

Something about Jesus: Jesus is terrible at meeting people's expectations

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [April 3, 2007](#) issue

I spend a lot of time with the followers of Jesus. Some exercise their ministries as clergy while others do the trickier work of ministering while they do business, take depositions, teach school or care for grandchildren. They come from a wide variety of churches. Many serve as leaders in their congregations. Others have left institutions that no longer engage their energies or imaginations.

What they have in common is their fascination with Jesus. They are captivated by his life, his death, his teachings and his example. They never tire of studying the stories about him, which they take as templates for their own lives. While the really savvy ones can name at least some of the ways that they make Jesus in their own image, this does not stop them from trying to follow him. In their prayers, their hymns and their confessions, they ask God to make them more like him.

It seems to me that those who follow Jesus might reasonably take Peter, Mary, Thomas or Martha as our exemplars instead of Jesus himself. Following means taking a position slightly behind the leader, after all. To be a follower is to be someone other than the one you follow. And yet most followers I know are stubbornly fixed on being like Jesus. Even those who admit no hope of succeeding still measure their failure by his example. He is the gold standard for what it means to be fully human, in full union with the Divine.

In many ways, this is heartening. The most convicted sinner still recognizes the Christ seed within. The headiest intellectual still hears the call to wash feet, and the weariest disciple still finds cause to feed the hungry crowd. To focus on Jesus as exemplar is to never run out of redemptive things to be or do. What interests me is how we split his personality, choosing the parts we will embrace in our life together and the parts we will ignore.

When I listen to the most devoted followers of Jesus, they tell me what it costs to love unconditionally, to forgive 70-times-seven, to offer hospitality to strangers, and to show compassion for the poor. These are essential hallmarks of Jesus' ministry, which no followers of his can ignore. At the same time, they are acts of divine mercy that disciples can feel good about, while helping others feel better too. Those who follow Jesus' lead in these areas tend to be honored in their communities, at least as long as they are judicious about whom they choose to love without condition and as long as they stop short of political activity on behalf of the strange or the poor.

What I hear less about from Jesus' followers is what it costs to oppose the traditions of the elders, to upset pious expectations of what a child of God should say or do, to subvert religious certainty, and to make people responsible for their own lives. Yet all of these are present in his example too.

When people come to Jesus for predigested spiritual instruction, he gives them chewy stories instead. What must they do to inherit eternal life? What is the greatest of the commandments? Who does Jesus think he is? Over and over, he answers such questions with more questions, so that those who came hoping for confirmation of their beliefs go away more confused than ever. They do not even know who their neighbors are, but thanks to him they are going to stay up all night thinking about it.

When they want to give Jesus power over their lives, he gives it back to them. He tells the enthusiasts traveling with him to count the cost of discipleship before they volunteer. He lets the rich young ruler walk away. After he frees a man from a legion of unclean spirits, the man begs to stay with him, but Jesus refuses. Instead, he sends the man back home to his friends. He will not even take credit for healing people. "Your faith has saved you," he says to them. "Your faith has made you well; go in peace."

Although Jesus pays visits to the religious institutions of his time, those visits rarely go well for him. Sometimes this is because he goes out of his way to provoke the pillars of those institutions; other times it is because he persists in being who he is and doing what he does in ways that defy the community's sacred norms. With few exceptions, his most memorable sermons are delivered on mountains, in fields, from the prows of rocking boats. He does his best work in the open air.

Jesus is terrible at meeting people's expectations of him. He engages the sorts of people he should ignore and ignores the sorts of people he should engage. He

accepts the wrong dinner invitations. He is rude to respected religious leaders. He scolds his own disciples, while he praises the faith of a Roman soldier. All in all, this is not a man you want teaching the first-grade Sunday school class (although he is crazy about children). He is impossible to manage. He will not stay in role. Every time his handlers think they have him handled, he vanishes from their midst.

While it is easy to understand why the followers of Jesus might stop short of emulating him in these ways, it is intriguing to think what might happen if we did. What if ministering in his name meant answering questions with more questions? What if it included refusing to do for others what they must do for themselves? What if it meant maintaining a critical distance from our most beloved institutions, declining to fulfill the roles they assign to us? On the basis of Jesus' own example, these are redemptive ways of life too. If their followers are few, then it is worth asking why.