

## (W)Holy Men

My first 'big' sermon was titled Jesus vs. the Superhero. For better or worse, I still think it is one of my best, but that's a story for another day. My point was, that we want Jesus to swoop in to our rescue, like, well, Superman. But that would mean that Jesus, like Superman, would have to overlook all of the people who get knocked about, blown up, along the way.

Our thoughts on Jesus are confusing, and really, really inconsistent. On the one hand, we want Jesus to rescue us, pick us up in his strong arms, but we aren't sure we want Jesus to have a body. We want him to be strong, which we collapse into masculine, but we say that he was meek and mild. Traditionally we paint Jesus as soft and gentle, almost feminine, yet feminine language or genuinely feminine imagery for Christ is uncomfortable for us.

I think our images of what it means to be a man, in particular a white man, in this moment is as fuzzy as our idea of what kind of man Jesus should be. As a culture we are telling white men to give up one paradigm, but we aren't being very clear about what to replace it with, and we certainly aren't being very clear about why a new model of masculinity would be good news for men.

But we need to. And quickly. Even as we have more dads involved in the raising of children, staying home, cooking meals...at the very same time, we have increasing evidence that sexual assaults are on the rise. Not just the famous ones. The numbers are true on airlines, in the military, on campuses. The rise of the white nationalist alt-right is, many psychologists and sociologists feel, a response to men having their sense of identity taken away. It is, fundamentally, an attempt to know themselves. A terrible, misguided and sinful one, but still.

Now, to be clear, I am sure that changing roles in society for men is good news for them. I don't feel bad that white men are no longer holding all of the reins of power. But I do have empathy with the sense of bewilderment I imagine accompanies that. Which is not the same as tolerating the terrible behavior or having patience with unwillingness to grow and change.

So, what is the good news that Christians, Christian men in particular need to hear and have to share in these bad times for men? First, we have to ask ourselves what Jesus we want to build our model upon. Unless we know what Jesus we are talking about, how can we ask men to follow Him as a role model?

Jesus hung out with lots of women. He included them in ministry, valued their thoughts. I would argue he even showed himself to be a bit of a flirt, at least once in the Bible. Jesus never raised a hand to anyone. He was not a violent man. There's that turn the other cheek bit. We've always heard that as evidence that Jesus is saying to take whatever comes your way. There's that meek and mild Jesus. But, culturally, that was not what this meant. As Jesus describes it, he is advocating that you highlight someone's (Rome) inappropriate behavior by publically shaming them. Turning the other cheek on your aggressor would have shown them to be less of a man. Not violent, but not so meek and mild, either...

Jesus was also perfectly comfortable feeling his feelings. Jesus wept. Jesus shriveled the fig tree out of sheer frustration. He held his emotions on, shall we say, a moderate leash. He was determined, though not stoic, and his anger at injustice always, always propelled him to action for his people.

Jesus was either the best or the worst provider imaginable. Follow me. I have no money and I'm on no schedule and no one is going to pay me. But I'm sure we will eat and find a place to stay. No wonder he wasn't married, he would

have been a terrible husband by pretty much any standards ever. And, he doesn't seem to care at all about a good work ethic. Good soul, good intentions, right action, but not so much about going to work. He seems to have given it up entirely and encouraged his best friends to do the same.

Jesus was, certainly, a protector. He made the case for a bloodless revolution, because a bloody one would only cost the lives of his people. He protected women and children, but not because they were inherently vulnerable. More because he recognized that the culture around them *made them vulnerable*. He was relentless. No matter how many times people tried to silence him, he had a mission and a purpose, and he just kept at it.

Jesus has had quite the makeover. Several makeovers. He has been turned, on the one hand, into a pushover who will just hug everyone saying 'love' and 'forgive' without asking for any action. On the other, he has been turned into a card carrying member of the NRA who will blast anyone who disagrees with this version of him to hell. Both versions of Jesus are, I believe, sinful. And they send men into a wilderness of impossible and irrational choices.

In an NPR story reported by Jonathan Levinson for Oregon Public Radio, he was exploring these shifting ideas of masculinity. Middle class income has become increasingly elusive, automation replaces workers (and largely male ones), male dominated industries taking the greatest hits from the process of automation. Society is simultaneously becoming more pluralistic. The Mayberry image of men as the providers, breadwinners, and protectors no longer seems as essential. And if men are not essential in this way, what are they to be? The answer, increasingly, is to replace a good middle class income with a deep dive into gun culture and a longing for lost whiteness. See, if they are saving 'us' from a loss of

culture and protecting 'us' from enemies, they are essential again. That seems to be the underlying story.

I know that I am not talking about the men in this room. But I am hoping to speak with and through you. We need to understand what is happening around us, even if it is not happening to us. And, even though our family members may not have joined the alt-right, we are all feeling the results of the shift in roles. We need to help others understand, too.

How is that good news? We have a model for maleness that is life sustaining, nurturing, strong, independent, and brave. It's all there in the gospel, but these weird versions of Jesus seem to have taken over. And that is possible because we have not been doing our job of providing a meaningful, visible, welcoming alternative. We have to. And we need to do it *right now*.

I know – I know that we have cousins, nephews, family friends, who are falling victim to this literal no-man's-land, where an old way of being is gone and a new way has yet to appear. Modelling an authentic Jesus-centered way of being in the world is a prophetic life choice. It is less about what you say, and more about what you do, when you do it, and if you are completely comfortable with following a Jesus model – and no other – regardless of who is there to see. It helps to talk about it, too though.

Think what it means to younger men right now to have people – especially other men – to work through this time with. To have men to say 'you are so lucky to not have to be Ward Cleaver or Superman. Man, I wish I could have spent more time with my kids when they were little.' Or, 'no one says you have to be a saint, or make a million dollars. But I'm sure Jesus isn't okay with you being a jerk.' Or, 'treat women the way Jesus would.' Maybe, 'do you honestly believe Jesus would

want you to act like that?' 'Jesus stood up to tyranny. So, I will too. Course, Jesus didn't say become a tyrant. So, I'm not doing that. Neither should you.'

The term 'toxic masculinity' gets tossed around a lot these days. The thing about toxins is that even a little exposure can do a lot of harm. We are all being exposed, to varying degrees. I think we are less exposed, but that makes us better able to see the symptoms and help others who are. And if we do not do our bit...we have seen in history where this twisted version of Jesus leads us. Perhaps Jesus as he is, not as he has been spun, is the one model that can guide men to what comes next.

Men, we need you to be like Jesus. You don't have to die to protect us, or become a martyr. You don't need to be a pushover, you don't need to be stoic. We need you to be unafraid of your strength and unafraid of your vulnerability. We need you to help other men more lost in the toxic cultural soup than you are. Fish them out. After all, Jesus specifically asked that you be fishers of men. Amen.