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Matthew 10:34-39

GIVING UP NICE GUY JESUS

We normally conclude the scripture readings with the words, "This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God." But did you just hear that reading from Matthew's gospel? Do we really want to say, "thanks be to God" for such a troubling passage? These words of Jesus are so disturbing! "Do not think I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." Or then, "For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother." And then, "Whoever loves mother or father or son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me."

What happened to Nice Guy Jesus? What happened to the guy who spoke about love, the one we see in the paintings holding little children on his knee or cradling little lambs in his arms? What happened to Nice Guy Jesus who went around making sick people better?

What if Nice Guy Jesus never really existed? What if Nice Guy Jesus is a creation of our imaginations? Now I don't mean to imply that the Jesus we follow was mean or cruel. But I do wonder if the Christian Church down through the ages has crafted Jesus in our own image--or in the image we would most prefer. How much of our image of Jesus is something Christians have created to confirm our own preconceptions? I do believe we Christians have tamed Jesus in a whole lot of ways, and made him more palatable to our sensibilities. We come to worship in our quiet sanctuaries to hear about a Jesus who is warm and loving and pleasant and who asks very little from us.

Here is a question I think is worth considering: would we even like Jesus if we were to meet him? I mean, really, would we? Because Jesus was a handful. He spoke the truth, the hard

truth. He challenged prevailing social norms. He disturbed power structures. He was an agitator. He was an agitator. That's a word we hear used against people today who stand up against social problems. They are smeared with the word "agitator." Well, Jesus *was* an agitator--an agitator for the Kingdom of God. And you can't agitate without creating conflict.

That word "conflict" does not sit well with us. Most of us will do our very best to avoid conflict. We think of conflict is the opposite of "being nice." And we want to be nice. Nice people don't create conflict. Nice people try to get along. We've all been taught to be nice.

But not by Jesus. Jesus taught us to be loving. Jesus taught us to be kind. Jesus taught us to be generous, to be grateful, to be compassionate, to be forgiving and merciful. But he did *not* teach us to be nice. If what we mean by "being nice" is that we don't ruffle any feathers, that we don't make any waves, that we just try to keep things pleasant.

That is not being nice. That is ignoring the realities of suffering and evil and wrongdoing. Conflict is not a dirty word. Conflict happens when you have two opposing forces. There is good conflict and bad conflict. When you think about warfare, we can easily see how that kind of conflict between nations causes tremendous harm and suffering--the kind of thing we want to avoid. But then think about the conflict that was necessary in the Civil Rights Movement, or when opposing child labor, or when advocating for women's right to vote. In such cases, justice and goodness could not take place without conflict.

Genuine peace is not achieved by everyone "being nice." According to South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu, "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor."

Jesus does not teach us to be hateful or violent or cruel. But he does teach us that there is no place in the Kingdom of God for our bland "niceness."

The Kingdom of God is a big concept, so it may be helpful to narrow down a bit what we mean when we talk about the Kingdom of God, or the Way of God. There are two scripture passages I think help sum up what it means to live in the Kingdom of God. The first is from the prophet Micah when the prophet states, "what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." And then Jesus offers a similar message when he gives the great commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

These two passages reveal to us the demands made upon us by the Kingdom of God. Big demands. These demands require our loyalty over and above everything else in our lives-- even over and above our loyalty to family. And that is really hard for us to hear. Family is important to most of us. And it was especially important to the people of Jesus' day. Family was the most important social institution in Jesus' world. But here Jesus tells his followers that our loyalty to the Kingdom of God--to the love of God and to the love, justice, and mercy toward our neighbor, no matter their skin color, their gender, their orientation, their social status, immigration status, whether they are an enemy or friend. This Way of God, demands our ultimate loyalty over *everything*. Jesus isn't asking us to follow him over and against the *worst* things in society but even over and against the *best* of society. He makes very heavy demands. It is what it means to be a Christian, and to walk with Jesus.

And if we are to be faithful to those demands, then we had better expect conflict. When frigid air from the Arctic meets up with the hot humid air from the Gulf of Mexico, we can expect volatile weather. Jesus prepares his followers for volatile weather. When the way of the Kingdom of God meets up with the way of the world, there will be conflict and divisions. There

will be conflicts and divisions in society when Jesus' followers adhere to the Kingdom God and there will be conflicts and divisions in our families when we adhere to the Kingdom of God.

Following Jesus is not about being nice, so Jesus warns us we had better not expect nice responses from those around us. And so the question we Christians have to answer, the question you and I have to answer for ourselves is: are we willing to give up Nice Guy Jesus to truly live in the Kingdom of God?