The Historical Jesus

(A sermon delivered to the residents of the Women’s Correctional Center at Swannanoa)

Scripture readings: Luke 4:18-21 Matthew 5:3-10, Matthew 25:34-40

Today we are talking about the historical Jesus. You say, “What are you talking about Scott. Are you telling me there is more than one Jesus?” Well, sort of. The reality is that we all tend to turn Jesus into the man we want him to be. Let me give you an example. Before I came to Asheville, I attended a church called Gloria Dei and the pastor was Jerrett Hansen. Jerrett was flying one day and got upgraded to first class. Don’t ask how that happened because it certainly never happens to me. But anyway, in first class you get free beverages, so Jerrett got a glass of wine. He then opens his laptop and starts working. A nosy Nancy plops down next to him and starts to look over to see what he is working on and asks, “Are you a pastor?” Jerrett responds, “Why yes I am.” She then says, “That surprises me since you are drinking wine.” Jerrett looks over and responds, “Well you do know that Jesus drank wine. In fact, one of his first miracles he did was turning water into wine at a wedding.” She then looks at him and says, “Yea, I would have liked him better if he didn’t do that.”

 So, you see, we all tend to turn Jesus into the person we want him to be. But the fact is that there was a real human being, a man who walked and talked, laughed and cried, peed and pooped. Is that the first time you’ve ever thought of Jesus peeing or pooping? I bet it is. But again, it just goes to show that this was a real human being like you and me, with one big difference. Jesus was totally filled, totally instilled with, totally imbued with the spirit and presence of God, so much so that he shared a unitive consciousness with God. And this Jesus, representing God’s presence on earth asked us to do one thing before he left. He didn’t ask to believe specific things about him or the significance of his going to the cross. He asked us to follow him. He taught a path, a way of living that will lead to an abundant life with a connection to God and a connection to each other in the way God intended and he asked us to follow that way.

As Christians, we better then know what this Jesus was all about. What did he model? What did he teach? What exactly did he ask us to follow? Well, I would suggest that if you want to know Jesus, you should look at three different parts of the Gospels. The first is his inaugural address. You know what an inaugural address is, right? We see a president sworn in and then he gives a speech stating who he is and what he wants to accomplish over the next 4 years. Well Jesus did something very similar which we read in our first scripture reading. He went to his hometown of Nazareth, unfurled the scripture and read from the prophet Isaiah? It told the people who he was and why he came. We’ll spend quite a bit of time on that in a minute. Next, I would look at the time in his ministry where he seemed to have the most popularity and influence. This would be the sermon on the mount. We just read the Beatitudes which is a part of that sermon, but you should go back and read the several pages of your bible devoted to the sermon on the mount and you will come to a better understanding of who Jesus was and what he taught. There are teachings in there about forgiveness, not judging others, repairing relationships, loving your enemies, and much more. Finally, you should look at the end of his ministry, shortly before he leaves this earth to see what he truly valued. You will find that in the parable of the sheep and the goats which we read a portion of today.

So let’s start with his inaugural address. He said he was here to restore sight to the blind. Is that something he did? Sure, we see that a handful of times scattered throughout the gospels. He literally restores the sight of people who could not see. But if we limit our interpretation to that then I think we are missing a big part of Jesus’ message. You see, Jesus often spoke using metaphors. Do you remember what a metaphor is? It is a figure of speech that means more than its literal meaning. For instance, when Shakespeare said, “All the world is a stage.” He doesn’t mean that literally the whole world is a stage but rather that dramas play out all around the world. I think when Jesus says that he is restoring sight to the blind he is telling his listeners, and us today, that we are blinded as to what is truly important. What does our culture and society tell us is important? Well, if you asked a young person, they very well might say their goal is to be rich and famous, perhaps a sports star, or an actor, or a social media influencer. The focus is all on money, possessions, achievement, power, and prestige. How much merit did Jesus place on these? None at all. He was all about people. Building up relationships, restoring relationships, empowering the disadvantaged, learning to forgive one another and not judge one another. He promoted a radical form of love, a love so radical that if truly embraced, it would leave no room for hate in your heart. This love would be brought forth through acts of compassion and generosity. There would develop a solidarity of humanity in which everyone would have enough. He restores our sight to what is truly important and will give us abundant life.

What next? He said he was there to release all the captives (aka prisoners). How would you like Jesus to show up and free all of you today? I think it would look something like this:

He shows up at the gatehouse dressed in a white tunic and sandals. It takes 15 minutes to get buzzed in because they didn’t buzz people in during his lifetime. The guard looks at him and bellows, “Sign in!” He looks at the sign-in sheet. Let’s see now….DATE: “OK, Now” …..NAME: “Uh, Jesus of Nazareth”……ORGANIZATION: “ God Inc.”………..REASON FOR VISIT: “To free the prisoners.”

How far do you think he would get? Yea, not very far. And to be honest, we don’t see that happening during his lifetime. But again, let’s think metaphorically because I think there are many things that imprison you, shackle you, keep you from being free, even more than the walls around you.

Let’s start with addiction. Many of you have struggled with addiction or know others who struggle. Addiction totally shackles you and prevents you from being free. All you can focus on is the next dose. And it doesn’t have to be drugs. It can be alcohol or cigarettes. You can be addicted to food. You can be addicted to harmful behaviors like lying, cheating, or gossiping. You can be addicted to unhealthy sexual behaviors. I would go as far as to say that any obsessive thought or behavior that repetitively separates you from God is an addiction. Jesus comes into this world to teach you a different path, a path that surrounds you in love and compassion, a path that brings you such joy and strength that you can live a life free from addiction.

How about fear and anxiety? Fear can be a paralyzing force, imprisoning you. I know that many of you have a lot of fear. You fear what may happen to your loved ones while you are in this facility, fear whether broken relationships can ever be restored. You fear what might happen to you while you are in prison and then fear what will happen to you when you are released. How will support yourself? How will you put a roof over your head? How will you avoid the same set of circumstances that led you here to begin with? Jesus comes into this world with the power to allay those fears. He promises to walk with you through any trials and tribulations, providing you with the strength and peace of mind you need.

How about pain, physical pain or mental pain? They can shackle you. Perhaps you have been traumatized, abandoned, abused, or betrayed. Jesus brings a healing presence that can see you through whatever you are dealing with, not that it will magically disappear, but that the love, peace and joy that comes with him will be enough for you to emerge from whatever darkness you are experiencing.

Finally, how about shame and regret. Shame doesn’t allow you to live freely. I know some of us feel shame but let me tell you loud and clear that Jesus came into this world to tell us that there is no shame in the kingdom of God. Say it with me, “There is no shame in the kingdom of God. Louder like you mean it. THERE IS NO SHAME IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD.” He came and showed that to the tax collectors. He showed it to the adulteress. He showed it to the sex workers, and he showed it to the Samaritan woman at the well. Regrets, yes, we all have those, but through God’s grace, there is no place for shame.

The last piece of the inaugural address I want to focus on is Jesus saying he is there to free the oppressed. He supported every oppressed person or group he encountered and showered them with love. Who is oppressed in our world? Women still are to an extent, people of color and people of minority ethnicities or religions, members of the LGTBQ+ community, people who are differently abled, people with mental illness, unhoused people, and people with addiction. I am telling you that if Jesus was here now, he would let each and every one of the people in those groups know that they are beloved children of God and he would support them in any way he could, and he expects us to do the same.

Let’s now jump to the sermon on the mount. We don’t have time to fully discuss this but again I would suggest that you read it. For the moment, what I want to do is focus on a small portion of the Beatitudes because it relates to something we spoke about earlier and very much applies to your situation here behind these walls. What does Jesus say? He says, “Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the meek or humble. Blessed are those who mourn,” and the Hebrew word for mourn here is the same one used when talking about the Jews mourning that they have not lived their life the way that God intended. It is hard for us to even comprehend where Jesus is coming from here because our culture focuses on achievement, fame, and money. Blessed are the poor, the meek, those that mourn. What the heck are you talking about Jesus? But think about it more deeply. The rich and famous generally have no need for God. They think they have it figured out. Who they have become and what they do usually separates themselves from God. However, when you are poor, meek, and mournful, you are in a place where you are now open to transformation. You are available to let God’s spirit work upon you. You are willing to try a new path, the path that Jesus taught. Many of you now feel poor, meek, and mournful. You are Jonah in the belly of the whale. You are in the wilderness, and these are the times when you can begin to transform into your true self, the person God intends for you to be. Jesus is telling you that you are blessed. Believe it.

Finally, if you want to know who Jesus is then look at what he says at the end of his ministry shortly before his death. For that we read the parable of the sheep and the goats. If there is any judgement to be made, then what does it entail? “For when I was hungry, you fed me. When I was thirsty, you gave me drink. When I was a stranger, you welcomed me. When I needed clothes, you clothed me. When I was sick you looked after me. When I was in prison, you visited me. But when did we do that for you Jesus? I tell you that whenever you did it for the least among you, you did it for me.” It is all about compassion and simple acts of kindness. That is who Jesus was, what he modeled, what he taught, and that is what we are told to follow.

Can we do it? It ‘s not easy. But through the grace of God, we are given every opportunity, over and over again, to try. I would say that at least every one of us in this room can every day do one simple act of kindness or compassion. It might not seem like much but 70 people in this room all providing an act of compassion is something special. Something that our world desperately needs at this time. And you know, when we do this, it makes us happy, brings us joy, and becomes contagious. We begin to seek out more and more opportunities to serve others through compassion and it brings us closer to God and closer to each other in the way that God intended. Let’s give it a try. Amen