

Prophets Aren't Popular

Who do you think of when you think of the word nice? Gandhi? Mother Theresa? How about Jesus? Most artists renditions portray Jesus as the sweetest, nicest-looking man, usually accompanied by lambs or children.

They're not entirely wrong – Jesus is known as “the lamb of God” and he did love to bless children. But that doesn't mean Jesus was nice. Jesus was more than “nice.”

Christians love to proclaim: God is love! They're right. God IS love. And in 1 Corinthians 13, love is described as patient, kind, not envious, not boastful, not rude, selfless, not easily angered and ungrudging. “Nice” never shows up on that list.

But “kind” does. The difference between niceness and kindness is like the difference between tolerating and embracing, political correctness and love, appearance and reality.

Nice people donate money to a beggar. Kind people invite the beggar home for lunch.

Nice people ask you how you are. Kind people actually want to know.

Nice people do occasional “good deeds.” Kind people consistently love others.

Jesus was not nice – he was kind. He touched the untouchables. He told the disciples to “let the little children come to me.” He ate meals with the rejects of society. He declared “I have not come into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world.” Especially to people who were sick discouraged, beaten down, humbled.

If you were sick, discouraged, and beaten down, would you want someone to give you a pat on the back and a “good luck!” – or would you want someone to hold you, love you, and encourage you until you get back on your feet again?

If we're really honest with ourselves, we don't really want people to be nice to us, either. “Nice” is just what we settle for when what we really want is for people to be kind. Jesus didn't care about niceness – he cared about righteousness.

Nice people don't make enemies. But Jesus did. Lots of them. Because he cared about righteousness more than making and keeping friends. For one thing, Jesus had no patience for unrepentant, greedy men who took advantage of others. When he saw moneychangers and merchants selling animals in the temple courtyard (probably at exorbitant, unreasonable prices,) he made a whip, drove them from the temple area, and overturned their tables.”

This was not a fit of uncontrolled temper, however. Jesus didn't run through the courtyard screaming and flipping cages which would have injured the animals inside. Instead, Jesus was totally in control: he took the time to make a cord with which to herd the larger animals out of the courtyard. He overturned money-changing tables and ordered the people to take their birdcages out so the birds would not be injured and he barred them from coming back into exploit the temple visitors.

he didn't care that he was inconveniencing and offending people or messing up their business. THEY were the ones who were wrong, for desecrating a holy space by daring to use their unsavory business practices on humble travelers who only wanted to worship God. And he wasn't afraid to call them out and stop them.

Jesus also had no patience for religious hypocrites. He criticized the Jewish religious leaders for holding on to empty traditions while ignoring their fellow human beings' very real needs.

He demonstrated through his example how true religious leaders ought to behave, how they ought to care for those under their authority.

Some of the things – actually a lot of the things – he said to these oppressors could not be described as “nice” in any way. But Jesus didn't care about being nice. He cared about righteousness, about waking the religious leaders up to their cruelty and hypocrisy, and giving them a chance to repent and do better.

At times, people can be won over with gentle words. At times, they need a smack up side the head to see some sense. And Jesus did both.

During his three and a half years of ministry, Jesus touched and healed social outcasts. He defended women who were being criticized by arrogant men. He raised the dead. But he also pissed a lot of people off. So much so that they eventually killed him. We tend to forget that when we are surrounded by so many sweet Jesus pictures.

Jesus wasn't afraid of what people thought, nor was he afraid of conflict. He had no qualms breaking the status quo, pointing out people who were doing and saying wrong things, and confronting arrogant religious leaders who were hurting the people they were supposed to help.

He also didn't care about being politically correct. Jesus was willing to tell people when they were wrong because he loved them more than he cared what they thought of him. Jesus came to tell the truth, to heal the sick and wounded, to save lives. If he had to step on a few toes to do it, he was willing to do so, even at the expense of being perceived as “not nice.”

Remember, this is the guy who called the Pharisees “Whitewashed tombs! Snakes! A brood of vipers!”

I don't know about you, but those do not sound like “nice” words to me. They sound like fighting words. No wonder the Pharisees wanted him dead. If Jesus had been “nice” no one would have crucified Him.

Tomorrow we celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr. The very name, “Martin Luther King, Jr.,” conjures positive thoughts to most people. He's a national hero, a fighter for equality. Someone so beloved that he has his very own national holiday, an honor only given to the likes of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln.

There are movies about him, songs about him, statues of him. His name is synonymous with freedom and justice. At least it is now. But when he was alive – and his movement was in full swing – that was far from the case. In fact a majority of white people disliked King and the civil rights movement.

According to an early 1968 Harris Poll, King died with a public DISAPPROVAL rating of nearly 75 percent, a figure shocking in that day and still shocking in today's political climate.

I think we can safely say that King pissed off a lot of people too! In April 1967, he denounced American involvement in Vietnam, once at his own Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta and once at Riverside Church in New York before 3,000 people. He decried the hypocrisy of sending young black men eight thousand miles to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia that they hadn't found in Southwest Georgia or East Harlem.' He talked about how they joined white soldiers with whom they could hardly live on the same black in Chicago or Atlanta, torching the huts of a poor village. King said that they were agents of a US policy that destroyed and depopulated the country side, forcing them to take refuge in cities teeming with hundreds of thousands of homeless children who were running in packs on the streets like animals.

Former Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee Chairman Stokely Carmichael observed that, in this case, King was taking on, not a hapless, wholly unsympathetic villain like Birmingham's Sheriff Eugene "Bull" Connor, but rather "the entire policy of the United States government."

An outraged President Lyndon Johnson cut off all contact with King. And a great number of black Americans – including many old allies and colleagues from the civil rights years – warned that his stance could have devastating consequences for their cause.

He also was taking his civil rights movement north. When he moved his open housing campaign in and around Chicago, where he confronted white mobs he described as more "hateful" than any he had seen even in Mississippi or Alabama."

Do you remember how he called out clergy for not making a stand in the issue of civil rights?

Listen to these words. He was anything but nice!

I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says, "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action", who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will.

King, just like Jesus, spoke up and pushed people hard toward a more perfect understanding of what justice and freedom really looked like. They admonished people who were taking advantage of the downtrodden.

If you look at what will be shown on tv today and tomorrow, you would think that Dr. King only gave one speech, the "I have a Dream" Speech. But he was much deeper than that, and

became much more of a threat than that speech. We tend to forget that when we remember him.

I think we have made him too safe today. We have forgotten his objection to the Viet Nam war, we have forgotten his support of local unions, often walking picket lines with them, long after he became famous. We forget that he was starting the Poor People's Campaign to eradicate poverty in our country, when he was assassinated. We forget that Robert Kennedy authorized secret wiretapping of King's phones and had surveillance on him. We forget that.

We forget that the same way we forget what Jesus stood for and what Jesus spoke out against. Because that Jesus is too dangerous. Martin Luther King is too dangerous!

And neither Jesus nor Martin Luther King cared much about their popularity. King said "Cowardice asks the question, is it safe? Expediency asks the question, is it politic? Vanity asks the question, is it popular? But conscience asks the question, is it right? And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but one must take it because it is right.

Prophets aren't popular. They never were and they never will be.

A year after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr in 1968, the poet Carl Wendell Hines Jr published "A Dead Man's Dream in which he wrote: "Dead men make such convenient heroes. For they cannot rise to challenge the images that we might fashion from their lives.

Too often, this weekend means only remembering the parts of King that make us feel comfortable. I encourage you today and tomorrow to look at some of King's later works. where he lectures about the triple American evils of racism, materialism and militarism."

On the day before he died, in the speech given in support of striking sanitation workers in Tennessee, he retold the story of the good Samaritan. He said that those who refused to stop for the wounded man on the road asked, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" but the good Samaritan instead asked, "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?"

Today, we ask the same questions that Jesus and Martin Luther King continue to prod us to answer? Questions like these: If I do not stop to help families separated at the border, what will happen to them? If I do not stop to help the homeless, what will happen to them? If I do not stop to help survivors of rape and sexual abuse, what will happen to them? And if I do not stop to help victims of racist and homophobic violence, what will happen to them?

In his study of King, the historian Vincent Harding concludes, "Perhaps each generation must forge its own understanding of King's meaning, must determine and demonstrate the power of his impact and influence for our lives."

We must ask ourselves, What is our understanding of Dr. King? Is it to keep him in a box? Is it to limit ourselves to the "I have a dream" speech? Is it to embrace the radical King? Is it to sing hosannas to his name? Or is it to build a better world. Amen.