

Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent

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A few years ago, I signed a petition acknowledging Christianity's poor record on racial justice. It seemed relatively straightforward at the time, that is until I got a phone call from a Christian man in Utica. He asked all sorts of questions, each with a rather heavy dollop of accusation barely veiled behind his aggressive words. Ultimately, he wanted to know how I, a priest, could suggest that his church had ever done anything that required repentance. Now, I made it clear that I'm an Episcopalian, and I asked why he didn't take this topic up with a minister in his own tradition, but that went about as well as you're imagining. While I didn't love the guy's tone, more than anything, what bothered me most was that he decided I was a part of something I wasn't and then judged me based on those standards. It wasn't fair, and it wasn't terribly kind. As conversations with strangers go, it was not what you might call "fun."

Obviously, there's a lot to unpack wrapped up in that not-brief-enough encounter. We could spend all morning talking about the Church's many errors throughout history. We'd need to break for lunch before spending the afternoon talking about the Church's ongoing errors today. There's a lot of hurt in this world caused by Christians, some in our own denomination, some in others. But the proposition that the Church has never treated another person badly or never taken steps in bad directions, that proposition is absurd. We're a human institution trying to make sense of a sacredness beyond comprehension. Of course we're gonna make mistakes. The question shouldn't be "Has the Church ever made a mistake?" It should be "How does the Church fix its mistakes?"

This is complicated stuff, I realize that. But I suspect most can see the distinction between God and us, God and our institutions. Actually, I think most need that distinction. We know enough about people to have experienced humanity at its best, and I want our institution to reflect that. But we also know enough about people to have experienced humanity at its worst, and I don't want to go anywhere near an institution that makes that a practice. St. Thomas', that's not us. We aren't perfect, but we strive to be humanity at its best with the Love of God as the epitome of our communal life. But that can't be said for everyone. There are far too many Christians and far too many churches like that guy that took me to task on the phone. It isn't fair to judge non-Episcopalians by Episcopal measuring sticks. But we can and should measure ourselves by those metrics.

I bring all this up because of a marketing campaign that's been swirling around for a while now. If you're a football fan, you probably saw the He Gets Us footwashing ads. The basic idea behind them is to market Jesus to folks that don't know about him or might've gotten the wrong idea somewhere along the line. For a long time, I've been in a live-and-let-live place with those ads. To me, they feel a little cheesy, but I've been fine with just letting them exist without giving 'em an extra thought. Then I found out the money behind the ads comes from folks with religious agendas very different from my own. The money comes from folks with the explicit rejection of things like the full inclusion of LGBTQ+ people. They'll tell you they welcome everyone, but that comes with the tacit understanding that everyone's welcome to join ... so long as they agree to change. But even that, even that I was *mostly* willing to set aside. I mean, that's not great, and I'm tired of being targeted, but mostly I thought I could ignore what my measuring stick had to say about how they do their own thing. And maybe, just maybe, someone would see an ad and think about learning more about Jesus and somehow find their way into our sanctuary. It hasn't happened to my knowledge yet, but I held out hope. But I should've listened to my gut.

After the Super Bowl, the He Gets Us ad campaign has come under pretty intense scrutiny. Some of that is a general resistance to Christianity, the exact thing the campaign aims to undo. Some is the rejection of organized religion, some is the acceptance of Christianity with a rejection of the supposedly "woke" depictions

of Jesus. And some of it is a rejection of that particular kind of Christianity. All that's fine, individual choices. But the scrutiny the campaign has received has unveiled some deeper problems. Many have raised the concern of how much a Super Bowl commercial costs to air. I've lost count of how many times I've heard "Couldn't that money have been spent on the poor?" For the record, while that is a Biblical question, it was Judas that asked that question of Jesus, but we shouldn't discount the question because of him. In fact, even back then it was such a good question that the Gospel writers had to explain that Judas didn't actually care about the poor but was trying to skim off the top himself. Anyway, spending the money on the poor absolutely is a good and faithful concern, and questions about the campaign's finances matter.

But even THAT I could almost stomach. It's oodles of money, but assuming you're doing the good work elsewhere, maybe it's not the worst thing in the world to do some advertising. And then news broke -- on Ash Wednesday no less -- that I cannot support. If you are interested in the He Gets Us campaign, you can go to their website and poke around with no problem. But it's all very vague. In order to get to the real meat of what they're about, you have to create an account and login. And here's where the trouble begins. Once you create an account, the campaign mines your data and sends it off to the political organizations they'd really prefer you be a part of. Now, I don't care which organizations they do this with, any data mining to sway you politically under the auspices of learning more about Jesus is an extreme misuse of what we hold sacred. I grew up being told that using the Lord's name in vain meant saying a specific pair of words when I hit my thumb with a hammer. Maybe I shouldn't cuss as much as I do, but I've come to have a different understanding of what it means to use the Lord's name in vain. I don't think it's about the occasional swear word. Using Jesus to sow hatred, *that's* using the Lord's name in vain. And if that's so, Christianity has a major problem right now. Thing is, I'm guessing most Christians can look at the world and the state of our shared religion and see cracks. But we disagree on where the cracks are. Some say we're evil for supporting gay people; some say the other side's evil for advocating for conversion therapy. Some say the poor will always be with us so we don't need to worry about them; some say the Church is meant to serve the poor. Some say God is only visible in a select few; and some say God is in every soul waiting to be seen.

So, how do we make sense of all this confusion in a world trying to confuse us? This isn't a new problem. The Old and New Testaments both are peppered with false prophets and bad leaders. But over in the Gospel according to Matthew, we get the secret. Jesus says, "Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits." Religion is a powerful tool, and people looking for power know that. It can be used for great beauty and kindness, but it can just as easily be turned to hatred and oppression. And it can be incredibly hard to tell the difference in the moment. Now, I realize that I'm talking myself into a tight spot here. I want to continue to measure He Gets Us by our standards for our purposes, but it's a fine line to step beyond that and start judging them by our standards for everyone's purposes. Does that make sense? I don't want other Christians telling us how to do Episcopal things, but it's real tempting to do the same thing back.

So these days, I'm having a real struggle. You see, what I love about the He Gets Us campaign is that it does have the potential to introduce, as they put it, "hurting people to Jesus." That's great and it's a very Christian thing to do. What I'm concerned with is which Jesus they're introducing, or better yet, if it even is Jesus. My problem is that these ads don't have much in the way of nuance. There isn't the important detail that there are many different denominations and many different ways to be Christian. And that means someone who knows very little about Christianity hears the loudest (and often most damaging) voices without caveat. And pretty quickly, all Christians get lumped together. This is not hypothetical. I've been spat on for representing things I do not believe. A mother once pulled her child away from me at a buffet because of what The Church has done to children. I've been mocked in the street for my collar and my life has been threatened for standing

between oppressors and oppressed. I know some of you are worried your friends will stop talking to you because of what other Christians do. I know some of you have children that don't want anything to do with the Christianity you're not even a part of.

I know this is hard, but y'all, we have a choice. We can let the world assume we're a part of something we're not, or we can differentiate ourselves. Some of that's conversation and education, hard things to do, no question. But some of that's being who we are. How can the world tell love wrapped in love from hate wrapped in sheep's clothing? The same way it always has: they will know us by our fruits. For God's sake, my dear people, love everyone, no matter how hard they are to love. Love the ones who hate us, love the ones who misjudge us, even love the ones that we're pushing so hard against. But loving the people doesn't have to mean we love what they do. If He Gets Us starts a conversation or gets someone through our doors, wonderful. But we can't trust that campaign to do our hard work for us. For one thing, they aren't selling what we're about. And for another, too much of the world doesn't even know what we're about.

I don't know, maybe I'm being too harsh on some fellow Christians. Maybe there's room to be lenient, and maybe they aren't using the Lord's name in vain by their own standards. But I remain skeptical. I've seen at least some of their harvest, and much of it is poison. I wish I could ignore them and focus on planting our own seeds, but their reach has become far too broad, and it threatens to subsume what we're about to a larger agenda. People of St. Thomas', remember what you are: the very fruits of a faithful community. You are sheep in sheep's clothing, the real deal. You are servants of God and servants of the poor. You love your neighbor without exception. You scoot to one side in the pew so anyone can sit beside you. You hold fast to what is true and what is good, and you put your faith not in a human demagogue but in God. Use that name faithfully, and your harvest will be great.