

Gerald Ford has to be one of my favorite presidents; at least of those I can remember. Soft-spoken and self-deprecating, Ford carried himself as a quiet and dedicated Christian. In 2006, traditional music, i.e. *For All The Saints*, graced his funeral service in Washington D.C.'s National Cathedral. One Scripture chosen for the service was taken from John 14, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God and believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many mansions." However, when the minister came to verse 6 he read it this way, "I am the way, the truth and the life... if you would have known me, you would have known my Father." Now, anyone who has read John 14:6 a few times knows that the minister left something out, because the text reads, "I am the way the truth and the life and no one comes to the Father but by Me." He edited Jesus. When asked about it, a representative of the church said,

Christians understand Jesus is the route to God, but that's not to say others i.e. Muslims, Sikhs or Buddhists don't come to God in other ways. They all come to God in their own human experience of the divine. Christians talk about that in terms of Jesus.

Now, whatever you may think about this, that comment bears little resemblance to what Jesus said. Jesus said, "I am the way the truth and the light and no one comes to the Father but through Me." But, in our day, that kind statement sets our post-modern sensibilities on edge. It's like scratching fingernails down an old chalkboard, because in a pluralistic world an exclusive claim is judged as an arrogant claim. So, Jesus gets edited. But, if you edit Jesus, are you really reading about Jesus? Or, are you reading about a Jesus of your own making. So, let me ask, "Who is exercising arrogance? The one who thinks Jesus needs to be corrected or the one who lets His words stand?" When you look down the well and look at the Jesus of your own making guess what you will see? You will see your own reflection. Now, we can reject what Jesus said about Himself, but if we change it we become the author of the script and not Jesus or those who knew Him best. Jesus just refuses to be edited. You can reject what He said or submit to it, but you can't edit Jesus and claim to follow Him at the same time.

In Mark's gospel we're looking at the first written account of the life of Jesus. This morning our story reveals an amazing combination of attributes folded together in one person. On the one hand, it reveals the *Offensiveness of Jesus* and on the other the *Beauty or Attractiveness of Jesus*. Let's consider these two pieces of the story. The first piece tells us how offended Jesus' hometown people became because of His exclusive claims. The second piece of the story tells us how inclusively loving Jesus is and how inclusively caring He called His disciples to be. It's the combination of these two attitudes that I find remarkable. Those who make exclusive claims are usually tyrannical, i.e. Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, Kim and Islamic terrorists. Genocide is based on exclusive claims of superiority. As a rule exclusivity leads to tyranny. On the other hand an all-inclusive love, (to love everything and to hate nothing not even evil) and a tolerance for all views has no grounds for restraining tyranny. If there is no exclusive absolute truth, then there is no absolute ground for resisting anything—even evil. Without an exclusive claim to good, who gets to decide? With Jesus, however, you get a remarkable conjunction of attributes found in no other. With Jesus an exclusive claim and an inclusive love are folded together. Let's consider these two things: The Offensiveness of Jesus and then the Love of Jesus.

The Offensiveness of Jesus (6:1-6)

This is Jesus' second recorded ministry visit to his hometown Nazareth. The first visit didn't go so well. There, He entered the synagogue and read from Isaiah 61, which is a prophesy about how the Messiah would come to Israel and free the captives, recover sight to the blind and liberate the oppressed. That part went well enough, until he interpreted it to mean that God was not going to liberate Israel from her Roman occupiers. Instead, God would come to heal people who were trapped in evil, sickness and sin. Then things went downhill very fast when He used Gentiles like the widow of Zerahath and Naaman the leper as the objects of God's election. He suggested that Israel, just as in the days of Isaiah, would reject the Messiah and so God would turn

to use and to save Gentiles. How do you think that message was received? Not well. Not only was God not going to bring political freedom, He would be turning to the Gentiles to manifest His grace and glory. Filled with rage, they drove Jesus out to the edge of the city and tried to kill him by throwing Him off the cliff. Yet, somehow, Jesus slipped through their midst and went away.

I wonder how the disciples felt about returning a second time with Jesus to Nazareth? Perhaps a few bodyguards would have been a good idea. Also, notice that the proverb about a prophet not being honored in his hometown didn't keep Jesus away. Their disbelief didn't keep Jesus from moving towards them with words and works of grace. Jesus went back to preach and to serve among those who hated Him and had tried to kill Him.

Here in Mark 6, Jesus comes a second time to Nazareth. He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath and began to teach. Many were astonished. But their astonishment was not a favorable astonishment. It was amazement at the unmitigated gall He possessed by parading His deception and homespun learning among them. I can see no reason to read their astonishment in any positive way. Their questions are derogatory and sarcastic:

Where does *He* come up with such things? What sort of wisdom is this? What's the real source of His miracles? Our religious leaders say that He does His miracles by the power of the devil. He's no legitimate Rabbi; He didn't get a degree from seminary. He's just a common worker who works with His hands just like the rest of us? Moreover, isn't this one Mary's son?

In that culture, a man was never named after his mother even after his father's death. "Mary's son" is derogatory. They were accusing Jesus of being illegitimate. Nazareth was a small town and people could count. Look, they were arguing that Jesus was, in reality, no better than any they were. And they were offended (literally *σκανδαλιζω*); they were *scandalized* and found His claims to be contemptuous. This word means to viscerally reject someone. It's the same way we use the word scandal today. When it was discovered that former presidential candidate John Edwards was planning a rooftop wedding with his mistress, while his wife was battling cancer it was announced as a scandal. When Bernie Madoff stole millions of dollars from non-for-profit charities, it was said to be scandalous. The word communicates a deep visceral rejection and contempt down in your gut. Why were the folks at Nazareth so offended? At least three reasons: First, there is a hometown petty jealousy at work here. When someone from your high school class makes it big, out of jealousy, we find less than altruistic reasons to explain her accomplishments. Second and more importantly, Jesus' claims were intolerably exclusive. He claimed to forgive sins, which was an exclusive and divine prerogative. What person in his right mind would claim to have the power to forgive some else's sins against God? He just said outrageous things: "If you have seen me you have seen the Father." "Before Abraham was I AM," taking for Himself God's exclusive name. He said, "No one comes to the Father but through Me." He claimed divine prerogatives by calming the storm with two words. When He touched the leper, the Gentile, and the woman with the hemorrhage, He never applied the rules of purification to Himself. He claimed to be the only one who ever lived who could come in contact with uncleanness and not become unclean Himself! His claims were just extravagantly exclusive asserting divine prerogatives for Himself. This was just too much. And if you try to edit out all the exclusive claims of Jesus, you're going to have a very thin Bible. His claims offended everyone! The big city leaders were offended. The small town conservatives were offended. Religious leaders were offended. The Herodians were offended. His family was offended. There's no one left. If you have not been offended by Jesus you've probably just not heard Him clearly. Jesus claim to be the exclusive Son of God, LORD or God among us in flesh and a man who accepted worship was enormously offensive and continues to be offensive today.

Philosophically this was offensive. Every other religion has God releasing us from human life. But Jesus claimed to be God *in flesh*. This was just unheard of and outrageous. In Jesus, God comes down into our humanness and gets entangled, immerses Himself into ordinary human life. He takes on the vulnerability, pain and suffering of our human life and eventually He dies to redeem it. The purpose of Jesus death and resurrection is to redeem the world into the new heavens and new earth. Not to remove us. In the new heavens and new earth we're not going to float on clouds. We're going to dance and maybe fly but if so, there will be

real wind hitting our faces. We're going to eat and drink in the kingdom of God. There will be food, music, art, sciences, sea and sky, oceans and mountains. Do you think sitting in the sun, working in your garden, laughing and eating together with friends, watching the geese fly over honking their horns, raising beautiful dahlias or tomatoes...do you think all that is going to end in the new heaven and new earth? No! In the new heavens and new earth all of that will be there but it will be cleansed. No other faith holds out the promise of eternal salvation of the flesh and blood world of the ordinary world. They may hold out the hope of some pure spiritual reality, but Only Christianity claims salvation for ordinary human life. That God would become flesh was unimaginable and offensive. Jesus' claimed that He is LORD. And the claim that Jesus is LORD was and continues to be offensive. If Jesus is Lord that means that you can't live life anyway you want to live. It means that your sexuality, your money, your time, your worship, your sense of justice and injustice, and ethics are not yours to do with as you please. If Jesus is LORD, that means that we are obligated to submit and yield to His authority. Becoming a Christian does not mean that your sins are forgiven for you to go and do whatever you can imagine. It means to follow Jesus as LORD. And that will change everything about your sense of entitlement to your independent ambitions and behavior. And beloved, that's offensive. In Nazareth, they said, "No! You're just a man like us; we have no intention of making you our LORD over us." O.K. That's the offense of Jesus. In John 15, Jesus said to His disciples that if the world hated Him it would also hate them. If you follow Jesus and represent Him faithfully you too will evoke some offense. Jesus also said, "Blessed or Happy is the man who does not take offense at Me." Are you editing Jesus or submitting to Jesus?

The Beauty of Jesus

Then Mark gives us this amazing second piece of this story where Jesus sent His apostles out on a short-term mission trip. It's amazing to me because, as a rule, when someone advocates an exclusive claim or message, the outcome is almost always tyrannical oppression. Remember, Jesus is also teaching His disciples about the proper use of authority. Who do you know making exclusive claims that doesn't use those claims to their own advantage or to lord it over others? It can happen in a home, a church, at the office or in governments. There is a proper use of authority. But the abuse of authority is most often the history of humanity. Look at how Jesus tells His disciples to represent His exclusive authority.

Go to serve. Go and heal. Go and humble yourself. Don't take a lot of money. Don't stand over or above the people. Don't demand any entitlement or rights. Accept the hospitality offered by others. And when things start going well, don't trade up for a better offer. Meet needs. Liberate people from dark spirits. Heal people of harmful diseases of all kinds. Serve and love people. Be dependent on the people to whom you minister. Live with financial integrity and modesty. Talk to people about the kingdom of God in Christ and their need to repent and to believe in Jesus, Don't change the exclusive claims of Christ, In a pagan world where everyone had their own gods, this was terribly offensive just as it is in a post-modern culture. But, as you proclaim Jesus as LORD, you will live with a love, service, compassion and a humility that doesn't oppress, use people, manipulate or market people. Don't treat people like consumers or commercialize the faith. Get involved in their lives, stay close to them, love them and serve them. Jesus is the only one you can submit to totally who will not abuse that authority. He uses His authority to heal. And, there are things He hates like pride, sin, injustice, oppression, and evil.

Folded together in Jesus is a combination of beliefs, attitudes and actions never before seen and rarely seen today. It was a convergence of offensiveness and attractiveness. The message of the early Christians was the most exclusive message that could be announced and yet, the Christians were the most inclusively loving people the world had ever seen. The early Christians cared for the poor and the sick and needy the way pagans never dreamt of doing. They included all races, classes, ages, sinners of every kind, all religious and ethnic backgrounds, rich and poor, healthy and sick, political liberals and conservatives. The pagans of the first century wrote letters back and forth exhorting their followers to imitate the Christians' love and care if they wanted to survive as a relevant philosophy. I recently came across this quote from J.P. Meyer, in *A Marginal Jew*

What is beyond dispute is that in the ministry of two or three years Jesus attracted and infuriated his contemporaries, mesmerized and alienated the ancient world. Unleashed a movement that has done the same ever sense and thus changed the course of history forever.

Martin Luther often suggested that Christians tend to be like drunken sailors on a donkey. We have a way of falling off one side or the other. We can let the exclusive message of Jesus make us unloving and tyrannical toward all who disagree with us. Or we can let the inclusive command to love everyone, silence us about the exclusive truth that Jesus is LORD becoming tolerant of everything even sin and wickedness. It's this combination found in Jesus that I find so amazing and compelling.

Where can we get such courage to be both? Perhaps we can get it from the insult His hometown people gave Him. The comment that Jesus was Mary's son implied that Jesus was a man without a Father. Of course it was a cheap shot and an insult. However, on the cross Jesus truly became a man without a father. On the cross He said, "My God, Why have you forsaken Me?" On the cross, Jesus received the rejection of God the Father. On the cross, Jesus took the ultimate rejection so that we could have ultimate acceptance. Jesus took the punishment for the sins of the world so that the Father could justly punish sin and at the same time not destroy us along with it. And by doing so we can now call God our Father. If we believe in the Lord Jesus, we can cry out to God, "Abba Father," When you have been loved, served, and cared for like that with that much love it frees you up to bear witness to an exclusive truth and leads you to an inclusive love. Think about this. If you believe that Jesus reconciled you as a sinner to God by a miracle of grace, how can that possibly lead to arrogance and self-righteousness?

The man who died on the cross was the one and only Son of God and the only Savior of the world. Jesus was God with us, God among us in flesh. This was His exclusive claim. And when He came as the only Son of God, He used His power and authority not to increase His power and status but to love and serve. He did not consider the prerogatives of divinity to be clutched. Instead He emptied Himself of those prerogatives and took on the form of a servant and became obedient, even unto death on a cross. Jesus' claim is exclusive and faith in the real Jesus will also lead you to the most inclusive love possible. You will find this amazing combination of excellencies in no one else but Jesus.