

The Rev. Billy Cerveny:

Y'all pray with me.

Father, thank you for the gift of your word. Thank you for the gift of all the hearts in this room, Lord. I know you see us. I know, Lord, you say your word never returns void. So I pray right now you would open the eyes of our heart. Give us the grace that we would see who you are, Jesus, what you have for us this evening. We pray this in your holy name, amen.

All right, we doing okay?

You know, I gotta be honest. I love being a priest. I do, I love it. I was a Presbyterian minister for a number of years before. I love doing that. I love being a priest. It's great, get to serve here. I get to mix with people that I would never normally mix in different ways than I normally would. But I gotta be honest, it's a weird gig, right? Be a priest. Can you imagine? It's a little different, right?

It's not what you would think when you're a little kid growing up, what you kind of imagine that you'll do. And one of the reasons it's different, one of the things that makes it such a kind of unique experience, is oftentimes it's people's reactions to you when you kind of go into the general population. Sometimes when I go out and I'm not wearing a collar and I'll meet someone, I'm having this conversation with them, I'm like, hey, it's nice to meet you. We're kind of riffing, we're having a good conversation, we're talking, I'm like, what do you do for a living? He's like, you know, I work for Delta. I'm like, cool, he's telling me how to do this. What do you do for a living? I'm like, I'm a priest. And it's like, it's almost like, it's like they look in their rear view mirror and see a police car. They put their hands at 10 and two. My favorite thing is you can watch them smile, and then you can see the screen going, what did I say? What did I say? What did I say? Like, I care, right? Like, I'm gonna, it's really funny.

The other interesting experience, when you go out in public when you wear a collar, right? It's a really different experience as well. Because I get generally, there's three different reactions I get. The first reaction I get when I encounter people in public, it's just generally the most of the people; this is generally what happens most of the time, is generally people are very friendly. And they see, they're like, oh, they're kind of chatty, right? And they see the collar and if they've had, if it reminds them of something in their story, or maybe their mom went to church and their grandmother, whatever, they'll start telling me stories, or maybe they'll share something with me, they'll ask me to pray with them. And it's awesome, it's this great experience that I get to have. The second thing that times that people react, this is a little less common, people are a little suspicious.

You walk in, they're like, hey, what's up? Oh, you're a priest. Like, what kind of priest are you? Like, are you on my side, kind of priest? Are you this kind of hyper religious, judgmental guy that's gonna kind of judge me? Are you kind of feeling you out, kind of dipping your toe in the water? And the third kind of reaction I get, and this doesn't happen very often, but it's happened a few times, is I'll come in and I'll meet people and they're angry.

They'll just look at me, or there's this forced indifference that I experience with them.

And when I just walk in and I'm ordering a cup of coffee or whatever it is I'm doing, and I know when that happens that there's something in their story, they've got this church hurt, or there's something, their understanding of Jesus, or something's happened to them, and I am sort of a representative of that.

And that's what I try to be, really special, especially nice to those folks.

But in all those things, let me tell you, in all those reactions, here's what I've learned. In all the reactions I've just described,

not one of them has anything to do with me.

It's just not about me. They don't know me. They just know what I represent.

And when I walk into that room, they have this, it's almost like this trap door opens up, they see the collar, and they have this Pavlovian response.

And all of a sudden, this trap door opens, and some aspect of their story comes out. Sometimes it's positive, and it's this great association. Sometimes it's negative, and it's a negative association. But regardless, in some way, shape, or form, I know they're not reacting to me, but I'll tell you what they are reacting to. They're reacting to their understanding or their lack of understanding of Jesus.

That's what they're doing.

And it's just really divided response.

And it's this incredible moment. And as an American, and especially ones that live in the South, we all have had some sort of experience of Jesus, haven't we? Be it in pop culture, whether you come to church or not, you can't grow up in this area and just not hear the name. We just drive down the road, and you can see signs. Spray painted on pieces of plywood, repent.

You know, we all have this story about Jesus.

And it all has this reaction to us. We all have a story of it inside of us. And maybe for some of us, that we have a Jesus that inside of us that fits right inside of our comfort zone.

Maybe some of you we have a Jesus that, man, he really just affirms me in all the ways I think, or all my political views. And I don't get challenged very much by my Jesus.

Or maybe you have a therapy Jesus who comes in and he makes us feel better.

And no matter where I am, he's always got a kind word, and he's just trying to kind of build me up to get me more resilient in those ways.

Or maybe I have this sidecar Jesus, it's kind of like Siri, like, hey Jesus, help me find a parking place.

Or hey, Jesus, could you please make this situation work out?

Or maybe the story we have of Jesus, if you're in this room or maybe not in this room, or anyone you ever encounter, it's a negative story.

It's a Jesus that was hurtful.

Or that we think that we have a Jesus that judges us, or he stands off in the distance with a cold indifference.

All the virgins of Jesus that any one of our stories may contain are really diverse, and they're really powerful.

They're really powerful, and they really affect us.

You see this in the gospels that people encounter Jesus, and before they even fully know who Jesus is or who Jesus is claiming to be, they have these strong reactions. You know the one thing you never see with people encountering Jesus in the gospel?

Indifference.

You never see people like, oh yeah, Jesus, cool, let's go get some tacos. Just doesn't work that way.

He's this thing that stirs us. He messes with our categories because Jesus didn't come to fit inside of our stories.

What he did is he came to reveal how we fit inside his one, his true, and his immovable story.

How do we fit inside of that story?

And most of the time, for some of us, depending on where you're coming from, depending on your heart posture, some of us, when we come to that place and we're encountering his story, we submit to that. And others of us are smashed on the rock of the story of Jesus. And some of us, it's been both.

But the point is this: none of us are indifferent.

You can't be.

That's why Jesus, when we read this passage we read in a minute ago, it's so divisive, he's so divisive.

Why is that?

What is so divisive about it and about him?

You read in our passage we just read in Luke chapter two. This is, I think what, our third week in Luke chapter 12, rather, Luke 12. We are picking the chicken off this bone. There's a lot of chicken on that bone in chapter 12.

Jesus is traveling to Jerusalem. He's with his disciples, and the passage says there's many of thousands around him. And I guess they're anxious, or they're drilling Jesus about the worries of their life. And this is one of the places where Jesus says, "Hey, don't be anxious about anything. Consider the lilies of the field. Your father is a father in heaven, and he'll give you everything. You just need to ask for it." And he begins to really reorder their loves and proclaim this peace to them.

And all of a sudden, in the middle of him talking to them, he begins to take this kind of hard left turn. It starts getting a little weird. And then we come to our passage here at the end of chapter 12, and it is probably the least warm, fuzzy gospel passage in scripture.

Jesus says in verse 49, "I came to cast fire on the earth,

"would that it would have already happened."

And then he references, referencing his crucifixion, he goes, "I still have a baptism to go through." Just to be clear, I want you guys to know this. He's saying, "I've come to bring division, not peace. I'm gonna divide households, fathers and sons, and mothers and daughters, and son-in-laws, and father-in-laws, and mother." He's getting really specific. He's really unpacking this one.

So Jesus is doing this, and I'm like, "Huh?"

This is a long way from the Jesus I see on the poster, holding the lamb, just trying to make us feel better, isn't it?

This isn't the "Let the children come to me, Jesus." It doesn't feel like.

And I read this, and Jesus seems to deny the peace of the gospel that he just spent a whole chapter trying to unpack.

What's going on there?

What Jesus is doing in this moment is he's not denying the peace of the gospel.

He's telling you the cost of it.

He's telling us the cost of it.

See, what Jesus knows is this, and what you probably know as well, is that we cling to the things of this world.

There are things in my life that I have my fingers so wrapped around, things that promise to bring me resolution to my world.

Heart postures that I can't let go of,
relationships that are unhealthy,
maybe things I use to numb the pain,

perspectives I don't want to let go of. And I'm so dependent on these things that if I think of letting go of them, it would be so costly.

But the problem is, is when I cling to these things, they keep me from picking up the truth of the gospel and holding it in my arms.

They keep me from carrying what Jesus has for me.

And what happens is if you live in a family or a

culture or a community or a neighborhood, or you're in a church that is defined by those some of those things that I just said about talk to you about, and you let them go, it will create massive division. Another way of saying that is if you live in a circus and you sell the elephants, the clowns are gonna hate you

they just are but the gospel it's not about what we let go of is it it's not about what we let go of it's about the one who is holding on to us it's the one that has grabbed us and says I will never let you go and in the grabbing of you Jesus is saying there are some things I need you to embrace there are things you have to embrace I need you to metabolize these things and the things that Jesus calls us to embrace they are divisive they just are and there's three things I want to talk about today the first one is this is the exclusiveness of Jesus the lordship of Jesus and the grace of Jesus let me take those one at a time the exclusiveness of Jesus see one of the central themes of the gospel you can't read the gospel and you don't see that so much of it if not all of it revolves around this one passage where Jesus said I am the way I am the truth and I am the life what Jesus is not saying there he's not saying I am a way I am an optional way you can go left you can write or you can come with me whatever you feel like he's not saying that what Jesus is saying is I am the way I am the truth and I am the life I am the exclusive path to God and the implication of that is to say something is the exclusive path to God or something is true it's saying that everything else is not true now if you're a first century Jewish person you have no issue with this idea of exclusivity you just don't they called them they thought they were God's chosen people they had no issue with the idea of yeah exclusivity we're in now they twisted that idea and they turned in words where the Lord was calling them to look outwards but but that was something that was baked into their psyche but their rejection of Jesus wasn't because he was exclusive their rejection of Jesus is that they were exclusive but in all the wrong ways they worship the scriptures they worship the law to and could not see what it pointed to and then when the very thing the scriptures and the law in the sacrificial system was pointing to came along they couldn't admit it they were exclusive in all the wrong ways and we're exactly like that man are we we can't see it I tell you what I mean if you are a modern 21st century westerner we hate the idea of exclusivity don't we it's not that we can't stand the idea of a Savior that we need help from above I just can't stand the idea or their 21st century Westerners we can't stand the idea that anyone tells me who my Savior has to be I want to pick my Savior I get to pick the path that takes me to God because that's that's what happens and you know what is a is a is an enlightened person we

are not exclusive there is no exclusivity do you see the problem with that is the problem is saying that we exclusively accept religions or worldviews that allow me to keep my options open it's just another exclusive viewpoint it's just another shape of exclusivity it's just another way of saying we're right and you're wrong the problem is and the truth of the matter is that to say anything is true is to say that other things are not there was no religion in the world that doesn't make an ex in a claim of exclusivity because they're all making truth claims but we as Westerners have rejected it saying that oh we don't like exclusivity but the truth is we're being just as exclusive as the thing we're attacking the second reason people reject the exclusivity of Jesus is because they think it is a claim of moral superiority all right what I mean is that after all Jesus tells us to do good things and to flee from bad things to live above so as a result what they'll say is Christians think then they're better than the rest of you now let me tell you Christianity is a claim of moral superiority for sure just not my moral superiority just not mine because I don't come to Jesus because I'm pure I because I'm I come becomes I'm not I didn't come to Jesus because I wasn't a hypocrite I came to Jesus because I was a hypocrite I didn't come to Jesus because I could keep the cheese on my cracker I came to Jesus because I could not I didn't come to Jesus because I said I I've got this worked out I came to Jesus and said Lord I do not know what I'm doing I need something bigger than me stronger than me more powerful to me something that's better than me something that is good to guide this I am not morally superior you are only Jesus was pure in the gospel it isn't an invitation to self-righteousness it's not for people who think they're better than you it's an invitation to prostitutes it's an invitation to the bruised it's an invitation to the broken to the to the addicted to sinners people like you and me sinners Jesus invites the unrighteous in why why so he can just look at us no so he can give us his righteousness that he gives us a righteousness that I can't get on my own and he needed dresses me in it and the and it is regardless of race of class of moral record of success or failure of how much I make it is regardless of all those things the only requirement is the humility to say I am a mess but I put my faith in the finished work of Jesus see the point is this I need you to hear this Christianity is the most inclusive and the most exclusive faith at the same time that has ever been created that's ever been devised why is that it's inclusive because it is it welcomes the on the most unworthy regardless of who they are but it's exclusive because the only ones that can come in are the ones that are willing to humble themselves to Christ alone period Christians that are in this room and maybe there's people in this room that are here for the first time and you aren't this is you're like what is happening right now right and maybe you're considering what is it in your life that what are you clinging to

because at the core of what we talk about this exclusivity of Jesus another way of saying is this is an invitation it's Jesus not saying we're sitting with a clipboard it's him saying please come to me he is pleading with you he is beckoning he is calling you he's whispering in your ear he is organizing the circumstances of your up lift your eyes it's what he said at the end of his passage you can read the Sun you can read the stars you can see the wind blowing but you can't see what's right in front of you come to me all you are weary come it's an invitation it's an invitation that Jesus extends to us to a banquet feast we're the only ones who get a ticket or the broken and the bruised and the people that can't pay the cover charge thank God for that because I can't pay it and I fit that description in every way shape or form

so we are we are called to embrace the exclusivity of Jesus and we're also called to embrace the lordship of Jesus okay that seems easy few years back I was at a young life camp the place called windy gap and we get there and there's like the first night and you know there's hundreds of kids

that came in there and there's this one young he's Indian from the country India and he's and he's he's in the game room we go to our first meeting and this guy has a sort of general light talk about God and Jesus and just kind of chums the waters a little bit about what we're gonna be talking about for the rest of the week and later I go down to the game room and I see this kid I'm like what's up man are you doing we're shooting pool I'm like so what'd you think of the talk what do you think all this God stuff he gets oh man he goes dude I'm Hindu let me tell you about Hindus we we welcome every God into the room like there's a space for every God that can come into this room and he's welcome and we and that's just the way we do it so I'm cool with Jesus and I remember listening him and I was like I literally have no idea how to respond to that like what do I say so I just kind of left and the week went on and day by day the speaker begins to unfold who Jesus is that Jesus is God incarnate and who we are that we are these sinners that are broken and we need a Savior and it we need a God that is that is that is sinless or a man who is sinless but also a man that would be willing to take the sacrifice for us a sacrifice that's good enough that's pure enough and only God incarnate Jesus the Lamb of God who climbs on the cross he dies for our sin he takes away the sin of the world and he rises from the dead and he now sits on the throne and we're called to follow him and all of a sudden the next that night I walk out and see this kid in the game room and he's sitting on the side by himself and he's in tears I walk up I was up man he says my whole life I've been a Hindu and our whole life I've seen how we invite this entire pantheon of God's into the same space and we worship them and we follow them but this Jesus is different he won't fit in the room he won't fit in the room and every time I get him in the room he pushes everything else out I can't I don't know how to do this he said it's either I follow him or I follow them but there's no in between and I looked at him I said you got it man it's such a pivotal moment I'm tears thinking about it pivotal moment in this kid's life it's so divisive see one of the most fashionable things for non-Christians or people in other religions to say about Christianity is that man we are down with Jesus he was a good man or he was a prophet or he was a great teacher or he is this wise charismatic figure the problem with that is the problem when people say that C.S. Lewis made a great point when he wrote about this that Jesus doesn't give you that option he just does it what does Jesus say he says I am God incarnate I am the son of man and that's in either that is true that Jesus is God incarnate or he's an absolute lunatic or he's a pathological liar there can be no in between Jesus doesn't just get to be a good guy he doesn't just get to be a prophet he's either a liar a lunatic or he is Lord as C.S. Lewis says there is no in between this is so divisive why because people are fine with Christianity as long as you have a Christianity that makes you a nicer person I'm cool you can have a Christianity you can have your faith it just makes you a nicer person you give more you're kind to other people you get more accepting but when you say that Jesus is Lord it means you have to submit to him it means that you have that his truth is truth that when Jesus is ethic is his ethic that means that that changes the way I got to handle the way I think about my family the way I think about my sexuality the way I think about my money it handles the way I think about forgiveness or justice this is really really hard in our cultural moment right now we're the only thing that has lordship over our life is ourselves it is my truth you do not get to tell me what I get to be you don't get to tell me my views on marriage you don't get to tell me my views on gender you don't get to tell me my fill in the blank it's this also incredibly hard personally because when Jesus is Lord it forces me to look at these at these falsehoods that are so deeply entrenched in my own life to say Jesus is Lord but to go on and doing whatever I want it's just I makes me a liar it just makes me a liar to say Jesus is Lord it means that I have to crack open the engine block of my heart and submit it to to what he says and I have to walk in those directions you being a

Christian it's an invitation to submit to the lordship but it's a new master but it's the right master and that is very different because this is a master who wants our good he wants us to trust him to leading us to freedom where do you struggle that with that where do you struggle to trust him to submit to him in the lordship of your over your life where I know where you do because it's the same place I struggle with his lordship over my life everywhere every corner of my being every corner of my being wants to do it my way that's why this third thing that Jesus calls us to embrace is so important it's so crucial and it's also the most divisive of all Jesus calls us to embrace grace what is grace it's a word we kind of whip around isn't it grace is actually it's a theological word and grace is not the same thing as mercy imagine we're here I lock the doors and I pull out two guns I'm like I'm a floor give me your money I hand a bag around and all of a sudden the police come and they arrest me I say please don't send me to jail please don't arrest me if they let me go and they said just don't do it again they send me on my way that is mercy if they say if I say please don't send me to jail please don't arrest me grace is them coming and they're taking me and they put me up in a new condo they give me a monthly stipend they pay off my credit card debt and my kids college tuition in a couple years grace is unreasonable giving a favor of the lavishing of gifts not just to people who don't deserve it but to people who are actively running in the wrong direction guess who that is that's all of us that's the message of the cross the power of grace and the divisiveness of grace is that it's not just offensive to non-religious people actually it's offensive to non-religious and religious people let me tell you why it's offensive to non-religious people because grace offends them because they don't think they need forgiveness and there's no humility and it's offensive to hyper religious people because they want to have a part in their own salvation my transformation is about me and how good I do it and how Christian I can be and how many spiritual setups I can do and there's no humility in it grace is the great equalizer it puts us all on the same plane it says no it's not because of your goodness it's because of mine and it's because of that you have to be able to see yourself see yourself clearly Jesus and grace Jesus died for my sins and he didn't just give me a new identity he didn't just give me forgiveness in this one-time thing so I get fire insurance to go to heaven what Jesus does is even now even when my rebellion is active even as a Christian even as a priest when I enter my days and I just I don't want to do certain things in the right way his spirit sustains me even when I don't deserve it his spirit protects me even when I don't deserve it his spirit convicts me it's moving through me it's moving around me it's moving in me even when I don't deserve it he still opens the eyes of my heart so I can read his scripture he still opens the eyes of my heart to see that he is the author of my faith and guess what else he is he's the perfecter of my faith he's the one that it's working me the faith that Jesus calls us to it's a place where we can rest but we can only rest when it becomes about not just what Jesus has done for us but what he's doing for us now and that means we have to let go of that story let go of trying to get Jesus to fit conveniently into the story I want to write and open my mind and my heart and say Jesus how do I fit into the story you're writing how do I do it help me to embrace the exclusivity that you are the one Savior to your lordship Jesus and Lord most of all would you please give me the grace

to submit to your grace and receive it, amen, amen.