***DO YOU PREFER RED OR WHITE?***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

October 30, 2022

Texts: Isaiah 1:2-4, 10-20 and 2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12

A recent article in *The Washington Post* caught my attention with its title: “*A $100 million campaign aims to fix Jesus’ brand from followers’ damage*”. The fix that is offered includes billboards in several major cities with messages like “*Jesus let his hair down, too*” and “*Jesus went all in, too*.” According to Jon Lee, one of the chief architects of the campaign and a principal at a cross-cultural advertising agency based in Dallas:

*Our goal is to give voice to the pent-up energy of like-minded Jesus followers, those who are in the pews and the ones that aren’t, who are ready to reclaim the name of Jesus from those who abuse it to judge, harm, and divide people*.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Another participant, Jason Vanderground, described it as seeking to “*bridge the gap between the story of Jesus and the public perception of his followers*.” Their research suggests that the gap is wide; more than 2/3 of non-Christians, people who are “spiritually open”, and so-called “Jesus followers” agreed with the statement: “*Followers of Jesus say one thing, but do not follow those things in practice.*” Perhaps tellingly, only 5% of so-called “engaged Christians” agreed that is the case. They apparently see themselves as being more faithful than does the rest of society. As Vanderground describes it:

*Jesus said, People are going to know my followers by the way they love each other and the way they interact with each other.” I think when we look at American Christianity now, we don’t see nearly as much of that – and that concerns a lot of people.*

Do you share that concern – that Christians are much better at talking the talk than walking the walk of faith and faithfulness? Or are you among those engaged Christians who believe that unfaithfulness and hypocrisy are the exceptions rather than the rule among us? In several surveys of young people who have left the church, hypocrisy has ranked high among their reasons for doing so. Young people see a disconnect between what the church says they believe and how they live and treat one another. They hear, “Love your neighbor,” but find little evidence of that love in action and plenty of examples of less loving actions!

As we heard in the reading from Isaiah this morning, that problem is not a 21st century phenomena alone! In a scathing indictment, the Lord identifies a multitude of ways in which Israel, God’s own people, have failed to live up to God’s expectations for them; the people are full of iniquity, doing evil, dealing corruptly, forsaking the Lord, despising God, and making themselves utterly estranged. What is remarkable in this indictment is that, like the people in the survey, the people of Israel fail to recognize how far they have fallen. They have wrapped themselves in the trappings of worship, as if that was enough to satisfy the Lord. They offer their offerings and sacrifices and incense, lift to God their prayers with uplifted hands, and observe the holy festivals. What more could God ask of them! God’s response is to reject their worship, their sacrifices, and their prayers, for God demands more! They will not be able to placate the Lord with the form of faithful worship when they lack the substance of faithful lives. “*Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen*,” says the LORD, “*for your hands are full of blood!*”

Perhaps that description is literal in the violence the people are unleashing upon one another, or perhaps it is figurative, in the harm they are causing to others in their community and beyond. But in either event and perhaps more appropriately in both events, they are coming to God with bloodied hands that God finds unacceptable. Imagine that! You carve out time and space to offer to God your worship – you get up on a Sunday morning and come to church instead of hitting golf balls or sleeping in or binge-watching yet another series, and you sing the hymns or at least mumble some of the words, and you endure yet another sermon from the preacher, and you throw a few dollars in the plate on your way out – and God somehow doesn’t think that is enough! What more does God expect of you and me and of us, as individuals and as church?

*Wash yourselves! Make yourselves clean! Remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes! Cease to do evil! Learn to do good! Seek justice! Rescue the oppressed! Defend the orphan! Plead for the widow*! That is what God expects from you, says Isaiah. “*Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God!*” says Micah. That is what God expects of you. “*Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream*,” says Amos. That is what God expects from you. God expects you to be, not a Sunday morning Christian, but an everyday follower of Jesus, an obedient child of God who not only talks the talk but walks the walk of faith and faithfulness day after day after day!

What does that look like in practice? Apparently, it looks like the church in Thessalonica to whom Paul wrote, for he commends them for their growing faith, their increasing love for one another, and their steadfast faith during persecution. Paul holds them up as shining examples of faith and faithfulness because they persevere faithfully despite the challenges that arise day to day. It was not easy to be Christian in first century Thessalonica where support for Rome was strong, yet the Christians there did not compromise their faith or shirk in faithfulness. They persevered; somewhere along the way they learned to do good, to seek justice, and to rescue the oppressed as the Lord had urged the people of Israel to do!

They are not alone in providing those examples. Across the ages saints of the church have showed us what faithfulness demands in ways big and small. Saints are not those who are perfect. They are those who have responded to God’s call faithfully and have proclaimed God’s good news not only in what they said but in how they lived. Some of them are listed among those names on the insert in your bulletin who we will remember in our prayers today, but some of them too are sitting in the pew with you this morning, and some of them, believe it or not, just might be you if you dare to do as Isaiah suggests - cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend those at the margins of society.

Which of those two communities of faith we heard about this morning better reflects where you stand in faith and faithfulness these days? Are you more like Israel – faithful here in worship but not so much anywhere else? Or are you like the Thessalonians, persevering in faith and in faithfulness, growing in faith and consistently demonstrating love for all your neighbors? Or to put it another way – do you prefer red or white?

That may sound like a question asked by someone pouring the wine at a formal dinner – do you prefer red or white, the cabernet or the chardonnay? But in light of those words of the Lord spoken through Isaiah, the question raises a question of faith and faithfulness.

*Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow;*

*though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool,*

*says the Lord through Isaiah.*

Do you prefer the red of sin or the white of forgiveness? Do you prefer to keep doing what you are doing, knowing that it is not what God wants you to do, and continue to worship God with bloodied hands? Or will you repent, as Isaiah urges, and accept God’s forgiveness that washes away the blood from our hands and the sin from our hearts?

It might be accurate to say that we are less red or white than a nice rosé – a pink that reflects a mix of faithfulness and unfaithfulness. Truth be known, some of us like it that way. We are loathe to give up ALL our sinful ways, but hope that in giving up the worst of them and doing some faithful things, we might be a little less red with sin and a little more white with forgiveness. But Isaiah does not urge the people to be cleaner – he urges them to be clean. He doesn’t urge them to remove most of the evil from their actions, but all of it. He doesn’t urge them to do good MOST of the time; he urges them to DO GOOD! It is the consequence of loving God with ALL your heart and ALL your soul and ALL strength and loving your neighbor as yourself. God asks us to be ALL IN on faith and faithfulness, as echoed by that billboard: “*Jesus went all in, too*!” For anything less is not being MOSTLY faithful; it is being unfaithful! That is why the Israelites worship was unacceptable to God; it is why people outside the church see those in the church as hypocritical; it is why the Christian brand is in need of some fixing. No billboard is going to fix it; we are the ones called to fix it, by living into what we say we believe. For, we are called to be ALL IN – to not only talk the talk but to walk the walk of faith and faithfulness within these walls and outside these walls, on Sunday morning and Monday morning and Saturday night too! That is what saints do – and we are all called to be saints – all of us are called to be saints! Amen

1. Bob Smietana, “A $100 million campaign aims to fix Jesus’ brand from followers’ damage”, *The Washington Post*, October 15, 2022, p.B2 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)