

**LAKESWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
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**March 9, 2008**

**IF YOU LOVE ME ... THE DIRT ON DA VINCI**  
**Mark 14:53-65**  
**5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent**

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*"If you love me, you will keep my commandments."* John 14:15

*"If you love me..."* The challenge we have had before us these last five weeks in Lent has been to answer the question: How are *WE* ... through the way we are living our lives ... How are *WE* finishing that sentence for *OUR* Lord? Today is the last time we'll address this, but the answer to another question ... an all important question ... might just be for us the *KEY*.



Probably everyone in this sanctuary has seen a reproduction of the magnificent painting by Leonardo da Vinci ... *The Last Supper*. But did you know that the mural has recently undergone a complete face-lift? Yes, it has been retouched, refurbished and renovated, and can now be seen by the viewing public. It's back and it's beautiful, sharper and more colorful than ever!

But not *everyone* is happy about the results.

It took artisans almost two decades to scrape 500 years of grime off one of the world's most famous paintings. And now that the face-lift has been completed, visitors to the Santa Maria delle Grazie church and convent, in Milan, Italy, can see a much brighter, clearer depiction of the last meal shared by Jesus and his disciples.

Paint and dirt were flaked away a millimeter at a time to get to da Vinci's original 1497 masterpiece. Over the years the tempera-on-stone painting has been the victim of nine *known RETOUCHINGS*; *destruction* by Napoleon's troops, who used the church grounds as a stable; *grease buildup* from a nearby kitchen; and the Allied *bombing* of 1943, to name a few.

But critics say that the \$8 million project stripped away important details, leaving nothing more than fragments of da Vinci's original work, and that the spaces left on the stone wall where the painting once existed [as much as 80 percent of the mural] were filled in with watercolors.

A similar sort of thing happened 2,000 years ago.

Next Sunday, the Christian Church celebrates Palm Sunday. We know that the crowd on that Sunday long ago was *pumped up* and *praising* Jesus, but by *Thursday night*, many of those same folks wanted to persecute him. Over the course of four short days, the people of Jerusalem thoroughly *RETOUCHED* Jesus, *TRANSFORMING* him from a *KING* into a *CRIMINAL*.

And just like those experts criticizing da Vinci's face-lift today, we [*who are 2000 years removed from the scene*] are quick to condemn the people who so readily *RETOUCHED* / *TRANSFORMED* Jesus from *KING* to *CRIMINAL*.

But it's *still* going on, isn't it?

We still do it – this *RETOUCHING* of Jesus.

- ➔ In China, he's Chinese.
- ➔ In Africa, he's black.
- ➔ In America, he's a white, Anglo-Saxon, male – a conventional, self-help, New-Age-guru-esque, "help-me-get-rich-quick" Jesus. If you doubt me, just

turn into EWTN (the Eternal Word Television Network on channel 31). They're having a fund drive ... and over and over the promise is that if you give to God – via EWTN – you will be blessed financially beyond your wildest dreams. Watch it and listen. That's the message.

But the reality is, that this *present day retouching* of Jesus is not something new. Just like da Vinci's painting of *The Last Supper* was *blurred* over centuries of abuse ... *our view of Jesus* has been *messed up, bombed out and dumped on* by an historical, cultural interpretation of the life of Jesus and what His life stood for:

- ➔ For the Crusaders, Christ was a *Conquering King*.
- ➔ For Marxists, he was a *Revolutionary*.
- ➔ For counselors, Jesus is a *Therapist*.
- ➔ For the business world, he's a *Management Guru* (check out the book I mentioned a few weeks ago ... Laurie Beth Jones' *Jesus CEO: Using Ancient Wisdom for Visionary Leadership* [Hyperion, 1995]).
- ➔ And for children, Jesus is a *Shepherd*.

Who can complain about that kind of imagery ... a *Shepherd*? After all, Jesus himself says, "*I am the Good Shepherd*" – right? But even this interpretation can lead us astray ... into misunderstanding.



Several years ago, the Methodist Church published a new hymn book for children. There was some criticism of the new book. One of its reviewers cut to the quick when he said:

"This book is preoccupied with lambs. It will not be surprising if, *when* the children who have used this book reach adulthood, they see little lambs hopping by whenever they hear a reference to Christianity."

Little lambs. Hopping by. *Cute*.

So you know what? We need to *RETOUCH* Jesus again ... Peel off, layer by layer, the *cultural assumptions*, the *materialistic bias*, the *myths that mask the man*, the *husk hiding the kerygmatic kernel*.

Whoa ... I got a little carried away there!

*Nonetheless, the Jesus we will find*, as we strip away the layers, is committed to *LOVING EVERYONE* – including *ENEMIES*.

*The Jesus we will find is CALLING US to GO in directions we'd much rather avoid* – into raunchy red-light districts, over to the cramped apartments of single moms, down to the streets littered with the homeless, into shelters beside junkies and alcoholics, through the doors of hospices and prisons. *It's RADICAL ... but it's JESUS.*



Not that there aren't those who are trying. There are some contemporary theologians who are making an effort at *RETOUCHING* Jesus. Let me introduce you to four of them and share with you their opinions:

First, there's New Testament scholar *Robert Funk*.

Now, don't confuse him with Allen Funt of *Candid Camera* fame, although Funk sees humor as a key to understanding Jesus. He says the Jesus he finds in the gospels is a "*Secular Sage* and a *Social Critic* who *satirized the pious* and *championed society's poor and marginalized*." He makes the claim that Jesus was the first standup Jewish comic.

Robert Funk's whole point is that whenever we poke fun at the *powerful* and show *compassion* for the *poor*, we are responding to an important aspect of the *original, authentic Christ*.



Another of the contemporary *RETOUCHING* theologians is *Marcus Borg*.

Borg's Jesus is a *Revolutionary Guru* who came to change society. Looking at Scripture, Borg discovers a Jesus who was more concerned about *this life* than the *afterlife*, and who was intent on *revitalizing Israel*. Jesus, according to Borg, was also a "Healer or Holy Person," and a *Radical Cultural Critic* who *preached the politics of compassion*.



Next is *John Dominic Crossan*, an Irish-American religious scholar and former priest and professor.

Crossan insists, "There has never been a more *empowering* figure than Jesus." His claim is that [and I quote] "If you are empowered by Jesus' life, in my judgment that makes you a Christian." [end of quote]

Many, including yours truly, would argue with that particular supposition he's making ... but we're not going there. The point is, John Dominic Crossan's *RETOUCHING* of Jesus *reveals* that he was a preacher who *proclaimed* God's "*RADICAL JUSTICE*," and lived the idea so *powerfully* that it inspired a movement that *undeniably changed the course of history*.



And finally, probably the one theologian that is making the biggest impact on my life and ministry at the present in his *RETOUCHING* of Jesus, is the retired Episcopalian Bishop, *John Shelby Spong*.

I love his three definitions of God and what our response should be:

1. God is the Ultimate source of *Life*. One worships this God by living fully, by sharing deeply.
2. God is the Ultimate source of *Love*. One worships this God by loving wastefully, by spreading love frivolously, by giving love away without stopping to count the cost.
3. God is *Being*—the reality underlying *everything* that is. To worship this God you must be willing to risk all, abandoning your defenses, stretch beyond all your limits and have the courage to *BE* all that you can *BE*.

John Shelby Spong's Jesus is the Ultimate Embodiment of all three, the God-presence, a doorway, an open channel to God. The *fullness* of Jesus' life *reveals* the Source of Life, the wastefulness of his love reveals the Source of Love, and the being of his life reveals the Ground of All Being who invites us to step into the power of *living fully, loving wastefully*, and *having the courage* to *be* all that *any one of us can be*. Spong concludes, "*Jesus is my way into God*."



That's just four of the many modern theologians I could have spoken about this morning. They are trying to put a *new face* on Jesus for us. But these experts can be *just as guilty* as anybody else of making that face of Christ look a little bit like their own. To the *Chinese* he looks *Chinese*. To the *African* he is *black* ... and so on.

The reason I'm telling you these things is for you to look deeply into your *heart* and discover again the face of Jesus.

- ➔ Who is Jesus to *YOU*?
- ➔ What's He like?

- ➔ How do *YOU* relate to Him?
- ➔ How has He changed *YOU*?
- ➔ What does He want *YOU* to do?
- ➔ Have *YOU* been *RETOUCHING* Him to suit *YOUR* desires?



In this season of Lent, it is appropriate to be *reminded* that Jesus was a Jewish peasant who preached *love* and *selflessness*. Who gained *some notoriety* and was *tested*. Who was *tried* under Pontius Pilate, *crucified* and *buried*. And later, He appeared before witnesses who took him for their *Messiah* and dedicated themselves to *spreading his gospel*.

Jesus is *NOT* just some great *historical figure* who needs some *RETOUCHING* in order for us to understand.

Leonardo da Vinci's great masterpiece is *still* great, even after all the layers of grease and grime were removed.

For us, after we peel away the layers of *time* and all the *theological guessing* as to who our Lord is ... *the Christ of Christianity is still POWERFULLY ALIVE!*

Friends, *YOU* and *I* are involved in a Christianity that is an *ever-evolving, ever-changing, ever-growing religion* based on personal leaps, tests of faith, and the good works of believers *filled with the ever-active Spirit of Christ ... CHRIST IN YOU!*

Yes ... the *LIVING* Christ is with us right now ... in *YOUR* life and in *MINE* and in the life of our *CHURCH*.

How is He making a difference through *YOU*?

How is He making a difference through *US*?



There is a well-known story that I have to share with you again. The last time I shared it with you was on Good Friday in 2005. It is without doubt, one of my favorites. I'm not sure of its authenticity, but it teaches a powerful lesson. Let me read it for you. It has to do with the actual painting of The Last Supper, and as the story goes, it took da Vinci seven years to complete.

Starting out, da Vinci wanted to find the perfect Christ caricature for his portrait. Da Vinci always used real people in all his portraits and paintings, so he always searched for *just the right "actors"* to portray the realism he wanted to capture for his canvas.

According to the story, "hundreds and hundreds of young men were carefully viewed in an endeavor to find a face and personality exhibiting innocence and beauty, free from the scars and signs of indulgence caused by sin." Eventually, after searching for weeks, a young man of 19 years was found and selected. For the next six months, da Vinci worked on the portraiture of Christ as he, the artist, saw him, the Messiah, in the face and demeanor of this young subject.

Now completed, da Vinci settled himself into the task of searching for and capturing the faces of the other disciples around that table in the upper room. One by one, over the next *six* years, da Vinci searched and worked.

Finally, the work had progressed to the point that there remained but one face left to find – that of The Traitor himself, Judas Iscariot. It was a face that the old master had purposefully left for last for any number of reasons. Now, near the end of his task, he went on a search not unlike the one he had at first – looking, scrutinizing, studying faces in endless crowds for just that *one face* – the face that would tell the story behind the story.

His travels finally took him to a dungeon in Rome, where he had heard resided a man who was thought to be the epitome of what the artist was looking for. Upon introduction, da Vinci realized his expectations were not disappointed. Indeed, here was a man of dark soul – a wretched, unkempt and vicious human. *Yes, this was the perfect Judas!*

By special order of the king, the prisoner was released into da Vinci's care for the next several months. For both days and nights, the portrait was crafted into the scripted scene. The moment finally came when the portrait was completed and the prisoner was returned to the care of his incarcerators.

Turning to leave, da Vinci suddenly found himself in the clutches of the prisoner crying out, "O, da Vinci, look at me! Do you NOT know who I am?" Upon studying the poor man closer, da Vinci exclaimed that he did not know the man.

"O, da Vinci," the man cried louder, "I am your Christ!! I am the man you painted seven years ago as Christ! O, God, how have I fallen so low?"



Guess what? The authentic Jesus is right there, just waiting to be seen, just ready to be discovered.

That's why when you scrape the *Dirt Off da Vinci*, the Christ you *SHOULD* find ... is *YOU!*

What are people going to see?



To conclude our series, "If you love me..." think about this as I read:  
I saw Jesus last week.

He was wearing blue jeans and an old shirt.  
He was up at the church building;  
He was alone and working hard.  
For just a minute he looked a little like  
one of our members, Neil Fleming I think.  
But it was Jesus, I could tell by his smile.

I saw Jesus last Sunday.

He was teaching a Bible class.  
He didn't talk real loud or use long words,  
But you could tell he believed what he said.  
For just a minute, he looked like one of  
our Sunday School teachers, Alan York.  
But it was Jesus, I could tell by his loving voice.

I saw Jesus the other day.

He was at a nursing home visiting one of  
our friends who has gone through some horrendous changes  
in her life.

They were in the dining room at the Life Care Center laughing.  
For just a minute he looked like one of our elders, Penny Mendheim.  
But it was Jesus, I could tell by the tears in his eyes.

I saw Jesus Friday afternoon.

He was in the church kitchen preparing bread and grape juice so that I  
could take it to our church family members at Wyndham Lakes.

For just a minute he looked like Donna Fetter.

But it was Jesus; I could feel the love from his heart.

I see Jesus everywhere,  
Taking food to the sick,  
welcoming others to his home,  
being friendly to a newcomer,  
and for just a minute I think he's  
someone I know.  
But it's always Jesus,  
I can tell by the way he serves.  
**May someone see Jesus in you.**

Amen and Amen.