

*Lenten Sermon Series: (Re)Discovering Jesus: Rebel, Revolutionary, Radical*

*Sermon Title: "The Rebel Jesus"*

*Isaiah 61:1-2; Psalm 27:1-6; 12-14; Matthew 5:17, 21-26, 38-48*

*Salem United Methodist Church; February 21, 2016*

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We are in the season of Lent which prepares us to face once again the Crucifixion of Jesus and his Resurrection. During these forty days we reexamine who we are in relationship to Jesus Christ so that during Holy Week we can have a deeper understanding of why Jesus goes to the cross. During this season of Lent we will be looking at the various teachings of Jesus and discovering or rediscovering how countercultural they are. So who is Jesus: a rebel, a revolutionary, a radical?

If someone were to ask you, "Who is Jesus?" what would you say? What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the question, "Who is Jesus?" Some freeze when they are asked this question. Others might say Jesus was a great moral teacher, a good role model, a prophet, or a historical figure. Knowing Jesus is primary to our belief as Christians. Knowing who we are in relationship to him is the beginning of faith. Without Jesus there would be no Christian faith. Our belief in him as the Son of God, as Messiah, as Redeemer, as Lord and Savior has changed lives and even the world. Change is something many back away from. We want things to remain the same because we know what to expect. The status quo is a comfortable place to be. There is some security in things being the same. Yet Jesus was not about the status quo. What Jesus taught and what he did threatened both the religious and political systems of his day. In first century Palestine Jesus was a rebel with a cause. He objected to how the systems were treating people. He was unorthodox in his teachings. He did not conform to the religious teachings of the day. The Jewish leaders considered him an agitator who stirred up the people against thousands of years of spiritual teachings and discipline.

His rebellion began in his home town, Nazareth. The Gospel of Luke records him reading the Isaiah passage, the reading of the morning, to his home synagogue. "The Lord God's spirit is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim release for captives, and liberation for prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and a day of vindication for our God." He then tells his family, friends, and neighbors who knew him since he was a toddler that the scripture is fulfilled in him. He is the Messiah, the One who will save them. This angered his community to the point they tried to kill him. One would think that they would have welcomed the news that broken hearts would be healed, that the poor would have hope, the prisoners and captives would come home to their families. But it wasn't. Jesus was messing with the status quo. First, the community took care of their own, so if someone was grieving, they cared for them. Second, why bring hope to the poor? People had been poor for generations and the Roman Empire made sure that they remained poor. Any hope would have been a false hope. They just had to keep on keeping on. And third, they wouldn't have wanted Jesus to stir up any trouble with the Roman soldiers by helping prisoners escape. This would just bring more injustices upon them. Already the soldiers took what they needed from them: food, clothing, money, and their children. When we understand their way of life, we understand their negative reaction to Jesus. "Please don't stir up any trouble. We are fine the way life is."

However, their reaction does not stop Jesus from fulfilling his mission. He is not going to be tamed or restricted by them. His mission is greater than their small town thinking. So he begins to teach and preach messages that were countercultural, revolutionary, and radical. One of the most subversive texts in the Bible is Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. We read selected portions of it this morning. These are hard texts for the people of the first century to hear, understand, accept, and live. They are still hard texts for us to hear, understand, accept, and live today. In this portion of the sermon, Jesus is reinterpreting the Law. His interpretations are even more challenging than the Law itself. His sermon does not portray a gentle, mild Jesus, a Jesus that is challenging the traditional interpretation of the Law. Let's look a few of these challenges.

In the first challenge Jesus states that being angry with someone, calling someone names, holding a grudge, and not being forgiving is as grievous a sin as murdering someone. His words cut too close to the bone, doesn't it? How many of us find ourselves in this kind of a situation every day? So here comes the self-examination. How many people have our words and actions knifed in the back this week? With whom are you angry? Who do you call names? Why are you holding a grudge against someone? Why can you not forgive? In his sermon, Jesus states that we cannot be in a right relationship with God until we make amends with those we hold a grudge or with whom we are angry. We are to seek forgiveness. "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Easier said than done. Why? Because we love being right, love putting another

down, love thinking we are better than another. This is an easy way to live. It is much harder to make amends, to acknowledge we could be wrong, to acknowledge that the other has value. Yet our culture honors leaders who spout words of anger and hate. Our leaders have become experts at demeaning each other with name calling, and holding grudges that last for generations. How does this kind of behavior impact us as people of faith? How does this impact us as a nation? How does this impact our world? Do we allow our politics to influence our faith or do we allow our faith to influence our politics? Jesus words are words of rebellion against a defensive, paranoid, hate filled, and self-absorbed culture.

The second challenge is about retaliation. Very young children understand getting back at another. One child takes a toy from another. The other will knock them down. This is more than “eye for an eye” retaliation. We usually want to hurt the one who hurt us more than we have been hurt. The “eye for an eye” has its place. Moses instituted this law to curb the retaliatory violence. It was customary that when someone hurt another, the one hurt might kill the entire family or village to get revenge. So an “eye for an eye” was meant to create a sense of fairness. But here again Jesus takes this to another level. He teaches we are to reject the temptation of retaliation. It only breeds more pain and can result in escalation. Where will all the pain and hurt end? Jesus challenges us not to retaliate but “turn the other cheek.” This smacks us in the face as being weak. Many fathers have taught their sons how to fight back against bullies. Jesus words are more than just a passive resistance. He is teaching us not to think of only ourselves, but to show love to the one who hurt us. Often Jesus spoke in parables and metaphors. With this teaching he wants us to seriously consider how to react when someone hurts us. How will we respond? Out of hate or out of love, out of revenge or out of forgiveness. So he goes on to talk about if someone wants something from you, give it to them, but give them more than they asked. Again, Jesus wants us to think about the other and not about ourselves. Jesus would say to the child who had his toy taken away from him, “Don’t knock him down, but give him another toy and another until he is satisfied.” Challenging? Overwhelmingly so! But what would it look like on a global level if tribes, communities, and nations sought ways to forgive and offer ourselves rather than retaliate? Is this even possible? For Jesus, the Kingdom of God looks like a place where people do not retaliate but try to figure out ways to respond with love. He showed this to us by not retaliating during his arrest, torture and crucifixion. He could have used the all the power in the entire universe to blow up planet earth out of retaliation, but he chose to be led to his death. God’s love for humanity was greater than Jesus’ personal well-being.

In the third challenge Jesus calls us to love your neighbor and your enemy. Pray for those who harass you, who harm you, who persecute you. What? If the first two challenges were hard to swallow, with this challenge we don’t even want to try to swallow. We want to just spit it out of our mouths and be rid of it. This third challenge goes hand in hand with the second one. Retaliation, vengeance and hate are kissing cousins. How can we love someone who has done us harm? Neighbors become enemies because we have harmed each other and we will not forgive because we are right. They are wrong. Again, our paranoid, defensive, self-absorbed nature comes into play. Jesus rebels against this kind of behavior. We are to be a people who do good and not do harm. When Jesus was asked who is my neighbor? To make his point about loving one’s enemy, he used an enemy of the Jews, a Samaritan to be the hero. He cares for his enemy, a Jewish man who was left to die on the road. This good Samaritan showed love to his enemy and even went the extra mile to see that the victim was restored to health.

As we hear, read, and study these difficult words of Jesus, we may want to rebel against him. We may think, “Who does this Jesus think he is, anyways? He asks the impossible from us. Can we really love and forgive everyone? Can we actually live in peace? Has he really lived in the world we live in? He just doesn’t know what it is like in the real world. To get ahead one has to trounce one’s opponents, right?” Jesus is about getting ahead, too, but he wants to get ahead by creating a peaceful, loving world, “on earth as it is in heaven.” Some may disagree with this statement or even be surprised. Jesus was not a Democrat or a Republican. These parties were not in existence during the time Jesus lived on earth. I am not promoting one political agenda over another. I am just a messenger. Don’t shoot the messenger! Jesus delivered The Sermon on the Mount as the alternative to the life we create for ourselves. Yes, God’s way is challenging. Yes, we can’t live up to it all the time. That’s why we need a Savior. This is why we need forgiveness and a new start. This is God’s unconditional love for us. We can only begin to live God’s way when we accept the unconditional love God has for us. As long as we think only of ourselves, we are both incapable of receiving God’s love and offering it to others. So who do you say Jesus is? And how do you follow his teachings in your daily life?

**Resources:** *The Renegade Gospel* by Mike Slaughter; *The Upside-Down Kingdom* by Donald Kraybill

