the principalities and political powers of his day. He also denounced the hypocrisy of the religious leaders and refused to return evil for evil. Jesus was called Prince of Peace, and when Peter cut off the ear of the slave of the high priest in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus said, “Put your sword back in its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that my father has given me?” Jesus was a rebel because he stood up to the status quo which oppressed the masses and dehumanized those who were considered outcasts. Jesus was a positive rebel and renegade for God because he practiced unconditional love.

In trying to understand this renegade gospel and the rebel Jesus, the logical place to start is with Jesus' own mission statement. Do you remember how Jesus began his ministry? When he was about thirty years old, Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist and heard a voice from heaven saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Right after that Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness. Why? So Jesus could wrestle with his call.

For forty days Jesus fasted and faced off with the devil, who tried to influence the course of Jesus' ministry. Jesus resisted the temptation to turn stones into bread, worship the devil rather than God, and throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple as a show of power. After forty days and forty nights, Jesus, again filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, began his ministry by going back to his hometown of Nazareth.

Jesus entered the synagogue where he was raised and lived until the age of thirty. It's important to remember that there was no minister as such in a Jewish synagogue. Any male could volunteer to read the Torah or be asked to give the sermon. Synagogue worship consisted of reciting the Shema in Deuteronomy 6:4-9, "Hear O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might."

After that the people would pray while facing Jerusalem. Then there would be an Amen response, readings from the Torah and the Prophets and a teaching. Finally, there was a benediction. Jesus would have stood up to read and sat down to teach.

We don't know whether Jesus had ever spoken in his synagogue before. What we do know is that Jesus took this occasion to announce his life's work by reading Isaiah 61:1-2, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Then Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. Everyone's eyes were fixed on Jesus. You could hear a pin drop. Remember, this was sweet little Jesus, Joseph and Mary's son. Everyone knew him since he was a baby. Or at least, they thought they knew him. Then Jesus said to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Jesus' ministry began when the Holy Spirit claimed him in baptism, tested him in the wilderness and filled him with a powerful ministry of grace in a downtrodden world.

Have you ever noticed how Jesus used the Old Testament in his teaching? The Old Testament was Jesus' Bible. Richard Rohr writes that Jesus never quoted scriptures that are ritualistic, legalistic, exclusionary, punitive, violent or hateful. Never. Have you ever noticed that Jesus does not mention the 28 "thou shall nots" of Leviticus chapters 18-20, but he goes out of his way to include one positive quote in Leviticus 19:18, "You must love your neighbor as yourself." And have you noticed that the single longest Old Testament passage Jesus ever quotes is Isaiah 61:1-2, which is our very scripture for today. Yes, Jesus quotes selectively. He refuses to quote passages that refer to anything other than love, justice, mercy, compassion and kindness because the God of Jesus is not a God of vengeance, violence or fear.

Do you see? Here Jesus declares that God is calling him to be an agent for the least, the last and the lost. This very scripture, Jesus' mission statement, which was front and center throughout his three-year ministry, turned him into a rebel and a renegade as he spoke clear words of truth to both the Romans and the Jewish leaders.

On the first day of our Holy Land trip, Mike, our Greek Orthodox guide, spoke to us about Jesus and said, "Who is this Jesus? He's a rebel, a renegade." Yes, Mike used these very words, although he had no idea that our congregation was going to study a book during Lent called *Renegade Gospel: The Rebel Jesus*. Mike said, "Jesus came to challenge the status quo not by violence but by radical love, not by rejection but by radical acceptance, not by despair but by radical hope. This Jesus asks us to follow. And it's supposed to be difficult because if you follow, you, too, will be afflicted and rejected. The way of Jesus is a different way and a difficult way."

How will you hear Jesus' challenge this morning? How might Jesus' own mission statement help you to form your own mission in life as a disciple of Jesus Christ? We live in a world today where everyone is talking about mission and purpose: businesses, non-profit organizations, schools, universities, churches and individuals. In my reading over the last few weeks I discovered that Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life*, which has sold thirty million copies and is the second most translated book in the world after the Bible, does not quote this scripture from Luke anywhere in the book. Evidently, Jesus' very powerful and clear mission/purpose statement is not even considered relevant for the purpose-driven life of Christians. It's curious, isn't it?¹

Jesus is clearly defining discipleship right from the outset of his ministry. Faith is not simply assenting to doctrines. Faith does not mean God will take care of us so we can get to heaven. Jesus does not exist to serve our personal needs. Jesus' mission is fullness of life for our world. In that fullness you and I find our life's mission.

Christianity is a radical movement initiated by a rebel who was almost thrown off a cliff in his very hometown because they didn't like the passage he chose. You see, right after quoting Isaiah 61, Jesus expounds a bit on his mission statement about reaching out to the Gentiles. Then Luke writes, "When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way."

As Mike Slaughter writes, "Discipleship does not begin with one's profession of faith. Nor does it end with one's profession of faith. Discipleship begins with our commitment to journey with Jesus." You and I cannot know Jesus without following Jesus. Because it's in the following that we really come to know and understand Jesus. And where does that following lead? It leads to love, and it leads to the cross because it's supposed to be difficult.

How will you follow this Jesus during Lent? What is your personal mission statement? Do you have one? If your mission statement has no connection whatsoever with Luke chapter 4, then you might want to rethink your faith and how God is calling you to live your life. Are you willing to fully submit yourself to his teachings?

I hope you don't choose to follow the example of the territorial monks at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre because the movement that Jesus started is non-violent and it's supposed to be difficult. What is ultimately at stake in this scripture is that outsiders prove to be models of faith in Israelite history. Jesus attempts to dismantle the stereotypes that define the comfort of the religious and social boundaries of the synagogue. Jesus is frightening to those who are not willing to include the marginalized and outsiders, but he is liberating and healing and joy-filled to those who keep their eyes fixed on Jesus.

Jesus' mission? It is possible to live in peace. It is possible to build bridges. It is possible to accept others who are different. It is possible to reorient your love away from you to a justice-seeking love for others. It is possible to turn the other cheek. It is possible to bring good out of evil, hope out of despair, resurrection out of death. It is possible to live by Jesus' values by saying no to clutching, power-grabbing and hoarding money and things. It is possible to change the world through suffering love.

Can you hear Jesus' mission statement with moral courage and repentance and then work on your own mission statement? Will you give your life to the renegade Jesus? Will you revolt with love and peace? Are you willing to endure suffering and ridicule for your faith? Are you willing to follow Jesus to the cross? After all, it's supposed to be difficult.

¹ Ernest Hess, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 1, p. 289.