



Jesus: Vagabond

John 20:11-18

Rev. Thomas G. James

Washington Street UMC

September 10, 2017

Over the course of the coming month, we're going to be looking at identities that help us understand Jesus. Like Peter, who rebuked Jesus and mistakenly claimed his being the Messiah *shouldn't* lead to his persecution and crucifixion, I wonder how often we make false claims about Jesus' identity. How often do we mistakenly make Jesus out to be some heroic myth or storyteller's legend that accomplishes our self-fulfilling hopes and dreams? How often do we talk about Jesus and his purpose as the Son of God in ways that make us feel good about ourselves, but have little to do with the real incarnate Lord? Let us dispel some myths, push back against the false legends, and claim the true identity of the incarnate, Jesus of Nazareth, that we may be better disciples who share the good news of God in the world today.

The first thirty years of Jesus' life are a relative mystery to us. We have multiple accounts of the birth narrative, including some background information on the family to which Jesus was born. His father, Joseph, a carpenter, was betrothed to his mother, Mary, known only in the Scriptures as a virgin. His family lived in the blue-collar town of Nazareth. It's unknown how wealthy the family would have been, but it is unexpected that, as a laborer, Joseph wasn't providing in great abundance for the family.

After the birth story, the visitation of the Magi, and the escape to Egypt to avoid the slaughter of the innocents by King Herod, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus disappear for a while. Luke tells us the one story of Jesus as a pre-teen, where he is left by Mary and Joseph teaching a Bible-study in the temple. But we know little of Jesus' upbringing. We really hear nothing about Jesus until his arrival on the scene as a thirty-year old, when through the baptism by John the Baptist at the River Jordan, Jesus begins his teaching ministry.

For as little as we know about the first thirty years of Jesus' life, once he begins his teaching, we hardly miss a moment. It's like Jesus was the first reality pop-star. Every where he goes, everything he says, everyone he meets, even those isolated and personal side-stories like the 40 days in the wilderness and the crying out to God in the Garden of Gethsemane ... it's all recorded. (I wonder if Lazarus, Paul, the Samaritan woman, or Zacchaeus ever had to sign a waiver to allow their names to be included in the story.)

Jesus has a lot of ground to cover, a lot of sermons to preach, a lot of lives to heal, a lot of disciples to train – and he's going to do all of it in less than three year's time. It's no wonder that in Mark's gospel we find the word "immediately" used forty-two times to describe Jesus' actions. Everywhere Jesus goes, he's going in a hurry. There's a lot of work to be done and not a lot of time to do it in.

For the most part, what we know about Jesus comes from the narrative accounts of his life, found in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – known as the Gospels; they make up the first four books of the New Testament. “The gospels differ on aspects of [Jesus’ life], but they agree that Jesus lived his adult life as a wandering beggar, without visible means of support. He never had a job or had a proper home.”ⁱ He was, as we affectionately might call him, a vagabond.

Before we explore his life as a vagabond too deep, let’s make sure we are on the same page as to what we mean when we call Jesus a vagabond. Wikipedia defines vagabond in two ways: first, “a person on a trip of indeterminate destination and/or length of time,” and second, “one who wanders from place to place, having no fixed dwelling, or not abiding in it, and usually without the means of honest livelihood.”ⁱⁱ To say Jesus was a vagabond is by no means to say he was a menace to society; though, perhaps he was that too. To say Jesus was a vagabond is not to say that he was causing problems for the local governmental or societal leaders; though again, perhaps he did those things too. As we talk about Jesus as a vagabond, we are first and only saying that Jesus was a wanderer. He owned no place to rest at night, he held no occupational claim to an income stream, and at least as his ministry began, he claimed no specific place of final destination. “Vagabond Jesus went from place to place healing, teaching, finding food and shelter wherever it was pre offered.”ⁱⁱⁱ

As a vagabond, Jesus spend a lot of his time with those who were not favored by society. Being so well connected with them, and speaking on behalf of the divine, Jesus stood up for the poor – calling on his followers to feed the hungry, to give clothes to the naked, and to offer housing to the homeless. When he was around the wealthy and powerful, he pushed back on their understanding of God’s laws, often chastising even the ruling temple leaders for their lack of grace shown toward the outcast. As a vagabond – as a wanderer who travelled up and down the Jewish homeland – Jesus spent most of his time with those on the outskirts of town who were not welcomed by the elite.

But Jesus didn’t just live as a vagabond, he encouraged that kind of life among others. Not only did he travel with few self-owned resources, he encouraged such a life of those who followed him. When Jesus called his disciples to follow him, he invited them to leave behind all they had previously owned. “He told his followers to take no money, food, or protective staff, to be totally dependent on the kindness of strangers. ... They were not to be impeded with the baggage that the world considers as necessary.”^{iv}

Such a calling was not only what Jesus encouraged of his disciples, it was his go-to response when someone inquired what it meant to be faithful to God. In Matthew 19, we find the example of the young man who came to Jesus asking, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” At first, Jesus says, “Keep the commandments. Honor your mother and father; do no murder; love your neighbor as yourself, and so on.” The young man says, “Jesus, I have done all these things; what do I still lack?” And Jesus says to him, “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell all that you have and give the money to the poor. Then, come and follow me.” If you want to be perfect, as I, the Son of God am perfect – if you truly place your trust and hope in the hands of God as

you say you do – then give away all that society has told you to acquire, and follow me. Don't just sell it and keep the money to live on – sell it and give the money away too!

Scriptures like these are hard to reconcile in our lives today. So it's no wonder why, in reading for today's sermon, I found a number of online articles written from Christian authors, in which people tried to reject Jesus' identity as a vagabond. If we believe in Christ, if we profess faith in Jesus, if we yearn to be disciples of Jesus, then we should at minimum be attempting to live into the kind of life we believe Jesus invited us to live. If we claim that Jesus was a vagabond and that he encouraged his followers to live as vagabonds, then we should at least be making an attempt to live that life, yes? That's a hard call to take on.

To help us feel better about our lives that look nothing like the life of Jesus, or perhaps even to feel better about our lives that vary greatly from Jesus' teachings, what we often try to do is speak of God in non-descript ways. Instead of naming or articulating the hard truths of Jesus' teaching and the visible witness his life offers toward God's love – like claiming that Jesus was a vagabond – we speak abstractly about God. Instead of claiming the reality of the man through which the will of God was made known, we write Jesus off as a fabled myth or storyteller's legend from whom we can learn, but are exempt from imitating. "By rendering God into an abstract idea, we can be assured that we'll always be safe from God."^v

Such a refusal to accept Jesus for his witness and teaching as God's perfect example of love and truth causes me to wonder, how different would our perspective of God and faith be had God chosen to raise some other famous character from the dead instead of Jesus? Would we struggle to accept God's invitation to faith if the person we were invited to have faith in wasn't a vagabond? If God had chosen to raise Caesar from the dead and hailed him as the example of God's perfect love, would we have any problem trying to be just like Caesar? Would we have an issue seeking power, wealth, or prestige? I venture to guess that we'd have no problem trying to be like Caesar, because we rarely have trouble trying to live up to those who are hailed as champions and rulers in the world today.

I remember growing up as a multi-sport athlete and falling victim to the advertising of sports commercials. One of the marketing campaigns that I remember was when Michael Jordan began advertising for Gatorade. In the early 90s, Gatorade released a commercial with video snippets of Michael Jordan highlights intermixed with children playing sports, which included after-game clips of Jordan and these children drinking Gatorade. At the end of the commercial, there was a simple black screen with three words displayed, "Be Like Mike."

There's no question that every child who played basketball, from street ball to recreational ball, accepted the invitation of the commercial. We all want to be like those who are hailed as the heroes, as the champions, and as the superstars.

But in the invitation for us to understand the eternal will of the Creator, God didn't give us Caesar or Michael Jordan as the living witness of God's love. God chose Jesus as our example. "God raised the one who forgave his enemies, who reached out to the sinner and the outcast,

who stood up to the authorities, and who invited everyone to his kingdom. That One is raised [by God],”^{vi} and he is our example for faithful living.

If you want to know what God looks like, if you want to break the abstract mentality that allows for safe living and guiltless selfishness, if you want to know what the Creator really wants from the created and creation, look to Jesus.

The morning of the resurrection, Mary was at the tomb. She had come earlier in the morning and had found the tomb empty. She had run to tell the disciples who came to see the empty tomb for themselves. When they left, Mary had come back and is kneeling there at the tomb by herself in disbelief that the tomb is empty. Jesus appears before her, and the text indicates that when she realized who he was, she grabbed on to him. Perhaps she held him in a loving embrace, or perhaps she grabbed on to him in an attempt to keep him from leaving again. In response, Jesus says to her, “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to my Father.”

How like a vagabond who never seemed to want to stay in one place! Jesus was constantly on the move prior to the crucifixion, and he is not about to be held down now in the resurrection. Christ was now free – not only from death, but also from the limits those who loved him might want to impose on him.

A God who is on the move, a vagabond Jesus, is hard to nail down – and that can be frustrating. It can be hard to follow a Savior who never lets you have the final say. It can be difficult as a people who want to put down family roots to follow someone who isn’t willing to stay in any one place for too long. But that’s what makes God so wonderful. It doesn’t matter where you are, what your problems may be, how difficult a situation you may be in, God will go anywhere and will go to any extent to ensure you know the heavenly love of the Savior!

And try as you might, there’s nothing you can do to limit the Lord. “That’s why Christian thought and doctrine is never final, finished, and static. God is alive, in motion toward us, in movement beyond us, not only two thousand years ago but now. Jesus is a journey.”^{vii}

Joining the journey of Christ is the invitation of God. The invitation of God is not to fully understand the Lord; the invitation of God is not to control the Lord; the invitation of God is not to have the final say over what the Lord thinks or would do in any situation. The invitation of God is to follow the Lord. “If [Christ] is who the Scriptures say that he is, we’ll never completely grasp him, for he is bigger than our ability to hold fully on to him.”^{viii}

So then, instead of trying to make Jesus fit into something he isn’t – instead of trying to make Jesus fit into the socio-economic class we want ourselves to fit in – perhaps we should be asking what it looks like for us to be in fellowship with and following in the footsteps of the vagabond Jesus.

What does this first-century vagabond have to offer you that could make you, like the disciples, drop everything and follow? What does the Son of God have to promise you to convince you that giving up all you have to follow him is the best of all options? How good does God's highlight film have to be for you to accept the Biblical invitation to "Be Like (the vagabond) Christ?"

Friends, here is the good news of the Lord: just as Jesus never stopped wandering the earth in his teaching ministry as he sought to heal the sick, give sight to the blind, dine with the outcast, welcome the foreigner, converse with the lonely, embrace the broken, give peace to the grieved, or stand up for the unappreciated, even in his resurrection, Jesus said, you can't hold me down for my work is not yet done. The Lord is still in the practice of moving in the lives of humanity today. The Lord is still on the move to ensure that every person today knows the hope and the love of God today. The vagabond is still traversing the world offering new life to all, and you are invited to join in the vagabond's work. For the glory of God, may we accept the invitation. Amen.

ⁱ William H. Willimon. *Why Jesus?* Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010.

ⁱⁱ "vagabond." <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/vagabond>. Retrieved September 9, 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ Willimon.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Ibid.