

Good news that isn't sweet

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There had to be something more to Jesus.

I wanted to find texture, nuance, even anger in the Lord. But what I got was more sugar. It was Sunday school. It was the South. And in Dixie, both black and white Christians tend to prefer sweet tea and sweet Jesus.

By middle school I was bored by the one-dimensional Jesus of the church. I was listening to Public Enemy and Boogie Down Productions. I was reading Malcolm and Baldwin. I became alienated from the gospel because its protagonist seemed to live in a prison of unflappable patience and limitless kindness, and I assumed he expected the same from his disciples. That would never be me.

A fuller portrait of Jesus did not emerge for me in church. It emerged in the classrooms of Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University, under the tutelage of Professor Ronald Liburd. In class, we read texts critically and respectfully. My faith was challenged. My juvenile theology made its way on the road to adulthood. I grew intrigued by Jesus.

The church seemed fearful of letting Jesus out of prison, even for a weekend pass. It seemed that we were afraid he might decide to join us at 11 a.m.

Preachers, we can do better. We can be unafraid of the Jesus who turns over tables. We need that Jesus. We have some table-turning to do.

Be unafraid of the Jesus who demands that we hate father, mother, wife, children, brother, sister, and yes life itself in order to follow him. We have some hating to do. There are some traditions and lies that we have received from those we hold dearest, things that must be hated and abandoned if we are to have any hope of being used by God.

This text does not run away from an angry, direct Jesus. Neither should our sermons. Young listeners and more seasoned listeners alike will appreciate Luke's believable savior. It's tempting to sprinkle sugar or pour honey on this text. But the news does not have to be sweet. It has to be good.