

April 26, 2020

Matthew 7: 7-8

Prayer: Dear Lord, we seek your face in these trying times. We ask for wisdom as we seek to reclaim our footing as Easter people. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

Finding Jesus on Our Own

Our message this morning comes from John. Not the gospel writer John, or John the Baptist. But John Prine.

John Prine was a powerful singer and songwriter who died from the coronavirus earlier this month. We've used his songs in here before when my son Taylor helped me illustrate "sung parables."

In one of his songs, Prine describes heroin addiction as a "hole in Daddy's arm where the money goes."

In another, he laments a paradise lost in rural Kentucky because "Mister Peabody's coal train has hauled it away."

In a song we've used at Triune previously, Prine described the challenges of growing old:

Old trees just grow stronger

old rivers grow wilder every day

old people just grow lonesome

waiting for someone to say, "Hello in there, hello."

But the song I want to talk about today is “Spanish Pipedream,” a whimsical tune written at the time of the Vietnam War. The narrator is a reluctant soldier making his way to Canada. Along the way, he meets a dancer in a nightclub, and she offers him advice on achieving happiness.

Zac? (Zac Bolton sings “Spanish Pipedream”)

Thank you.

Blow up your T.V., throw away your paper

Go to the country, build you a home

Plant a little garden, eat a lot of peaches

Try and find Jesus on your own.

It’s that last line that is so intriguing.

Try and find Jesus on your own.

What does that mean? Finding Jesus on your own?

The message of Christ is everywhere, pasted on billboards along the interstate and in shop windows in the mall.

In Greenville County alone, there are probably 400 churches proclaiming the gospel. You could stand on our corner, and providing you had the arm of Joe Namath, throw a rock and hit half a dozen of them.

But here's what would happen if you visited those churches: You'd find that everybody's Jesus is a little different.

Some would tell you that Jesus wants you to be wealthy and achieve worldly success.

Some would tell you that Jesus supports the Republican Party and is a staunch opponent of abortion and gay rights.

Some would tell you that Jesus favors the Democrats and would welcome immigrants and be a good steward of the earth.

And those differing opinions about who Jesus really is have existed across time.

If we go back 55 years, there were many churches that said that Jesus would never support equal rights for African Americans.

Go back another 100 years, and you would have heard that Jesus supported slavery.

Go back another couple of centuries, and you would have heard that Jesus believed the earth was the center of the universe, regardless of what science had to say.

Of course, the church ended up apologizing for its backward stance on the solar system, and for its hurtful stance on slavery. I am confident there will be apologies in our future for the people we are hurting today.

The problem is that we are intent on filtering Jesus through our human understanding, that we take our prejudices and judgments — our sin — and craft a version of Jesus that aligns with those beliefs.

And there is no shortage of churches that can tell us whatever it is we want to hear. You've heard the term "church shopping." So instead of our sin being removed by the power of Christ, it can be multiplied by the failures of the church.

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Which brings me back to John Prine. *Try and find Jesus on your own.*

Doing something “on your own” implies you do it without help from anyone else. So Prine seems to be saying if we want to find the true Jesus, it might be best to make the search ourselves, apart from the many strictures the church is so fond of.

As one who has staked a claim in the church, this is not an easy thing for me to contemplate. But, indeed, searching and finding is a common theme throughout the gospels.

In our Scripture reading for this morning from Matthew 7: 7-8, Jesus says, **“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.”**

As we celebrate the season of Easter, it’s a good time to remember what it is we are seeking and what we are hoping to find — the resurrected Christ.

We often make the mistake of believing that Jesus' life, death and resurrection was a once-upon-a-time event that happened 2,000 years ago. He rose from the dead, appeared to a few people and ascended to the Kingdom of Heaven to sit at the right hand of God.

Now the church is simply to commemorate that miraculous occurrence and wait for the second coming. Oh, and in the meantime, *believe this and do that. And stop doing that!*

But why would we think the resurrection is something that has no meaning beyond its singular place and time? Especially when we have seen how its power dramatically changed the lives of so many in the intervening centuries, how it changed the world.

According to our gospel stories, the twelve disciples understood almost nothing the earthly Jesus tried to teach them. Instead, they clamored to know who would be greatest in the kingdom of heaven. When the crucifixion drew near, Peter denied he even knew him. The others ran and hid.

But after the disciples encountered the resurrected Christ, they boldly faced death and laid the pillars of the early church, despite the personal danger that carried. They understood everything differently.

The apostle Paul never met the earthly Jesus. As a devout Pharisee, he persecuted the early Christians.

But once he experienced the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus, he understood and articulated the message of Jesus like nobody else before or since.

Paul didn't tell his readers that his encounter with Christ made him appreciate the sacrifice Jesus made, and so he spread his message. No, he said the resurrected Christ dwelt within him and gave him a new, radical knowledge, which changed how he viewed the world.

“I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it,” Paul wrote in Galatians. **“Rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.”**

The list is long of those who were traveling their own Damascus roads before their conversion experiences, everyone from Saint Augustine to Mother Teresa. The good news is the power of the

resurrected Jesus has not diminished over the centuries; it is as powerful today as it was 2,000 years ago. We just need find it for ourselves, to experience it for ourselves.

We gotta find Jesus on our own.

Before his death, Jesus told his followers that “**the kingdom of heaven has come near**” (Matthew 10:7) and “**I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven**” (Matthew 16:19). He said, “**I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture.**” (John 10:9)

Throughout the gospels, Jesus said he would leave this world and be transformed. He would open the gates of the kingdom to all those who found him in the resurrection.

But Jesus also said this in Matthew 7:14, “**...small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.**”

So this search of ours might require some effort. It might require more than adding our names to a church roll, or abiding by the philosophical or political leanings of the church we attend. It requires diligence to search for the risen Christ.

We might never gain the insight of a Paul or a Saint Augustine or a Mother Teresa, but that shouldn't stop us from searching. The late Thomas Merton, a 20th century American Trappist monk, recognized how challenging the path can be.

“I wonder,” he wrote, “if there are twenty men alive in the world now who see things as they really are. That would mean that there were twenty men who were free, who were not dominated or even influenced by any attachment to any created thing or to their own selves or to any gift of God, even to the highest, the most supernaturally pure of His graces.

“I don't believe there *are* twenty such men alive in the world. But there must be one or two. They are the ones who are holding everything together and keeping the universe from falling apart.”
(New Seeds of Contemplation)

Now that's a profound thought. In a world turned on its side, where lies are branded truth and false messages are lambasted over social media, the universe will hold together as long as the power of God remains in it.

If Merton is correct, we should be grateful to those few men and women who are still out there holding it together.

If there is one thing we have tried to do at Triune, it is *not* to be a barrier, an obstruction, a millstone, to anyone's search for Jesus. We have no dress code, no cleanliness code, no creeds to sign, no theology to swear to, no bumper stickers to hand out.

We try to welcome everyone: Black, white, brown, gay, straight, rich, poor, mentally healthy, mentally ill, mentally disabled. Those who love the church and those who are sick of it. Those who are gracious and those who get on my last nerve. In doing so, we hope to make the gate less small and the road less narrow.

I never want to tell you what you must believe. *I'd rather you find Jesus on your own.*

That's not as outrageous as it might sound. Martin Luther argued much the same thing in the 16th century when he challenged the authority of the Roman Catholic Church and sparked the Protestant Reformation.

He said that Christian believers could make their own personal connections with God. They could read the Bible on their own. They didn't need priests to intercede for them.

Luther just said it in more theological language than John Prine.

Perhaps it's not surprising that Luther would give the Christian faith back to the people only to have Protestantism splinter into so many denominations later on. We just can't help insisting that we — and we alone — know what Jesus really meant when he said the things he said.

In the end, when we find the true Jesus, our minds will be renewed, and we will be born again. We can live in the Kingdom of God that has come near, right here on earth.

So let's not settle for the Christ others would give us, the Christ bound by social conflicts of the day, whether they be slavery or the workings of the solar system. Let's find the Christ who transcends the conflicts of this world and whose power keeps the universe from flying apart.

At the end of “Spanish Pipedream,” the narrator and the dancer
decide to make a life together.

We blew up our T.V., threw away our paper

Went to the country, built us a home

Had a lot of children, fed 'em on peaches

They all found Jesus on their own.

May we, too, find Jesus in this Easter season.

Amen.