

Genesis 3:8-15

Psalm 130

2 Corinthians 4:13-18

Mark 3:20-35

Sermon for June 6, 2021

DESPITE APPEARANCES

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: We do not look at the things which are seen.

Many of you know Chris Fancher, the volunteer coordinator at Hospice of Orleans, and a longtime fixture in the Albion community. But I wonder whether many of you knew that her late husband, Ed, in the early days of their marriage, was a Marine, and that he was part of the Marine One Helicopter Squadron during the Reagan administration. Air Force One is a plane; Marine One is a helicopter.

Anyway as a result of that connection, Chris was once invited with Ed to a function at which President Reagan made an appearance. And Chris has told me that the thing that struck her most forcibly about Reagan was...guess what?...how small and frail he seemed. She'd only seen him before on television or on the covers of magazines, and those kinds of media always give the impression of someone somehow larger than life.

Although I haven't been exposed to celebrities very often in my low-profile life, I have run into a few, and I had a similar experience once with Paul Newman. He had graduated years earlier from the college in Ohio where I was teaching at the time, and he returned for a few weeks that year to direct a play the college's drama department was putting on. At some sort of faculty affair, I got a chance to meet him face to face, and I was astonished to find he was shorter than I am, and I'm obviously no skyscraper myself.

Here's Butch Cassidy, Here's Hud, here's Cool Hand Luke, for goodness sake, and I tower over him. (Well, anyway, maybe by a half inch.)

Both of these examples, of course, are simply illustrations of the truism that when you strip away all the artificial dressing of fame and fortune and power, everybody

underneath is a human being just like we are. No man is a hero to his valet, the old proverb goes, and the point is, people in their actuality are just people. Science teaches us that all of humanity in fact has 99.9% of the human genome in common. That means that all the differences in terms of race, size, hair color, sex, intelligence etc are all found in that tiny one tenth of one percent. Beyonce has to trim her toenails, just like you do. Joe Biden likes his afternoon nap, just like I do. And yes, Jesus of Nazareth, son of Joseph and Mary, had family complications, just like each and every one of us does.

That comes through pretty clearly in our Gospel reading from Mark this morning. Mark informs us that there was a point early on in his ministry when his own family was seriously concerned about his mental health.

After all, Jesus didn't have a halo around his head while Mary was changing his diaper, or whatever the ancient Middle East equivalent was of a diaper; he didn't emit a mysterious glow when he was playing hide-and-seek with his brothers and sisters; he wasn't miraculously creating beams and rafters out of thin air as he helped frame houses for his neighbors in Nazareth. He was to all appearances just a man of a certain size and shape, with eyes of a certain color, a voice of a certain tone and quality. "He's a man"... Mary Magdalene sings about him in *Jesus Christ, Superstar*..."he's just a man...he's just one more."

And so, if we try to look at Jesus from his family's point of view, we can begin to understand his reaction. After all, look at what Jesus was doing when he embarked on his ministry. He was violating the three common sense principles upon which people tend to organize their lives.

First, he was giving up security, both for himself and for those he loved. Here was the eldest son of the family who had spent the first thirty years of his life living quietly in a small country town, making a decent living as a carpenter, probably serving as the main financial support for his mother and perhaps for his brothers and sisters. What sane man, they must have been thinking, would throw up a business where the money came in on a regular basis to become a vagabond preacher who had no place to lay his head?

And second, he had thrown away safety. Jesus was even at this early stage of his ministry obviously on a collision course with the powers that be of his day, the religious leaders who were also the important political and civic figures in his society. A sensible person reckons the strength of the enemy before advancing into combat against them, and yet here was this nondescript uncredentialed deplorable

from the rural backwaters of Israel saying and doing things that were sure to bring down the full weight of Israeli, and eventually Roman, authority on his head.

And finally, he was giving up the good opinion of his society, Look at this little group of followers whom he had gathered around him. There were some uneducated fishermen; there was a tax-collector; there was a fanatical nationalist; there were loose women and other outcasts of various kinds.

So he was giving up security, he was giving up safety, and he was giving up his good reputation, and why was he doing all of that? Because he claimed to be a special messenger from God, proclaiming a new and potentially blasphemous message of salvation. What else could his family think, but that he had taken leave of his senses?

You see the problem? Jesus was to all appearances an ordinary man, and yet he claimed to be divine.

C. S. Lewis once put the problem this way:

"I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him [that is, Christ]: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse.... You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come up with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."

The Gospel reading for this morning really demonstrates the two horns of this dilemma: The family of Jesus wants to shut him up as a fool. The scribes call him a demon. And Jesus essentially makes the same answer to both his family and to the scribes. His answer is: I am not mad, I am not a demon. I am the third alternative.

To his family's position, Jesus points to those around him and says, "My true family are those who do the will of God." And what is the will of God? To do good works? To pray and fast and show acts of mercy? No. These things may follow, but the true will of God is to believe on the son. "This is the work of God," Jesus said elsewhere, "that you believe on him whom God has sent." (John 6: 29) "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believes in him should... have the life of heaven." (3: 16)

And to the scribes who accuse him of being evil, he in effect says, Unless you recognize me for what I am, unless you recognize God in me, God cannot do his work of forgiveness in you. Acknowledging me for what I am is the first step.

And what Jesus requires of his family and what he requires of the scribe is also, of course, what he requires of us. The necessary first step of the Christian journey is to believe in Jesus – the man Jesus – as the Son of God. The veil that must be lifted from our eyes is that which prevents us from seeing Jesus for who he really is.

But that recognition is not the destination of the Christian journey, it's the beginning. John puts it succinctly at the conclusion of his Gospel, having told us all about the teachings and miracles of Jesus, John says: "these things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing, you might have life in his name." (20: 31)

That you might lead your life *in his name* is the whole point. That you may follow *him*, accept *his* instruction, trust in *his* goodness and *his* mercy and *his* wisdom, rather than your own. Why? Not because it makes human sense. Not because it will be safe. Not because it will be secure. Not because people will love you for it and society will reward you. No. For one reason, and one reason only. Because Jesus is the Son of God.

A few weeks ago on a Tuesday morning, I was out walking my dog in the yard when the garbage truck came by and stopped to pick up the trash. There's always a guy hanging on the back of the truck who hops off, empties the trash containers into the truck, then hops back on to go to the next house. This time I happened to be standing right there, so I stepped over and said something to him about all the garbage we had put out this week. Suppose he had said in response, "Oh, that's all right. And by the way, I'm the most famous actor in the world."

I wouldn't have believed him, because he was a short guy, probably half an inch shorter than me.

You see the problem?

And so our prayer for this morning, heavenly Father, is that you strengthen our faith. Not our faith in our abilities or our country or the future of civilization. We ask that you strengthen our faith in the impossible, that the Word became flesh – actual flesh – and dwelt among us, that we ourselves might believe in Him who you sent, Our Lord and Savior, in whose name we pray.