

A Jesus who can be hard to like (Luke 4:21-30)

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What's up with Luke's assertive Jesus?

Most of us carry in our hearts and minds a sacred image of the Jesus of history. He is, as Albert Schweitzer said, but a reflection of ourselves. Each culture makes him into their own image.

Many see him as he is depicted by the white Western world—a fair-skinned, blue-eyed, blond-haired, meek and mild figure gazing into the heavens. Hollywood has given him a tan, long and flowing hair, and drop-dead good looks but has managed to maintain his white features.

The more likely image of Jesus as he would have appeared in his day—a first-century Jew from Palestine—still upsets many people. On the basis of scientific research, written descriptions, and skeletons from that era, biblical scholar James Charlesworth notes that the historical Jesus would have been about 5'8" with brown skin, curly hair, and a dark beard. He would have weighed 150 or 160 pounds, and he would have been in good shape since he walked everywhere. He would have looked like other Middle Eastern men of his day.

Many still find this description of Jesus difficult to accept and even more difficult to worship.

Not only must our Jesus conform to a certain image, but he must also behave in a certain manner. The assertive Jesus makes some of us uncomfortable. Yet this Jesus shows up throughout scripture. Filled with righteous indignation, he enters the temple and drives out those who are selling and buying within its walls. Then there

is the name-calling Jesus. His characterization of Herod as “that fox” (Luke 13:32), perhaps on par with “that jackass” in modern lingo, strikes some as unbecoming of the Savior.

Then of course there is the rather insensitive Jesus who refuses to acknowledge the plight of the Syrophoenician woman who seeks out his help (Mark 7:24-30). His harsh retort to the pleas of this woman still raises eyebrows. And even though he turns the wedding party in Cana into a great success, his mother’s acknowledgement that “they have no wine” is met with a rather curt response from Jesus: “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come” (John 2:1-4).

In Luke 4, we have an assertive Jesus who seems to be spoiling for a fight. Welcomed by the hometown crowd, adored by many as he stands to read and sits to preach, he soon stokes controversy.

He incites their fury with the words, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’... No prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.” The people are asking him to do in his hometown what they have heard that he did in Capernaum. “Doctor, cure yourself” means bring the promised relief to your own people—do not allow a place like Capernaum to get the benefits that the hometown crowd should have. Charity begins at home!

The assertive Jesus is not governed by the desires of the crowd but rather by the purposes of God and the precedents of the prophets who have gone before him. Those who cannot accept him on these terms more often than not will find him unacceptable.

Samuel DeWitt Proctor, who was pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, often reminded his flock that many of them probably would not have liked the historical Jesus and his iconoclastic ways. In Proctor’s view, Jesus said the wrong things, hung out with the wrong folk, and made what some in his day considered poor decisions that often countered traditional religious beliefs.

Like him or not, this Jesus is prominent in the Gospels. The Jesus we have constructed in our imaginations—in appearance and in behavior—often does not square with the Jesus of scripture, who seeks to do God’s will even when it angers those who claim to love God with all their hearts, mind, and soul.