

Welcome

Where are my Smurfs fans? I grew up watching the Smurfs - those little blue creatures who live in blissful community together. And I always remember being struck by one weird question: why was there only one girl?

That's right: Smurfette. The lone female smurf.

Little did I know that there's a totally reasonable explanation: in an episode called "The Smurfette" that originally aired in 1981 (!), we learn that Smurfette was originally created by the Smurfs' archnemesis, Gargamel. You know the bald guy, always wore a black dress, had a cat named Azrael? Wanted to catch the smurfs and turn them into gold?

Gargamel created Smurfette and sent her into the Smurf village to betray them. (You can tell Smurfette was originally evil because she had black hair.) But the Smurfs' overwhelming goodness, the purity of the Smurf way of life, overwhelmed Smurfette and she became good (and blonde!).

I think this episode of the Smurfs stuck with me - it's the only one I remember anything about - because it illustrates a truth we know deep down: just because someone claims to be something doesn't mean they actually are.

In the beginning, Smurfette claimed to be a Smurf, one of the community, even though her values and goals were totally at odds with the Smurf way of life.

We see that in religious life today as well. Massive numbers of people in our country claim to be Christian, and yet they don't follow they way of Jesus. They don't embody Jesus' teachings in any meaningful way. In fact, they openly support candidates and policies that harm those Jesus calls our neighbors.

As a church, how are we called to engage those persons? What should our response be to those Evil Smurfettes in our midst?

Message

Welcome to Easter-tide! We're in the season of hope - the time between Easter and Pentecost, between resurrection and God's gift to us of the Holy Spirit. Our series is called RECONNECTED. We're asking what it looks like to be plugged in - both to God and to the world to which God calls us.

What are the practices, attitudes and orientations God calls us to and gifts us with that enable us to be a church that engages and cares about the world around us?

For these questions, we're in the book of Acts, which recounts the beginnings of the church. How did we go from a group of scared people who fled from the authorities when Jesus was arrested to a group that faced down persecution and fearlessly spread the good news of Jesus' resurrection to the world around us?

We just spent a couple of weeks asking what makes a good disciple among those who are outside the Church. Today, as we're nearing the end of the series, I want flip the camera around. We've been looking at the world to whom God has called us. Today, it's time to look at ourselves. Today, we have to acknowledge a painful truth: it's easy to be religious without following Jesus.

It's easy to call myself a *Christian* and not have much interest in the Christ I'm supposedly like. This has been true since Jesus' earthly ministry - he famously warned that not everyone who calls him Lord actually knows him.

And the earliest church faced this as a real tough problem. [Turn with us to Acts 3.](#)

We often forget that the earliest followers of Jesus were all Jewish. That Jesus himself was Jewish. One of the reasons that's so important is that Jesus' resurrection caused a deep divide among the Jewish people. The question became, "Who is really the people of God?"

Part of the understanding of everyone in Jerusalem in Jesus' day was that they were *all* God's chosen people. But... what makes someone chosen? In the wake of the Exile and the Roman conquest of the Jewish people believed that the reason for their devastation was their own lack of faithfulness to the covenant they made with God.

In other words, it wasn't enough just to be born into God's people. Ethnicity alone didn't mark you as a child of God. What did? Faithfulness to the covenant, the way of God.

But then, of course, that raises a further question: *What does faithfulness to the Torah look like?*

It's the same question we ask today. Churches have sharp disagreements about what it means to follow Jesus in the public square. Should we have an opinion on Black Lives Matter? What about reproductive rights? Gun control? Immigration? LGBTQ+ rights?

What about in the so-called private sector? Does God care what we do with our money? Our leisure time? How many activities our kids are in? How many hours we work?

In other words, what does actual faithfulness to Jesus look like? How much of this stuff can you disagree about and still be on the same team, so to speak?

Enter our story today in [Acts 3](#). This is in the days just after Pentecost, after the Holy Spirit fell on the disciples. As we saw a few weeks ago, the disciples had made it their habit to gather in the Temple commons area to share about Jesus. On this particular day, Peter and John heal a man on their way into the temple, and bring him in with them. As you can imagine, everyone is amazed, and wondering what the meaning of this is. Peter tells them that what they've witnessed is further proof - in addition to the resurrection - that Jesus shows us God's true way. Listen to what he says to the gathered crowd:

But God was fulfilling what all the prophets had foretold about the Messiah—that he must suffer these things. Now repent of your sins and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped away. Then times of refreshment will come from the presence of the Lord, and he will again send you Jesus, your appointed Messiah. For he must remain in heaven until the time for the final restoration of all things, as God promised long ago through his holy prophets. Moses said, ‘The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from among your own people. Listen carefully to everything he tells you.’ Then Moses said, ‘Anyone who will not listen to that Prophet will be completely cut off from God’s people.’

“Starting with Samuel, every prophet spoke about what is happening today. You are the children of those prophets, and you are included in the covenant God promised to your ancestors. For God said to Abraham, ‘Through your descendants all the families on earth will be blessed.’ When God raised up his servant, Jesus, he sent him first to you people of Israel, to bless you by turning each of you back from your sinful ways.” -- Acts 3:18–26 (NLT)

Peter wants the listening crowd to understand that, by calling for Jesus’ crucifixion, they demonstrated they are not true followers of God. If they had truly been listening to the prophets - all the way back to Moses and Samuel - then they never would have chosen Rome over Jesus.

This is an important point Peter’s making: we like to make a hard distinction between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament. But for Peter, John and the other disciples - the guys who actually *knew* Jesus, followed him around and listened to his teachings, they understood that Jesus was the fulfillment of everything that had come before.

They understood that a holistic reading of the torah and the prophets would lead a person to follow Jesus’ way.

Of course - as we’ve seen in this series, *they* didn’t get that right. They missed it until the Holy Spirit came upon them. So Peter isn’t here to condemn.

Rather, his words are an invitation to those in attendance. He’s begging them to turn from their false religiosity that has them cozied up to their conquerors. He wants them to turn to Jesus and be made new.

BREAK

Friends, I was born into the church and raised in the church. My whole life, I’ve been taught that Evangelism - telling people the good news about Jesus - is something people inside the church do to those outside the church.

And there’s real truth in that. Obviously I want my friends who don’t know Jesus to come to know him as I do.

But we are at a time in our history where the Church as a whole - particularly in this country - is not known for looking like Jesus. People know who Jesus is, what he values. And when they

look at the church, they see a large gulf between the Jesus who came not to condemn, but to love the world and the church that offers nothing but condemnation.

I might suggest that God is calling us to evangelize our fellow Christians. Those who call, Lord!, Lord! but who do not demonstrate what Jesus calls the fruit of faith:

“Beware of false prophets who come disguised as harmless sheep but are really vicious wolves. You can identify them by their fruit, that is, by the way they act. Can you pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? A good tree produces good fruit, and a bad tree produces bad fruit. A good tree can’t produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can’t produce good fruit.” -- Matthew 7:15–18 (NLT)

We can look at the fruit of people who claim to follow Jesus and know whether their faith is truly one that leads to flourishing for all people.

In Peter’s day, the difference was stark. The faith of the crowd to whom he was speaking had literally resulted in a crucifixion. The fruit their faith produced was death.

But Peter and John healed a man on their way into the temple. Their faith was producing life even as they went about their daily tasks.

So, when we look at those around us who claim to be followers of Jesus, we can ask: what kind of fruit does their life produce?

I know... you want to say, “But JR., doesn’t the Bible tell us not to judge?!” Well... not exactly.

“Do not judge others, and you will not be judged. For you will be treated as you treat others. The standard you use in judging is the standard by which you will be judged.

“And why worry about a speck in your friend’s eye when you have a log in your own? How can you think of saying to your friend, ‘Let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye,’ when you can’t see past the log in your own eye? Hypocrite! First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend’s eye.” -- Matthew 7:1–5 (NLT)

So yeah, the first question we might want to ask is, “What kind of fruit is *my* life producing? Am I truly overwhelmed and transformed by the life-giving, fruit-bearing faith of Jesus? Am I empowered by the same Spirit that raised him from the dead?

Because that’s the standard by which God is going to discern which of us is truly faithful, and who’s just pretending.

But as we continue to submit ourselves to the Holy Spirit, to be formed in Jesus’ image, God also calls us to look to our neighbors, particularly those who call themselves Christians.

Do they bear the fruit of a holy life? Do they bear the fruit that the Holy Spirit produces in someone walking with Jesus?

If not, is it possible that, like Peter, we need to turn our attention to our own house? To speak not first to the rest of the world, but to those among us who claim to be true children of God but who have revealed *through their own actions* that they are not?

How does God call us to engage them? I suggest we look back to Peter, who invited them back into their own faith tradition to say, “How you have been living is not the way.” He then invited them, “It’s not too late!”

Peter learned this from Jesus himself - remember, all those disciples were wrong about Jesus a lot. They didn’t realize he was the Messiah, and then when they did, they misunderstood the *kind* of Messiah he really was. Peter wasn’t condemning his people for being wrong. He was inviting them out of their false, fruitless faith into the true mission God has always been on - restoring the world to the way God has always intended.

Can you imagine that here? Catalyst has become something of a haven for those of us who have been hurt by those who claim the name of Jesus but deny his teaching and life. Can you imagine that God is inviting us to heal precisely by engaging those whose fruit is that of violence, bigotry, immorality and injustice with the good news that Jesus has come for *them too*?

Communion + Examen

Where in my life do I see the fruit of faithfulness to Jesus?

Where in my life do I see the fruit of faithlessness?

To whom might God be calling me to share Jesus’ good news?

What does it look like for me to be faithful to Jesus this week?

Assignment + Blessing