

A Nice, Respectful, Popular Faith –

“For whoever would save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life, for my sake and the sake of the good news, will find it.” – Jesus of Nazareth

I was listening to a local Christian radio station a couple of days ago and a pastor was recounting his experiences with a Christian missionary in China, where the Christian faith can lead to imprisonment, rejection, and other forms of abuse. He asked the missionary what he and others here in the U.S. could do for the Christians in China. The missionary replied, “Pray that we don’t become like the church in the United States.” I was driving at the time, and at these words I literally pulled over into the nearest parking lot. What was this all about? Where was this man going? What the missionary meant was that we’ve come to take a lot for granted, and that the Christian faith here is understood as being synonymous with being civil, or polite, or NICE. Instead of being something that challenges our interests and our wants, it’s treated in most communities as a standard part of being a “team player,” something that you participate in not because of a passion or deep conviction, but because it’s something the neighborhood does and it’s something that people will respect you for doing. God’s love and mission is not something we are told to anticipate being popular, or even respected. Paul talks about being “fools for Christ,” for a reason. When we look at faith as something that is safe and sensible, we may just be missing something. While it is disheartening and disappointing when segments of society express resistance or even hostility to the radical grace and reckless trust that Christianity embodies, it should also remind us that this tension is something that SHOULD exist. Sometimes, people of faith say, “It would be so much better and easier for Christians if we could all be in the church.” Easier? Ya sure. Better? Well.....

Blessed are you when others hate, exclude, insult and reject you on account of the Son of Man”

I remember a course that I took in seminary on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.. We were honored and privileged to meet and speak with several courageous men and women who stood alongside Dr. King in his work for justice. While it can be debated whether or not he was an actual, official “prophet,” his work was certainly prophetic; and he is remembered as a prophet by probably millions in this nation and around the world. I remember one particular class when we talked about a felt need for someone to rise up and assume the mantel of leadership and continue where Dr. King left off. We talked about various black leaders who currently are national household names. When Rev. Jesse Jackson was mentioned, since he did work some with Dr. King in the 1960s, one of our guests, a veteran of the civil rights movement, said, “If Jesse were really following in the path of Martin, he wouldn’t still be here.” I’m not writing this to say anything personal about Jesse Jackson, but to sure the point that man was making – when you truly follow the path of Christ and share his life with others, there will always be people who won’t stand for it.

For all that can be said of the church bearing an image as a safe, nice, established, respected, predictable group or movement in the community, we are a body called to

share a life that is a radical departure from the standard rule of living in a way that saves one's own neck. The old slogan says, "Drive carefully – the life you save may be your own." Christ tells us, "The only life worth anything is a life that you are willing to lose."

Below are the words to the song, "God's Own Fool," by Michael Card

*It seems I've imagined him most of my life
As the wisest of all of mankind
But if God's holy wisdom is foolish to man
He must've seemed out of his mind
Cause even his family said he was mad
And the priests said, "A demon' to blame."
God in the form of this angry young man
Could not have seemed perfectly sane.*

*We in our foolishness thought we were wise
He played the fool and he opened our eyes
We in our weakness believed we were strong
He became helpless to show we were wrong
So we follow God's own fool
Where only the foolish can tell
Believing the unbelievable
Come be a fool as well.*

*Surrender the hunger to save ourselves
And the courage to say, "I believe"
The power of paradox opens our eyes
And blinds those who say they can see.*