

“Sending Jesus Back to His Room”

Did you ever wish for a different name? I did. I was at peace with “David,” but I had significant issues with—“Bibbee.” Sue didn’t care for her name, either -- not her last name, but her first. Sue was a Berkey -- *Vonette Sue Berkey*. What’s not to like about *Vonette*? It’s soooooo... *French*. She has her reasons, though, so I honor her preference and call her, *Sweet Sue*.

If I went through the trouble of changing my name, I know the one I’d choose. In Northern Wisconsin there is a Ford dealership owned by a fellow named, *Nels Gunderson*. You can trust a man named, *Nels Gunderson*. It’s respectable, strong, yet kindly and Scandinavian. I’m part Irish, and I sometimes think that a traditional Irish name would suit me. I would make a good, Cillian Callaghan, don’t you think?

There are interesting names in scripture, but most don’t have the ring of, Nels Gunderson. I never considered naming my son Methuselah. The Assyrian and Babylonian kings cited in the Bible had curious names. *Artaxerxes*, *Nebuchadnezzar*, *Shalmaneser* and *Sennacherib*. There is one name in the Bible, however, that is easy on the ear-- *Joseph of Arimathea*.

At Easter, we’re in a such a hurry to get to the resurrection, that we pass over important people about whom we know little, but who’s actions made an impact upon the story. Joseph of Arimathea is one of them. He’s stretched across the path to the tomb like a speed bump, but we don’t slow down for him. Joseph is more than a bit character. His story reveals something about our hesitant *response* to the living Lord.

The gospels give a mixed message about Joseph. Matthew portrays him as an honorable, learned man well versed in the

scriptures. A kindly person solidly rooted in Judaism, and a seeker of what God was doing to bring his reign upon earth. He was the only religious authority open to the possibility that Jesus was the Messiah.

Joseph got Pilate's permission to take Jesus' body and put it in a tomb that belonged to Joseph. Matthew never mentioned that Joseph was a member of the Sanhedrin -- the religious council instrumental in Jesus' death. Matthew not only disassociated Joseph from the Sanhedrin. In chapter 27:47 he writes: *"When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea named Joseph who was also a disciple of Jesus."*

Mark paints a different picture. Mark is the most democratic of the four gospels. By his appraisal, the disciples and the Jewish leaders were all knuckleheads. Jesus repeatedly revealed his identity and purpose, but they didn't get it. When Jesus died on the cross, who was the bystander that said, *"Truly, this man was the son of God."* A Roman centurion -- the last person you would imagine making such a confession.

Mark 15:43 reads: *"Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was himself looking for the Kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus."* Joseph wasn't *just* a member of the Sanhedrin, but a *respected* member -- a scholarly man with credentials and authority.

Stop a moment and consider something. How did Jesus get along with the Pharisees, Sadducees and scribes? It was more than a gentlemen's disagreement. They tried to discredit, discourage, and derail Jesus' movement. The public may have respected Joseph, but the disciples didn't. Mark 14:64 says that the council of Pharisees, scribes, and priests determined he (Jesus) deserved death. There were no dissenting votes. No abstentions. Mark says *all* the members condemned him, and that included Joseph.

We have two different pictures from two gospels -- Joseph, the benign, admiring disciple, and Joseph, the Jewish leader who

voted to condemn Jesus. If we assume Mark's version has it right, let's go further. Joseph takes over Jesus' the funeral arrangements. "I have a tomb. We can put him there." He takes the body, wraps it in a linen shroud, lays it in the tomb and seals it shut. He is in a hurry because it's almost sundown, and the start of the Sabbath. Being an observant Jew he won't break Sabbath law, so Jesus' committal is rushed.

Wait a minute! Matthew said Joseph was a disciple of Jesus. We know that Jesus' interpreted the Sabbath in a much broader sense than the Pharisees. If Joseph is a disciple, why the concern about the Sabbath? Think about it -- if you were a disciple, wouldn't your love for Jesus trump observing Sabbath law? Is law more important than love?

Then there is the matter of preparing Jesus for burial. The body was supposed to be washed and anointed with spices. But hurrying to keep the Sabbath, Joseph prevented it. "*Wrap him up, drop him in, and seal him up.*" If we step outside our unexamined view of Joseph, we see what may have been an intentional plan to rid the world of Jesus. We don't know with certainty that this is what happened, but if we take Mark seriously, we have to wonder. Joseph was in the Sanhedrin that unanimously condemned Jesus. He took Jesus' body to a ready-made tomb, hastily put him in, and saw to it that the tomb was sealed tight.

Joseph took care of everything. He left nothing to chance. End of chapter, end of story, no more Jesus to worry about. Maybe you're wondering why I've gone into such detail crafting a different understanding Joseph. I think our response to Jesus mirrors Joseph's.

Three weeks ago we had no trouble turning worship up a notch and finding many ways to say, "Christ is risen!" Where's he been since Easter? Have there been subtle or not so subtle ways you have re-sealed him in the tomb? Has he spoken to your heart, and you turned up your iPod or went channel surfing to drown him out? Maybe you've been around someone who says and does things 180 degrees from what you know is right, and

instead of speaking up, you shove Jesus into his room, and tell him to stay there until the coast is clear.

Have you caught yourself saying, “This problem is too big. Attitudes are too entrenched. The system is too stuck to do anything about it. That marriage is too far-gone to save. She has *always* been that way and will never change. There’s no helping *that* church. Close it down and move on. New ideas are conceived that can help the church turn the corner. But we pull up short because people won’t like it because we will have to change.” Wrap him up. Drop him in. Seal him shut.

We’re not the first to do it to Jesus. From the time he was born, they were there to kill him, silence him, censure him, throw him off a cliff, nail him to a cross and seal him in a tomb. But he keeps coming back, no matter how many times *we’ve denied him, ignored him and given lip service to him*. He won’t leave us alone.

I remember a drama where a young woman entered her apartment and found Jesus waiting for her. “Jesus! Good to see you. You’re looking good. *Sorry I haven’t seen you lately*. I’ve been SOOO busy of late. You know how college is. I’ll tell you what. Starting tonight things will change. I’ll set aside the whole evening to talk with you. I’ll put everything on hold and it will be just you and me.” She wiped the dust off a Bible and said, “And I’ll start reading your word, too.”

There’s a knock at the door. She says to Jesus as she goes to open it, “Yes, Lord. It will be just like the old days.” A classmate is at the door. “Good, you’re here. There’s a great party going on off campus. Get your coat and let’s go.” “That’s great!” she replies, then says, “*Sounds wonderful, but I’ve made other plans*.” “Oh come on. There’s not been a party this big in a long time.” “No... I...I can’t. I made another commitment.” “John’s going to be there. He’s been talking about you.” “He has? Well... maybe I can come -- for just an hour.”

The classmate tells her to be downstairs in ten minutes. The young woman turns and says to Jesus. “Lord, something urgent

has come up and I'll be gone a little while. See ya!" She walks to the door and Jesus follows her. "You don't understand, Jesus. I'm going out. You're staying here until I get back, okay?"

She heads to the door and Jesus is behind her, again. "No, no, Jesus. Listen. *I'm going out, but you can't come.* You wouldn't want to be there anyway. It's not your thing. Bye!"

Once more she goes to the door with the same result. Now she is frustrated. "Jesus, we're not communicating. Why don't you sit down and read a book or something. How about television? You like TV? She gets the remote and clicks through the channels. None are suitable for Jesus' eyes. "MMMM, let's forget TV. Just... make yourself comfortable. There's a pizza in the freezer and some cake in the fridge. I'll be back.... Soon." She runs to the door, but Jesus runs after her. "Listen, Jesus! I don't have time for this. Do you understand English? Stay HERE!"

She opens the door, and Jesus is on her heels. Then she snaps. Picking up an imaginary hammer, she says, "How many times do I have to tell you to stay (knocks his feet), where (knocks one hand) I (knocks other hand) put (knock) you!" (Crucifixion Drama: Mathew Pole, 1995)

On Friday night Sue and I went out with another pastor and wife for dinner. We talked about what's been going on in the church - - not just ours but the church in general. Near the end of the evening the other pastor's wife gave us something to ponder. "What do you suppose God thinks when God sees what we've done to the church? Do you think God gets exasperated by the concerns and issues that consume our precious time, thought and energy?" We didn't need to answer. We just pursed our lips and nodded.

I'll tell you what I think. I think God looks upon the church we have revised, remodeled, retooled, restructured and tinkered with and says to himself, "*Knuckleheads!*"

Joseph and Josephine of Arimathea STILL want Jesus to stay put. They want him to come to worship, especially at Christmas

and Easter. They want him to bless their little projects and plans for self-improvement. They ask him to sign-off on their schemes for betterment of the church. They hope he understands when they want him to stay in his tomb...uh... they meant *ROOM* and be quiet.

You know and I know God isn't going to let us off so easy. The tomb won't stay shut, no matter how we reinforce it. Jesus won't stay put. He'll keep coming to show what a resurrection will do to you.