

## *Swimming Upstream*

*John 15: 18-16:4a*

**First Presbyterian Church  
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One of my favorite comedians these days is Jim Gaffigan. He can bring you to tears of laughter talking about the torture of a vacation to Disney or the way we eat McDonald's fries. I also love the bit where he brings in some religious humor. In one sketch, he begins:

I do want everyone to feel comfortable.

That's why I'd like to talk to you about Jesus....[laughter]

It doesn't matter if you're religious or not, does anything make you more uncomfortable than some stranger coming up to you saying, "I'd like to talk to you about Jesus"? Yeah, I'd like you not to.<sup>1</sup>

Gaffigan makes us laugh as he puts his finger on an uncomfortable truth. Jesus makes us nervous. You can talk at a party about teachings from the Buddha and no one gets threatened. You can talk about Mohammed, too (just be sure you don't draw a picture of him). But the J-word will clear a cocktail party faster than a smoke alarm clears a house. Especially if you speak of him as the God who became man who is currently Lord of heaven and earth. His very name is so powerful that you dare not utter it unless you're using it to curse your circumstances or ridicule Christians. No other person who ever lived commands such attention that it becomes immediately clear that this man breaks through my defenses and demands my ultimate allegiance. Jesus is magnetic. And Jesus is repellent. He scares us. He draws us to himself. Because there is no one like him, before or since.

Talking with Derek this week about this passage, he made a great point. The problem many people have with Jesus is not Jesus but his disciples. So Derek said, "If people hate me because of Jesus, that's fine. But if they hate Jesus because of me, then I have failed." That makes a lot of sense. If I truly represent Jesus, and people reject me, that's appropriate. He told me to expect that. But if they hate Jesus because of the way *I* live and talk, then all I have done with my life is to distort the beauty of my savior and lord.

On the last night of his life, Jesus told his disciples to expect rejection from the world he came to save. He said, "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its

own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.” The world has a good sense of smell. The world can intuit what drives your life. “You’re one of us,” the world will tell you if it’s clear you live for yourself. The world can discern how you are *sourced*. If you give off no sign of belonging to a higher authority than the demands of what is here and now, the world will not be threatened by you. But if you hint that human lives belong to a Creator, that we do not make up the rules as we see fit but have rules from a higher source to follow, you will stink in the world’s nostrils. Jesus said this is to be expected.

Paul also expressed this in terms of aroma and smells. “For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life” (2 Cor. 2: 15-16). There is something about those who live from Jesus that smells *attractive* to those who are tired and broken from living from their own resources. The forgiveness, the love, the peace draws them like the smell of bread baking. There is something about those who live from Jesus that smells *repugnant* to those still striving to make their own way in the world as lords of their own lives. Our consecration to a higher power, our submission to a higher law, our recognition of a deeper reality repels them like the smell of flood water on a floor.

Jesus told his disciples not to be surprised by this. He warned them that rejection would come so that when it came they would not unravel. This is normal. Jesus magnetically draws sinners to grace. He also repulses those who are still resisting the reign and rule of God. Again, we remember the formula. If they hate us because of Jesus, that means we’re doing something right. But if they hate Jesus because of us, it’s because we’re not representing him well.

Jesus came to the world to save the world. God sent his Son because he so loved the world. But the world he came to save in large part rejected him. For the God who loves us each right where we are demands that we do not insist on staying as we are. He welcomes us when we are prodigals, hungry, broken, blood-spattered and mud-stained. But he also calls us out of the far country. He summons us to more. And therein comes the conflict. We have a beautiful vision to cast. We have a life-giving way to show. We have the path of human flourishing to offer. Some will receive it with joyful gratitude. Others will hate us.

So these days, there are a number of push points in our culture. We feel acutely how we are out of step with the mainstream of the culture in which we live. The beauty of our vision is called ugly. The love in our gospel is called hate. The

life we offer is rejected. Jesus said to expect that and keep on loving. It takes determination to do that. It takes considerable courage to enact a better way and to speak a more hopeful word. So I want to encourage you in three areas as we engage our world with the person and work of Jesus. 1) Life. 2) Committed life. 3) Afterlife.

**1) Life.** There is no other faith or philosophy in the history of the world that has so valued human life as the Jewish/Christian faith. We believe that human beings are created in the image of God. Not some humans. Not just the king. Or the supermodel. But each and all. We bear the image of the creator of the cosmos. We are intentionally created. We are not an accident. We are designed, intended, and desired by God. We are summoned to regard each life, at whatever stage of health, age or ability as being as precious as the finest human who ever lived. For Jesus said, “What you do to the least of these my brothers you do to me.”

It takes tremendous courage today to stand for sacredness of life in the womb. The most encouraging sign I have seen in our culture is the rise of an organization called Students for Life. It’s now on over 1000 campuses in our country. I am buoyed by the millennials who are willing to do what my generation has not: to break the taboo and actually talk about the facts. To see where our science leads us, acknowledging that every new discovery, every new picture from the womb leads us to know that life begins beautifully and miraculously at conception. Millennials are also willing to show one another the graphic truth in the images of what actually happens in an abortion. They are willing to expose the raw economics in the abortion industry. And they are willing to offer acceptance and gospel love to those dealing with the guilt pain of earlier abortion.

Affirming life requires the very best of us. It takes so much more than just ending a life. It takes us starting schools in Gardere. It takes building houses with Habitat. It takes befriending students from chaotic homes. It takes welcoming international students into our homes. It takes our willingness to cross racial lines with hospitality and honest dialogue. It takes us soothing fevered brows and spooning ice chips as dying takes its natural course. It takes adopting orphans from overseas, being court advocates for abused children, or becoming foster parents. It takes creating places like Heritage Ranch to help families heal. The ways to affirm life are as various and wonderful and complex as life itself.

**2) Committed Life.** People in our culture are plagued with a sense of abandonment. And we are reluctant to make or keep commitments. Fewer people marry today, in no small part because the pain from the break-ups in their parents’

marriages has made them wary. Few have even heard the vision of man and woman in committed love that Christianity uniquely offers the world.

I love to meet with couples who are engaged so that I can applaud the courage it takes to risk the commitment of marriage in these troubled times. I love to share with them how marriage is the prime example of life in communion that God has given us. I tell them how in a broken world they are especially blessed to have found love that not everyone finds. I tell them how hard they will have to work. Not every marriage makes it. But some do. By grace, some avoid the accidents, the betrayals, the premature illnesses that end a marriage too soon. I tell them what a mercy it will be if they are granted as well the gift of children. For not everyone who wants children can have them. Marriage is hard and a good one is rare.

But when it works, we all look at it and say, “Yes, that’s what we need.” That’s what we build communities on. They show us what happens when we sacrifice ourselves to others. Good marriages show all of us the power of commitment in every relationship. They show us how to have friendships, how to be a coworker, how to conduct life in community.” Theologically speaking, a man and a woman complete one another and in their love bring forth new life. This is an image of the Triune God who out of the love of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit brought forth the universe and all that is in it. It is an image, Paul tells us, of Christ and his bride, the church, so it embraces all who belong to Jesus.

**3) Afterlife.** While a huge majority of American do still believe in God, the cultural atmosphere in which we live demands we keep that silent. The historical Jesus has been reduced to faith. Public truth about Jesus has been relegated to a sphere of private belief. For the air we breathe tells us we are accountable to no one but ourselves. Functionally, our culture lives like there is nothing more to come after this life. Certainly no one or nothing to whom we must render an account. This provides an immediate rush of freedom. Hey, there’s no one in the principal’s office! The teachers have all left. We can do whatever we want! No more rules! No more constraints. Let’s be ourselves and find our own way. There follows this initial euphoria a great despair. There’s no one in the principal’s office. No one is in charge. No one can fix this mess. And there is no hope of future justice for those who got hosed. There is no brighter tomorrow. There is no reunion. There’s just nothing. The sadness and the meaninglessness crushes us. So we begin the mad dash to stay distracted every hour of every day lest the emptiness yawn up like a great black void.

Once more, we have such a better vision. I did not create myself. And this is not the end. I am going to God. There is a redeemed and restored world coming. I can be part of that. Death is not finality. There is more, much more to come. But that means I am accountable. The reality of afterlife means that I am not my own. I am not the measure of truth and morality as I would like it to be. A rendering of my life is due to the One who made me. I will be judged. And it's very likely I will be found wanting.

But one has come to save me. He has come to render account on my behalf. He has come to stand in for me and take the judgment due to my failures before my Creator. He has come to taste death and come out the other side victorious. And there is only one who could do this. He is the J-word. Jesus. His name means, The LORD saves. Call on this name and be saved.

Jim Gaffigan got it exactly right. I want to talk to you about Jesus makes us uncomfortable for good reason. His name means savior. He came because I cannot save myself. His very name calls me to account. His very name gives me hope if I will turn away from myself and call out to him. He will save me. He will forgive me and give me eternal life. But it means I am no longer my own. He has bought me with his blood. I have no right of demand on him. I can only trust in his grace. In a decision renewed every day, I am called to let go of my life as I reach for him. I will have to trust even as my heart asks, "Will he catch me? Will he give me life?" In faith I put my hand in his.

The life of Jesus was lived publically. He was not a set of spiritual principles. He was not a myth. He was a man who lived at a particular, documented moment in history in a particular place. There is a public record of his crucifixion. There are public accounts of witnesses who declared they saw the dead Jesus alive again. They went to horrible deaths rather than recant what was not a mere belief but an assertion of fact in the public arena where we conduct our business and write our history. Dead Jesus got up. He is Lord and he is savior and he summons all men and women to bow the knee. It's the best possible news. Because it means all we believe about the beauty of life, the path of committed life and the hope of after life is true. Startlingly, thrillingly true.

But it also means that if Jesus is Lord, then Caesar is not. Neither is business. Neither is sports. Neither am I. This news of the public figure of Jesus is not merely about spirituality. It's about a person who lived, died, rose and reigns. Some will do all they can to reject his claim on their lives. Others will be magnetically drawn to him. Our task is not to cajole or even convince. Our calling

is to bear witness and to love. “As for me, Jesus is life. How can I pray for you? As for me, Jesus is Lord. How may I serve you? As for me, Jesus is savior. Where can I tend you with his mercy?”

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QNIJN46q8ko>