

# Out of This World

John 15:18-27

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

January 15, 2023/Second Sunday of Epiphany

---

Last Sunday, I said that these first two Sundays of the Faith Questions series were kind of a two-part sermon.

Last week was a plea for kindness and grace, for taking Paul seriously when he said that without love, all the things that churches tend to fight about (spiritual experience, doctrine, ethics) is just a bunch of noise.

This week, we're talking about if it's possible for the church to hold unpopular views and still present Jesus in an attractive way.

Because we still do hunger for the truth, don't we? The truth of the matter, the truth of *any* matter, *matters* to us.

We are truth-seeking creatures. At our best, we don't want to just believe whatever makes us feel good or whatever is convenient.

Now, I say this acknowledging that we are not always at our best. But *at our best*, we do want to know what is real and to order our lives accordingly.

So, today's question: Can the church still call people to hard things, to name uncomfortable truths even while pointing to the goodness and beauty of Christ?

The short answer is. Yes. And we must. But how?

\*\*\*

I began the Faith Questions series this year by saying that even in a series like this, sermons should always proclaim good news. No good news, no sermon.

This Sunday's text does *not* sound like good news. It begins, ominously, thus:

If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.

Um. Pardon? I'm not really interested in being hated. I like to be liked. Probably more than I should.

If Jesus is trying to recruit people to his cause, this is a terrible sales job. "If you follow me, you'll be hated" sounds like awful news, not good news.

The people who put together the Revised Common Lectionary seem to agree. This week I did a search to try to find some commentary on this passage, and I saw that the only part of John 15 that *isn't* read in churches around the world that follow the prescribed readings is this one.

Jesus says hard things sometimes. It sometimes amuses me how the lectionary avoids some of these hard things.

But before I get too high and mighty, I should note that we all do this.

A few minutes ago, we recited some beautiful and ambitious words as we welcomed Karl and Ramona into membership.

We talked about the encouragement, joy, comfort, guidance, gifts, and the mutuality that come with being part of the body of Christ.

One thing we didn't do was tell them that they were going to be hated. I doubt many of us heard this at our baptisms or any membership Sunday.

I have preached on this passage precisely zero times in fourteen and a half years of pastoral ministry.

So, why this text?

I chose this text for the simple reason that Jesus seems to think that his followers will not always fit in the world. There will be a contrast between those who profess allegiance to Christ and those whose allegiance lies with "the world."

As Christians, we will not always be loved and admired and respected, much as we might like for this to be the case.

Now, no sooner do I say this than I must also say that this passage is *not* saying that we can just pick whatever issue animates us in the life of faith, go to war over it (speaking metaphorically), and then claim that we are hated for Jesus' sake.

Being "hated for Jesus" is kind of the ultimate trump card to play, in some ways.

And even beyond church discussions, we live in a broader cultural context where the word "hate" is tossed around extremely casually, particularly online.

It's not at all uncommon to hear people accuse others of "hate" if they express disagreement around some controversial topic (usually around some category of identity—race, gender, and sexuality).

There is moral and cultural currency to be gained by claiming to be "hated" or labelling your opponents "haters." Perhaps this has always been the case, even if it seems uniquely so now.

I don't think any of this is what Jesus is talking about in John 15. If we are hated, it should be for the right reasons.

\*\*\*

So, what are the right reasons? Well, we might start by asking a simple question: Why was Jesus hated?

Well, it wasn't because he was a decent, tolerant, kind, inoffensive respectful citizen of a twenty-first century democracy.

Jesus wasn't crucified because he was nice, even if we often seem to implicitly think this was the case.

Sociologists of the twenty first century west often say that most people's default religion is what's referred to as Moral Therapeutic Deism.

1. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
2. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.

3. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
4. Good people go to heaven when they die.

This is how many people—even many Christians—think about God.

But this not what Jesus taught. And it is not how Jesus lived.

The world *did* hate Jesus.

They hated the threat that he posed to business as usual. They hated the threat that he posed to religion as usual.

They called him a blasphemer, refusing to believe the claims that he made about divinity. They hated the way that he prioritized people over the law, how he claimed that his teachings superseded the law.

They hated the way he obliterated boundaries between people, between the righteous and the unrighteous, the clean and the unclean, the sacred and the profane.

They hated what he had to say about turning the other cheek, about loving even enemies, about being persecuted, about forswearing violence for the cause.

They hated the way he could not be managed and controlled. They accused him of sedition for being disloyal to the empire.

And of course, ultimately this ugly collusion of religion and empire killed him.

There was more going on, on the cross, than just human wickedness. We know that in some mysterious way God was working out God's own purposes on the cross, that Jesus was, in an important sense, born to die.

But on a purely human level, to borrow the words from the Christmas song Joy to the World, earth received her king very badly.

\*\*\*

What about our time and our place? In what ways might we who follow this Jesus be a poor fit in this world?

I think if there is one broad message that will make followers of Jesus hated in our time and place it will be for the challenge the gospel poses to the false god of the subjective human self as the centre of all moral and political reflection.

Followers of Jesus claim that there is a law of love and a God that transcends the self. That the point of a human life is not to be true to yourself, but to be true to the God who made you, to be conformed to the image of Christ.

This is not a popular message. I know this. I *feel* this, even as I say the words. It runs against a very powerful cultural script. The self is the most cherished idol of our time.

But Jesus says hard things to the self. He talks about taking up a cross and following. He says that ultimately, we must die to ourselves.

Last Monday at the jail, one of the guys asked me about that passage where Jesus says that anyone who does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, *even their own life* cannot be his disciple.

“What does that mean?”, he asked me. “I thought Jesus was against hate.”

I gulped and looked at the clock on the wall and pondered the feasibility of calling time a bit early. Sadly, we had a full twenty minutes left for me to squirm.

Eventually, I said, “Well, sometimes Jesus said things in extreme ways to be provocative. But I think he’s talking about priorities. Jesus has to come first, ahead of all other allegiances.”

The guy shook his head. “Wow. You know, I get it. I want that to be me. But I just don’t think I can do that. At least not yet. My kids, they come first.”

I assured him that this was among the hardest of Christ’s teachings, that all Christians struggled with this, that I struggle with this.

But I can’t just cut it out of my bible. I’m not the Revised Common Lectionary. ☺

Any religion that has at its very centre a crucified God and which calls its followers to imitate that kind of love cannot *possibly* be reduced to belief in a kind of impotent and

uninvolved God who hopes that we'll all be nice to each other and have positive self-esteem.

You could hardly imagine a more “worldly” religion than Moral Therapeutic Deism.

As Jesus makes clear in our reading today, his followers have been called *out* of this world (John 15:19).

Those of us who follow Jesus are a poor fit in the world as it is presently arranged. At least Jesus seems to assume that we should be.

\*\*\*

So, what is the good news today. Can there possibly be good news in being hated by the world?

In the eighth chapter of John's gospel, Jesus said that if his disciples held to his teaching, they would know the truth and that the truth would set them free. A few chapters later, he declared, “I am the way, the truth and the life.”

Christians have always believed that somehow the truth is a *person*. And that this person is the source of both freedom and life.

The good news is that we do not have to be our own little gods. We're pretty terrible at it, for starters. And it's not going so well for us.

Many people in our world—particularly younger people—find the expectation to be constantly defining and validating and projecting themselves to the world around them to be paralyzing, exhausting, and anxiety-inducing.

It is very often not experienced to be a source of freedom but bondage. So many in our culture are depressed, anxious, addicted. Deaths of despair are exploding.

I read yesterday that opioid overdoses leading to death have doubled in America over the past two years. Some of this is undoubtedly related to the pandemic. But I think it goes far beyond this.

It speaks to the crisis of our time. It speaks to the absence of meaning and connection and belonging experienced by so many. It speaks to the dead ends of this relentless demands of a society arranged around the endless demands of the individual self.

We were not made to be our own gods. Jesus saves us from this dead-end cultural script.

Jesus was hated, certainly. But it tended only to be by those with cultural power, those who had little interest in the world being different than it was (which served their interests well).

You know who didn't hate Jesus? Sinners. Those who were out of options. Those who had come to the end of themselves.

Sinners were drawn to him like a magnet. To them, Jesus was a source of mercy, of grace, of belonging, and of a love like no other.

These things will always be attractive.

If we are to be hated, let it be because we stubbornly insist upon pointing beyond the self as the centre of all things, and toward this mercy, this meaning, this belonging, this radical call, this grace, this love like no other. This Jesus.

Amen.

