

Seeing Jesus Again – for the First Time

Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco, Texas

September 6, 2020

John 4 (excerpts)

A year or so ago, I read a statement about Jesus that was made by someone I admire, a person who is not a Christian, and it blew me away. I thought, I need to go back to the Gospels and reacquaint myself with Jesus. Here's the statement.

I'm very fond of Jesus Christ. He may be the most beautiful guy who walked the face of this earth. Any guy who says, 'Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the meek' has got to be a figure of unparalleled generosity and insight and madness ... A man who declared himself to stand among the thieves, the prostitutes and the homeless. His position cannot be comprehended. It is an inhuman generosity. A generosity that would overthrow the world if it was embraced because nothing could weather that compassion.

You know who said that? Leonard Cohen, poet, singer-songwriter, who, if he wrote nothing besides “Hallelujah” would deserve to be enshrined in some music hall of fame somewhere.

Cohen was a Jew. He added, *“I'm not trying to alter the Jewish view of Jesus Christ. But to me, in spite of what I know about the history of Christianity, the figure of the man has touched me.”*

When was the last time the “figure of the man” touched you? When was the last time you were shocked by Jesus? Challenged by him? Captivated by his authenticity, his sensitivity, his courage, his audacity, his spirituality, his . . . what did Cohen say? His generosity. An odd choice of words, don't you think? I can't recall a time Jesus when gave anybody anything, certainly not money. He didn't have any. But he was generous with himself.

Remember the woman at the well? Remember her first words to him after he asked her to draw some water for him? “Why are you talking to me?” She understood her discomfort in that situation in terms of the conflict between her people and his. “You're a Jewish man, I'm a Samaritan woman. Our people hate each other.” But later, his disciples expressed dismay that he spoke a woman in public. Period. It just wasn't done.

Jesus stopped, engaged her. And they talked. They talked about history. They talked about theology. They debated, they argued. That's how much respect he paid her. And when the conversation ended, she ran back to her village, and . . . remember what she said? “Come see a man – who talked to me! Who saw me, really saw me, as if he knew me. You think he might be the Promised One?” It was, Leonard Cohen said, a

“generosity that would overthrow the world if it was embraced because nothing could weather that compassion.”

Unparalleled generosity, Leonard Cohen said, and *insight*. Not just insight into the things of God but insight into the spiritual nature of human beings.

John’s Gospel tells the story of a woman who, out of her great love and appreciation for Jesus, emptied a bottle of expensive perfume on his feet and wiped his feet with her hair. Judas Iscariot immediately criticized her, saying the perfume could have been sold and the proceeds given to the poor. The author inserts a parenthetical comment: Judas didn’t care about the poor; he was the treasurer of the group. He would have preferred that she sell the perfume and give the money to him. He would make sure it got to some local charity. You could always trust Judas.

Matthew’s version of the incident tells a slightly different story. It says that it wasn’t Judas who criticized the woman; it was “the disciples,” all of them. We can’t dismiss all of them, saying they didn’t care about the poor. They were making a defensible moral statement. “How much did that temple, that church, that monument cost? Wouldn’t that money have been better spent on the poor?”

Even in the face of the disciples’ valid moral judgment, Jesus defended the woman’s extravagance. “What she has done will be told in her memory,” he said. He understood that sometimes love, gratitude and devotion can overwhelm you and compel you to do things that do not make dollars and sense. How do you put a dollar figure on someone’s love for God?

Unparalleled generosity and insight, Leonard Cohen said, and *madness*. It is true, though we never talk about it, that there were people, including some members of his family, who thought Jesus was, as the NRSV puts it indelicately, “out of his mind.” I don’t think that is what Cohen was thinking about. I think he was thinking about the audacious things Jesus sometimes said and did.

Like when he made a shambles of the courtyard in front of the temple in Jerusalem, brandishing a whip, he overturning tables and chased animal sellers and money-changers from their stalls. He yelled, “You have made my Father’s house a den of thieves;” but one Gospel says what he said was, “You have made my Father’s house a marketplace.” (John 2:16) Another Gospel says he was so upset he wouldn’t allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. (Mark 11:16) Jesus saw what was going and he just lost it. This was the holiest place in the world for Jews. What he did could get you killed. It was madness.

When I see Jesus through Leonard Cohen’s eyes, I see him in a new way. When I see Jesus in a new way, my gaze bounces back, and I see myself and the part of the world I inhabit, differently. I can explain what I mean by that by telling you about where I live.

Nikki and I live in the West End of Winston-Salem, North Carolina. It is in the historic district. There are Victorian houses up and down our block.

Next door to our house there is an eight-unit apartment building for low-income, elderly people. Further down the street there is a half-way house for men recovering from alcohol and drug abuse. If you go down Sixth Street, which runs alongside our house, maybe 300 yards, you see a twenty-two story apartment building, Crystal Towers, that is home to 200 low-income, elderly and/or disabled people.

Behind Crystal Towers, down a hill, hidden by trees and kudzu is a cluster of maybe half-dozen green tents, a camp of homeless men, not bothering anybody as far as I know, not bothered by anyone, as far as I can tell. Coming back down Sixth Street toward our house, you pass a low brick building – the John 3:16 Building (because God so loved this neighborhood). The building is owned by First Baptist Church, which is across the street from Crystal Towers. The John 3:16 Building offers space to non-profits that provide services to the marginalized rent-free. Directly across Sixth Street from our house is the City with Dwellings, a non-profit serving the needs of the homeless.

That's our neighborhood. That's where we live.

When I see Jesus paying attention to a poor woman in the temple, in awe of her extravagant devotion to God; when I see him stepping into the space of lepers without proper personal equipment; when I see him bringing sanity to the demon-possessed people, the true “mad” ones, I can't be in my neighborhood the way I used to be in it.

I can't walk downtown in the morning before businesses open as I do every day and avert my eyes when I pass a homeless man. Not anymore. I have to look him in the eye. I have to acknowledge that we share the same sidewalk in the same city on the same planet. And I have to speak. Nothing profound. Nothing personal. Just “How's it going?” “How you doing?” It's a way of saying, “You're not invisible, I see you.”

The goal is not simply to see Jesus differently. The goal is to see the world differently, to allow our perception of the world and our way of being in the world to be reshaped by the way he saw his world and the way he was in his world.

For me all this began with a Jewish poet who thought Jesus might be “the most beautiful guy who ever walked the face of the earth,” and who wrote:

*Jesus was a sailor when he walked upon the water
And he spent a long time watching from his lonely wooden tower
And when he knew for certain only drowning men could see him
He said all men will be sailors then until the sea shall free them
But he himself was broken, long before the sky would open
Forsaken, almost human, he sank beneath your wisdom like a stone
And you want to travel with him, and you want to travel blind
And you think maybe you'll trust him
For he's touched your perfect body with his mind*

Those with eyes to see Jesus anew, let them see. Amen.