

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
The Rev. Dr. John Judson
“Alive in the Adventure of Jesus: Exception-al Christians”
Rev. Dr. John Judson
February 19, 2017

Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 16:13-28

I was trying to figure out how to help him. His reading was coming along but there were moments when he was clearly stuck and I wanted to figure out a way to help him move forward. Some of you may, or may not know, that one of the things you let me do each week is to go out to Alcott Elementary School and spend an hour or so working with First Graders on their reading. Several weeks ago as I was working with one boy I could see that he was “getting it.” But he needed a bit more help decoding some words which contained two vowels in the middle. My first thought was, “when two vowels go a’ walking... the first one does the talking.” Ah, I thought to myself, here is a rule I can teach him that will set him up for success. Yet as he and I continued, I began to realize that this was not a hard and fast rule. In fact, there are lots of exceptions. So I demurred, teaching him that rule, for fear that I would send him down the wrong path without his teacher having the ability to set him straight and keep him from getting in trouble with his reading.... which is in some ways, where Peter finds himself in this morning’s story.

I realize that may sound a bit strange but bear with me. Peter, somewhere in his life, was taught a set of rules...not of pronunciation or phonics, but of messiahship. He had learned what to look for in the messiah, the one who was to come and save God’s people. This person was supposed to be charismatic, drawing people to himself. He was supposed to be someone imbued with power; power which was capable of fulfilling the prophecies of Isaiah and others. He was supposed to be someone who had wisdom which would help people align themselves with God’s law; with the Torah. He was supposed to be someone who would claim the Kingship of Israel and lead the people to victory over their oppressors. And in Jesus he saw all of these things. He saw charisma, crowds, power and wisdom. All that was missing was for Jesus to bring all of this to completion. Little wonder then that when Jesus asked the question, “Who do you say that I am?”, Peter, sitting in the front row of the class, says, “Call on me! Call on me! You are the messiah.” Peter knew the rules. He knew that Jesus was the messiah. The only problem was that Jesus, while being the messiah, was the exception to the rules.

Jesus makes clear almost immediately how much of an exception he was. As Matthew retells it, *“From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.”* Peter then goes ballistic. This was not part of the messianic rule set. This was not the way things were supposed to work. Jesus had it wrong. Peter had it right. Messiah’s were not supposed to suffer and die. Messiahs were supposed to be winners and not losers. Messiahs were supposed to overwhelm their enemies not be arrested by them. As Peter tries to explain these rules to Jesus, Jesus turns on him in one of the most famous lines in scripture, *“Get behind me Satan...you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”* Peter knew the rules. What he failed to

realize was the Jesus was not going to follow those rules. He was the exception. And not only was Jesus the exception, but Peter and his followers were to be exceptions as well.

Jesus' disciples, his followers knew the rules for following the messiah. It meant victory. It meant positions of power. It meant wealth. It meant victory. Just as today when people back a candidate for office and expect something in return, a cabinet post, an ambassadorship, or perhaps simply access and influence, and the followers of Jesus expected the same. Their lands would be returned. The Romans would be gone. You get the picture. These were the rules. But Jesus tells them that those rules do not apply. That his followers were in fact supposed to be the exceptions. *"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?"* Jesus' followers were not going to be victorious, they were going to be executed. They were not going to be powerful, they were going to be powerless. They were to be the exceptions to the messianic discipleship rules.

What this means for us, my friends, is that we too are to be exceptions, which is where things get a bit dicey. I say things get a bit dicey because we are not living in the First Century. We are not living under Roman occupation. We are not a persecuted minority. We live in a country in which the vast majority of people profess to be Jesus' followers. We live in a country in which many of the prevailing rules are in alignment with our faith. So what then does it look like for us to be the exception? What does it look like to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus? What does it look like to be exceptional Jesus' followers at home, at school, at work or at play? I wish I could give you some simple rule to follow but I can't. What I can say though is that I know it when I see it. I see it in the signups for SOS down the hall. I see it every year in the mitten tree, on Church World Service blanket Sunday, when we turn in our One Great Hour of Sharing Banks. I see it in the ethical manner with which those you in the working world operate in ethically responsible ways, treating your employees and co-workers with respect. I see it in the way you give your time, talents and treasure not only to this church but to causes that change lives here and around the world. I see it in this church where we welcome all people as brothers and sisters. I see it in the many exception-al ways you choose to look to the needs of others, rather than to respond to the call of culture to always put your own needs and desires first.

My challenge for you then is, to ask yourselves, "How am I being an exception-al Christian, in the ways I choose to deny myself, take up my cross and follow Jesus."