

Past, Present, Future
(PART FIVE OF A FIVE PART SERMON SERIES—JESUS: THEN AND NOW)

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver at
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Hebrews 13.1-8, 15-16

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you.' So we can say with confidence,

*'The Lord is my helper;
I will not be afraid.
What can anyone do to me?'*

Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever.

Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

For three hundred years, scholars of various religious convictions and theological attitudes have engaged in what has come to be known as the search for the historical Jesus. The quest, or to be accurate, the three quests that have comprised this search, grew out of a desire to know more about the Jesus of history who, it was presumed, stood behind the Christ of faith. Know more about the former, it was argued, and one would be able to defend the latter – or, as time passed, dismiss it. No doubt, this centuries-long, still-incomplete endeavor, has offered many valuable insights. But, rather than answer definitively the question of just who the historical Jesus was, the effort has yielded multiple possibilities: wisdom teacher, student of the Cynics, itinerant rabbi. And it has left so much of the mystery unsolved.

Basic questions like, “What did Jesus look like? Was he tall? Was he a good carpenter? What did he like to make?” were not, could not, be answered by the Quest. “No matter,” you may say. “Those things are the stuff of trivia.” But consider this: we still can’t even say for sure what it was Jesus actually said.

“Hold on,” some of you may protest. “What about those color-coded bibles I’ve seen, the ones that identify every word Jesus uttered?” A wonderful devotional tool, an inspiring aid for worship and reflection they are, but, I’m sorry to report, those red letters do not reflect a verbatim transcript of our Lord’s every utterance.

“Well,” others might counter, “what of the famous Jesus Seminar?” Nice try. But a self-selected assembly of scholars using color-coded beads to cast votes on what they believed Jesus may or may not have said can only point us towards the debatable conclusions of a particular group of academics, not a sure and uncontested report of Jesus’ words, his preaching, teaching, or prayers.

So if we want to know what Jesus actually taught and did, we are left with the incomplete, sometimes contradictory, witness of the Gospels, compiled forty to seventy years after Jesus’ death. We can turn to the writings of Paul and the traditions of the early church. But none of it is first hand. True, Paul and the four evangelists may well have known people who had seen, heard, been touched by Jesus, and that’s worth something.

Consider that while John F. Kennedy has been dead almost fifty years there are people in this sanctuary today who, without turning to a book or consulting the internet, could clearly and accurately recount from their own contemporaneous experience the events of his presidency, offering memorable quotes from some of his famous speeches and relating significant events from his time in office. Then others among us, equipped with this information, could tell what we knew to yet others. The story of JFK’s administration could spread, and be handed down, shared with generations to come.

Yet. Yet. To have heard second-hand what Kennedy said or did is not the same as to have experienced these things directly as they transpired, even with the benefit of video and radio which allow us to see how even the long-dead spoke and gestured or the resource of historical research and analysis, which can provide context and perspective, leading to a true understanding of events.

Which brings us back to the Gospels and other early documents of the church: as faithful and reliable as the early disciples and apostles may have been, what they tell us of Jesus then is by its very nature limited by the constraints of history, of communication, of memory.

So, if the quest for the historical Jesus will always come up short, should we despair? Should we be worried? Disappointed?

I think not.

For the church, while it may love and celebrate history, is not about the past, as glorious and compelling as it may have been. Rather, it’s about the present and the future. Put

another way, we are not here in church because of what we hope to know about the Historical Jesus but because of our desire to meet the Risen Christ.

And how do we do this? By heeding the words of the author of Hebrews.

Let's take a few moments to look more closely at what he said:

First, "Let mutual love continue."

When you or I write a letter or a report, we give some thought to how things are ordered. We should assume the same is true of the person who wrote this epistle. So, it's significant that the first thing we are told to do is let mutual love continue. The basis for all we are called to do in the Christian life is love one another. Our faith is not a solo activity; it's meant to be lived out with other people. Yet, loving each other can be hard work, it's no easy thing. There's a reason Tertullian, the great Church Father, offered the ironic observation, "Oh those Christians, how they love one another." We may be called to love, but all too often we let pride, grudges, preferences, agendas get in the way. Love you? Sure. But let's not forget the all-too-frequent unspoken coda: it's my way or the highway. That, we are called to remember, may be the world's way, that may be our way. But it is not Jesus' way.

So let's assume we are graced to have the courage and the blessing to love one another. What's next?

"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."

Hospitality to strangers? You've got to be kidding me! I have enough trouble taking care of my own family!

Sorry, Hebrews tell us. You and I are called to do more.

A hypothetical situation for your consideration: It's election season in swing-state, politics-mad New Hampshire. That means that many of us have received a visit, or two, or three, from some eager partisan making the case for you and me to vote for his or her candidate. I don't know about you, but sometimes it's all I can do not to slam the door shut on those pesky people. Yet imagine if one of these folks asked if he could come in, take a rest, catch his breath, maybe have something to eat. My immediate reaction would be to send him on his way, tell him how to get to Jake's, where he could get a cup of coffee and a donut. But my instinct is not what the epistle calls us to do. This intruder, this nuisance, is the person I'm called to invite into my home. We might want to invite our family or our friends to dinner, but it's the stranger, the inconvenient guest to whom we are called to offer hospitality. Hospitality isn't about entertaining, about spending more time with people just like us. It's about engaging with the other, with those who are different, with those

who are in need. In doing so, we may well meet angels. In doing so, we will surely open ourselves up to meeting the people of God.

Third on the list is the call to “Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.” If we sit with these words for a few moments, they should create discomfort in us. In the first century, few people went to prison. Infractions usually resulted in death or exile. Even the smallest of crimes could result in execution. We’ve come a long way from those days. We’re far more compassionate, much more civilized. Or are we? Twenty-first century America is home to a sprawling penal-industrial complex in which people are incarcerated for minor crimes; it’s a place where support of the death penalty remains widespread, even enthusiastic in some quarters. Yet it’s all those criminals who are doing time and sitting on death row with whom we are called to identify. It doesn’t matter if we dislike them, if we abhor their crimes, if their sentences are warranted. We are called into solidarity with them.

The same goes for those who are tortured. Now it’s easy to sympathize with twelve-year old kids who are savaged by a vicious, desperate regime in Syria; of democracy activists and Falun Gong adherents who are broken in the *laogai*, the Chinese gulag; of the victims of ruthless Mexican drug cartels. But we are also called to stand with those who are tortured by officials of our own government, who, in our democratic society, are acting in my name and yours. And so whether it’s the immigrant Amadou Dialou being brutalized by rogue cops in New York City or some America-hating militant being subjected to what is euphemistically called “enhanced interrogation techniques” at Guantanamo Bay, we are called to put ourselves in the shoes of the one being tortured, regardless of whether that person is sympathetic or despicable.

Fourth, we are told that we should “Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers.” Marriage in the Christian church is serious business. The union of two people isn’t simply the execution of a contract, an arrangement of convenience; it is a sacred act, a holy state. That doesn’t mean it’s perfect, that marriages don’t hit rough patches nor that they do not fail. It does mean, though, that faith and fidelity are called for in marriage. And so we have the admonitions against “fornicators *and* adulterers.” I don’t believe this warning is about things like gay sex; rather, it’s about what is done inside the context of marriage.

Which brings us to this matter of fornication. What a wonderful, titillating word. Many Church people love to say it, filled with Victorian connotations of sexual naughtiness as it is. Yet fusty as it might seem, it’s still relevant today. No fooling around, we are told. No extramarital affairs. Needed words in a celebrity-addled society with a casual attitude towards marriage.

Fifth, and finally, we are urged to “keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have.” Just as the first item on a list is usually of significance, so,

too, is the last. In some ways, this exhortation regarding money may be the most difficult one for us to heed, living as we do in a culture devoted to the acquisition, expenditure, and celebration of wealth. Even after the sobering events of the last few years, we still find ourselves reading of the advent of the hundred million dollar apartment, watching news channels devoted to finance and the stock market, and remain the targets of incessant advertising urging us to get more, borrow more, spend more, for only by doing so will we find our true selves.

Don't, if you'll pardon me, buy it, Hebrews tells us.

Be content with what you have. True happiness, fulfillment doesn't come through having yet more things. We tell this to our acquisitive children, and with good reason. We need, however, to also tell this to ourselves.

Now, have you noticed a common thread here? Have you noticed a recurring theme?

Each of these five behaviors, these virtues, is about how we engage in relationship: with one another in church, with the stranger, with the imprisoned, with our partners, with our money. And it is through right relationship with these things, with, in essence all the world around us, that we open ourselves to relationship with the Risen Christ, the one who promised "I will never leave you or forsake you."

It is this Risen Christ we seek to meet today.

It is this Risen Christ, this Word made flesh, this person of the Trinity, this God who is love made tangible, who in the past has always been with us, standing with us, holding us.

It is this Risen Christ who is by our side now in the present, standing with us, holding us in this very moment.

It is this Risen Christ, this living Jesus, who will never leave us, who into the future will stand with us and hold will us.

And so this is why we, with hope, conviction, and confidence, can describe this faithful, loving ever-present Jesus Christ as being the same, yesterday and today and forever.