

JESUS ICONOCLAST

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

February 12, 2006

Scripture: II Kings 5:1-14; Mark 1:40-45

The new, old argument about whether or not sacred subjects can be depicted in art has its origins not in a Danish newspaper cartoon of two weeks ago, but in the Byzantine Empire of the 7th and 8th Centuries. Muslims and Jews alike have always been sensitive to art depicting God and God's messengers ever since the writing of the First Commandment and of the Koran. This recent outbreak is only a replay of a story with a long history.

At the end of the 7th Century Christians began to use pictures or "icons" to depict sacred subjects, and it set off a firestorm in the church like the one we see today in the Muslim world. These Christians aflame with passion for the First Commandment prohibiting graven images went around busting up the pictures of the saints. They were known as iconoclasts, or icon busters. This disagreement over icons, and a few other theological and liturgical issues, eventually split the Orthodox from the Catholic Church.

The issue re-emerged during the Protestant Reformation 800 years later when the same fear of graven images, paintings, and sculpture broke out once again. In Zurich, Pastor Ulrich Zwingli, a leader in the Reformation, had the paintings on the walls of his church whitewashed in order to avoid any appeal to superstition. Is it any wonder that artists have had issues with the church for a very long time? The church has been a fickle lover of its artists, first praising their work for its spiritual qualities, and then condemning it as too material and literal.

What is particularly remarkable is the passion behind both, the artistic urge to create beauty for the sanctuary, and the religious zeal to destroy it.

Today an iconoclast is anyone who attacks and seeks to overthrow traditional or popular ideas or institutions. Betty Friedan, she was an iconoclast. So were Coretta Scott King and her husband Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., iconoclasts. And in the passage we read today, the story of the healing of a leper in Mark's gospel, so is Jesus, an iconoclast! He was someone who broke through tradition and ritual to do something new, something better than the respected and time-honored order of things, and he did it with passion and with no small amount of controversy as well. Jesus' break with tradition becomes clear when you compare the two healing stories we heard earlier.

The first story is about Naaman an Aramean general who suffered from leprosy. Naaman hears about the power of the prophet Elisha and the possibility that this Israelite can do something to help him.

When Naaman arrives at Elisha's house with all his retinue of horses and chariots and soldiers, Elisha sends word from the house that Naaman should go and skinny dip in the Jordan, doing seven cannonballs into the water, whereupon he would be healed.

But Naaman took offense that Elisha didn't even so much as pass his hand over the affected area of leprosy, but instead had called out his instructions from the house.

Naaman whines about this cool reception and lack of hospitality, especially considering his high station as a general. Elisha was just *calling it in*, the way Naaman saw it, no bedside manner, no respect for the battle ribbons Naaman wore on his uniform, the brass on his buttons! With whom did Elisha think he was dealing? But eventually Naaman's servants persuaded him to swallow his pride and go and wash in the Jordan. And when he did, he was healed.

In contrast, the story of the healing of the leper in Mark's 1st chapter is not quite like the Naaman story. This is the third healing in three weeks that we have examined. First there was the man with the unclean spirit in the synagogue, and then there were the dual healings of Peter's mother-in-law and the people of Capernaum who crowded into the house and were healed by him that evening. And finally there is this story of a man with leprosy, who is the first to receive healing outside of Capernaum.

The story, when read in the New Revised Standard Version does not come to us exactly the way Mark wrote it. It has been cleaned up and sanitized. The NRSV says that Jesus, when he met the leper, was *moved with pity*, and that after the healing was effected, Jesus *sent the man away* at once. This is the country club version of what happened. The way Mark wrote the story originally, it reads more like this:

A leper came to Jesus begging him for help. Kneeling, he said, "If you choose; you can make me clean. *Snorting in anger*, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I choose. Be made clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him. After sternly warning him, Jesus *pushed the leper out*, saying, "See that you say nothing to anyone, but go and show yourself to the priest, and offer what Moses commanded for your cleansing."¹

When you read it that way, you catch the abruptness of the verbs. *Jesus snorted*, and he *pushed the leper out*.

This is a healing story with passion in it. It's not just any healing story. Jesus is frustrated and upset when he heals the man; and in the process of healing him, Jesus breaks down walls that have been carefully built and scrupulously preserved by well meaning religious types, when he *touches* the leper. He dares to do the unconventional, in fact, the unlawful, so that he may accomplish the unlikely.

The anger in the story may best be explained not by anything that the leper has done, it's more the fact that the leprosy itself makes Jesus angry; that anyone is suffering like this upsets him.

We know what this is like, ourselves. I get angry when I see pictures of children in the sub-Saharan desert malnourished, flies all about their faces, death hanging in the air, and the commentator says that only minutes after they stopped filming the child died. It's the injustice of suffering that angers Jesus; not the leper, but his suffering.

I doubt Jesus had ever seen a leper before this time in his life. He may have heard about lepers, but lepers were kept apart from everyone else, living in colonies separated from family and friends. Whenever they encountered another person they were required by ritual law to shout well ahead with the warning, "Unclean," so that all might steer clear of them.

Lepers had skin diseases; sometimes nothing more than psoriasis, and other times they might have the much more serious bacterial infection, Hansen's disease. But whatever the severity of their ailment, no one was permitted to touch the leper for fear of being exposed to what was erroneously considered a contagious illness with enormous social consequences.

A man once told me that after he left the doctor's office upon hearing his positive diagnosis for HIV, he walked down Madison Avenue in a daze, and the only word he could think of was "unclean." It was bad enough to know that he was ill, but quite another to fear the social ostracism he might suffer, not only from people who didn't understand the illness, but also his friends whom he believed would now look down on him.

Jesus *does* in this healing story, *what Elisha would not do*, he touched the leper. And when he did, centuries of carefully rendered, scrupulously observed ritual law was broken by Jesus the Iconoclast.

Mark has intentionally put this healing story in the very first chapter of the gospel to signal the passionate way in which Jesus has taken on his work as messiah and savior. He will be called reckless by some, a threat by others, a force to be reckoned with by all. But from this healing forward he can no longer be thought of as just another snake oil salesman. This healing shatters tradition and law and breaks open a new understanding of the kingdom that he brings.

This healing story shatters our icons and images of Jesus. Our tendency is to emasculate Jesus, make him tame and domestic, see him as sweet and kindly, the irenic Jesus of the soft face and well groomed beard, sitting with hands folded looking heavenward, the glow of calm about him. Or, worse yet, we make him into the Jesus of the locker room, the testosterone pumped Jesus of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, snapping towels in the locker room, and giving prayers in the hoo-haw huddle before the break to the scrimmage line.

But Mark sees Jesus differently. The Jesus of Mark's gospel is engaged in a cosmic battle against the powers of this world that oppose God. He snorts in anger at the illness of the leper because he knows that the demons are now on notice; he pushes the cured back into the world to claim for themselves the life they had lost, he binds the strong man Satan in his own house² and confronts the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees. And, when in a storm on the sea, he orders the winds and waves to obey him, they do.³

This is a Jesus who shatters what is traditional, and breaks open what is taken for granted. He is driven by a passion for God that will not let him rest until he has done what he is bound to do, which is to usher in the reign of God on earth.

You may remember that at the end of Mark's gospel, as Jesus dies, the temple curtain dividing the Holy of Holies from the people is torn, ripped, shredded from top to bottom, signifying the tearing that occurs when the kingdom of God breaks in. No more barriers between heaven and earth. It is an image of a Jesus who has done battle with the powers of Satan and defeated them.

So if, along the way, it means that Jesus must touch a few lepers in order to heal them, or be accused of eating with sinners and tax collectors shocking as that may be, or plucking some heads of grain in the fields and eating them on the Sabbath day thereby scandalizing the Pharisees, then so be it. This Jesus that Mark portrays pushes the envelope and lets the chips fall where they may. This is the Jesus who toward the end of his life, will stand outside the temple in Jerusalem with his disciples and tell them that not one stone of it will be left on top of another.

Now why tell you all this on this Sunday of the blizzard when if we'd had any sense we'd have called church off, but instead are about to lay hands on elders and deacons and commission trustees to the work that we believe God is calling them to do, an act that is eminently institutional and traditional?

Well, because contrary to popular opinion an important part of the work of being an officer in the church is sometimes that of being an Iconoclast, of breaking up old patterns and leaving behind worn out ways. Sometimes that's what you have to do to either restore or establish health, not only in a physical body, but also in a church body.

Many people feel that becoming a church officer is going mainstream, it's taking the mantle of the establishment and empowering people to preserve the way things are.

In a church with almost three hundred years of history behind it, it is very tempting to do things the way we always have, never to allow the winds of change to blow any dust off the chandeliers in here. But while the letter to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever, we need to remember that it is Jesus that is the one constant and unchanging factor, not the church.

I once was asked to preach in another house of worship, an interesting and modern sanctuary with a large life sized crucifix hanging over the altar. As I sat in the chancel during the service and looked out at the congregation, I noticed something out of place; a perfect spider web had formed along the vertical and horizontal beams on the left side of that huge cross above us. There, suspended over the congregation's place of meeting with God was an inadvertent depiction of inertia and neglect. I vowed to myself never to allow any church I serve to become so apathetic as to allow a spider web, to form either on its symbols or its life as a congregation.

The church is not a museum, bearing the artifacts of a bygone era. We are not meant to come here and observe quaint customs that meant much to our ancient forebears, but nothing to us. The church is a hospital for the sick in soul and spirit, a refueling station for the world-weary and worn, a communication center for all who would pray, a router in a wireless network for connecting the world to the One source that binds all our lives together. The church is the means for God breaking through to the world and bearing the message of hope that it most needs, the good news of God's love for us in Jesus Christ.

Every church should be a vital place of meeting where God can come gently to us at times, or break into our lives at other times, challenging our assumptions, comforting our sorrows, inspiring our best intentions, and helping us to live as people who, by baptism, bear the sign of the cross on our forehead.

These next three years in the life of this church are going to be exciting ones. That's the term of office that these new elders, deacons and trustees will serve.

We have a lot of work to do as a congregation. An associate pastor to call. A Mellin-Macnab building to improve significantly. Classrooms to update and make more child-friendly. Adult education programs to expand and diversify. Outreach to the community to support and develop. Hospitality to extend to seniors in the neighborhood, and to autistic children who are in our day school. A great nursery school to make even better. And doors that can swing even wider than they do now to this community so that others may come and find in this place the God who is its reason for being.

So roll up your sleeves, congregation. Let's get to work, you elders and deacons and trustees. Let's get the cobwebs off the cross, and let's not let the past overrule the future. Let's preserve the traditions that define the best of who we are as God's people, and let's be iconoclasts with all the rest that stands in the way of being faithful in this modern age, and in this changed circumstance in which we find ourselves today in this church.

We are as young a church as any church I know. 70% of our new members are in their 40's, 30's, and 20's. We are young and old, gay and straight, every ethnic and racial combination you can imagine. We come from all the boroughs, and especially from the neighborhoods nearby. There are 300 children on our rolls under the age of 5 and we don't even have a room dedicated to nursery care or toddlers, this growth has come on us so suddenly!

God is breaking the mold at First Church and calling us to pay attention. To respond to the marvelous thing that God is doing right before our eyes. God is shattering our picture of the way the church used to be, and doing something new in its place. And we had best get with God's program. The seven most dangerous words in the church are, "We never did it that way before." It's not a phrase I have ever heard anyone say here. Thanks be to God! Because in an exciting time like this, I think that's the last thing God wants to hear from us. So let's be up and on our way, and put these officers to work, making ready for the new thing God means to do among us.

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¹ My translation.

² Mark 3:27

³ Mark 4:41