

A Label-less Lord

To be haunted by the dangerous memory of Jesus is to allow him to enter our lives as he is, not as we wish him to be. To follow him as Rabbi and Lord is to embrace him on his terms, not on the terms we create for ourselves. It is a refusal of all the labels, all the boxes, and all the myriad ways in which we keep him at arm's length because we know that if we let him in, *everything* changes.

Jesus is the one who comes to us as a holy disruptor, upsetting the balance in our lives that prevents us from truly engaging him as our Lord and God. He is the one who calls forth from us the best that we could ever imagine. Those who met him in Nazareth understood how disruptive and challenging he can be. They knew that if they were to let him into their lives, nothing would be the same, and they would find themselves burdened by the glorious purpose of Jesus Christ, who calls forth from us the best that we could ever offer. And because their world was like ours in so many ways, they weren't comfortable with how he challenged them to be holier than they were yesterday. They weren't comfortable with the way he returned to his hometown and put all of them on notice. So, they resorted to the cheapest of tactics. *On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him.*

Buried within this gospel reading is an insult given to Jesus meant to discredit him and provide them a reason to ignore his deeds of power and words of transformation. *Is not this the*

carpenter; the son of Mary? The Son of Mary, **not** the son of Joseph. The son of *Mary*, who became pregnant with him before she was married. The son of Mary, a fatherless child. This is to say that all those who gathered and rejected him called him a *bastard*. I realize that that is an ugly word not usually fit for Sunday mornings, but it's necessary in order to feel the weight of their insult. Something about his words pierced their heart. Something about the way he carried himself challenged all the choices they made and all the systems they set up. Truly, he challenged their entire way of being. Because they knew that they could not stand toe to toe with him when it came to those deeds of power and those words of wisdom, they tried their best to denigrate him and reduce him to something *less than* in order to feel justified when they walked away from his offer of new life.

This was his hometown, so they were all aware of the strangeness of his birth. They hoped to prey upon his insecurities, on his own sense of self-worth. They hoped that calling him the son of Mary would not only give *them* a reason to reject him but also allow everybody else to reject him, too. They refused to receive him on his terms, and by boxing him in and reducing him to a fatherless child, they hoped to disrupt his own acts of disruption.

But here's the thing about Jesus: he can take the best we can throw at him right on the chin and not back down. He didn't bat an eye. He didn't shrink back from the insult. Rather, he leaned into his status as a disruptive prophet of God and returned words of challenge to the very people who tried to challenge him: *“Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.*” If these folks could see themselves now, they would recognize how utterly ridiculous they were being. By labeling him, they hoped to negate him. By labeling him, they hoped to

control him. Thus, they missed out on experiencing the fullness of his power, joy, and love. To the people out in the villages, on the outskirts of town, who weren't a part of the inner crowd, he sent his disciples to offer them the power that those in Nazareth rejected. For those who boxed him in, they experienced him as a curse. Yet, those who were willing to receive his wisdom as carried by his disciples experienced blessings beyond measure.

Now, I'm going to guess that none of y'all have ever referred to Jesus with such offensive and cheap insults. Yet, our challenge is to purposefully avoid behaving like the people in Nazareth who could not embrace his unparalleled beauty because they were too guarded. The same challenge remains to allow Jesus to come to us on his terms and to transform our lives, refusing to box him in with words, ideas, or labels that will enable us to keep him at arm's length. Discipleship is hard, yes indeed. Following Jesus is hard, absolutely! But would any of us say that our lives are worse because we have chosen to call Jesus our Teacher and Lord? Would any of us look at the source of our salvation and say, "No, thank you"?

Even still, I recognize and celebrate him as my Lord and God, and yet I know there are ways in which I continue to keep him at arm's length because I do not like the demands he places upon my life. He summons us to a life lived for others, and that challenges the lives of independence we so cherish. He summons us to a life lived for the sake of justice, and that challenges how we often prefer surface civility rather than engaging with the systems around us that keep boots on people's necks. So yeah, I get it. I get why those in his hometown resorted to insult and injury. They didn't like what he made them feel. Perhaps that's where we can find ourselves most connected to them.

However, as we see from the Scriptures and Church History, though the demands of Jesus may be hard, they can change the world. Those who have allowed Jesus to *truly* be their Lord

have transformed history, and we are still reaping the benefits of their labor. So, I implore you, beloved children of God, to make a new beginning of your discipleship *right now*. I implore you to embrace Jesus as he is, disruptive as he may be, so that you can take your place as one of those who will transform the face of the world in the name of and for the sake of Jesus of Nazareth. Let him into the secret places of your hearts so you can be filled with the same power and conviction that will not turn back in the face of hardship or rejection.

No more boxes, friends. No more justification for part-time discipleship. We together remain haunted by his dangerous memory, and we are the better for it. We can rise above all that would keep us from becoming our fullest and most powerful selves, but only if we choose to make it so.