

Years ago, my friend Steve and I went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. From Bethlehem to Golgotha, we followed Jesus' steps and Jesus' story. Elaborate churches, simple chapels, the occasional well. There's the mural of the resuscitated Lazarus covered in a sheet with arms outstretched like a mashed-up Halloween costume. There's mosaics of Mary as a local woman in traditional dress from every corner of the planet. The palace fortress at Masada, the endless wilderness, the Valley of Armageddon... which, on a cozy bus ride after a heavy lunch, I slept right through.

There's also a ton of places that claim to be THE Emmaus where Jesus walked unrecognized. The grounds of the Emmaus we went to had a lovely garden complete with ancient olive trees that were mere saplings back when Jesus walked by. Outside, the church is beautiful stone, and inside the walls are covered in faded, 900-year old Byzantine frescoes of Biblical scenes. While some of that fading was from time, some was sabotage! Nearly all the faces are smudged out, making for a weird effect where you see action, you see stories, you see people, but you don't see faces. Smudged-out faces were not the intention of the original muralists, but it kinda works for a place called Emmaus 'cause the whole Emmaus story revolves around his disciples failing to recognize Jesus, though they walk, talk, and eat face-to-face. And when his face finally is recognized, just like the faces on the walls of that church, he vanishes.

Now, most big figures in iconography have identifiers beyond facial features. Names are often written near subjects' heads. The color blue goes with the Virgin Mary. Peter & Paul hold miniature churches in their palms, St. Bartholomew holds his own skin, Thomas holds an architect's square, and Jesus typically wears a red shawl outside his robe, raises a hand in blessing or healing, and is surrounded by gold light. Cleopas and his travel companion don't get those context clues. We know the stranger's Jesus, but bless their hearts, they don't. I can't really blame 'em. Our theology says we meet Christ in the stranger, but sometimes it is hard to recognize him. But sometimes it's just not. I've seen enough icons to recognize that kind of depiction of Jesus. An image of a man surrounded by gold, red cloth draped around his shoulders, hand out in blessing or healing -- that's Jesus. Whether it's really Jesus or satire or something else altogether, with those features ya know it's meant to be Jesus.

Which is why, a little over a week ago when the president posted an image of himself surrounded by gold, red cloth draped around his shoulders, hand out healing the sick, it was clear who he thinks he is. As if that wasn't enough, he's surrounded by people looking at him adoringly, their hands in prayer, eyes longing for a miracle. Behind him an American flag waves and machines of war, dead soldiers, and eagles fill the sky. There's even a figure with a crown of horns -- not thorns, horns -- a crown only worn by the Beast from Revelation. Sometimes it's really hard to recognize Jesus, but sometimes it's not. And y'all, in spite of all the arguments and justifications as to why this wasn't blasphemy, there is simply no way to see this image and in good faith say it's okay. There's just not.

Mind you, this isn't happening in a vacuum. On Easter Sunday of all days, the president tweeted a profanity-laden threat to send Iranians to Hell capped off with the phrase "Praise be to Allah." This kicked off a two-week series of incursions by government officials into religious territory. Two days later the president threatened "a whole civilization will die tonight." A House Representative said the president was "almost a second coming." The Secretary of Defense took a made up quote from Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* and attributed it to scripture, and he compared the president to Jesus and the press to the Pharisees. The president's Religious Liberty Commission said the separation of church and state is "the biggest lie that's been told in America since our founding." After the pope had the audacity to preach on Jesus promoting peace in place of

war, the administration lashed out, and the vice president said the pope needed to stick to matters of morality and stay out of policy. It's rather telling, don't you think, that the vice president claims morality has no place in the creation of policy.

Now, a quick sidebar: we're Episcopalians. We came out of the Protestant Reformation. Our theological ancestors made explicit their attempts to establish distance from, and I quote, "that popish dunghill." We don't subscribe to the doctrines surrounding the papacy, and while we recognize the pope as a religious leader, he's no more sacred than any other religious leader. But he is a religious leader. We may not be the best of buds historically, but in response to all these threats against the pro-peace pontiff, our Archbishop of Canterbury Sarah Mullaly, supported the pope saying, "it is the calling of every Christian ... to work and pray for peace." This isn't happening in a vacuum.

Let's rewind to that picture of the president "definitely not" depicting himself as Jesus. When the backlash started rolling in, including from his own supporters, the president said the picture was meant to portray him as a doctor. Y'all, that's about as disingenuous as it gets, but it points to something I'm curious about. Either he hoped people would cheer on the comparison OR he didn't see how that image could be seen as Jesus. The cynical side of me says he absolutely knew what he was doing. But a different part of my brain isn't so sure. Stick with me on this. Over and over, he's told on himself when talking about matters of Christianity. He said "an eye for an eye" was his favorite quote from the Bible, ignoring Jesus' rebuttal, "You have heard it said 'eye for an eye' ... I tell you to turn the other cheek." He said his favorite book of scripture was "Two Corinthians," which is not the book's title. He teargassed a seminary friend of mine off the steps of his own church. He took a photo with an upside-down Bible and went on to publish a heretical Bible. He doesn't know scripture, he doesn't care about clergy, he doesn't follow Jesus' teachings, but he and the people around him appropriate the trappings of Christianity to support their aims. So maybe, when he posted that picture of himself as Jesus, maybe he really didn't understand how it could be seen as Jesus. I doubt it, but maybe. And if he really didn't recognize Jesus, I gotta wonder if it's because they've never met.

Remember what Jesus said about how to determine true from false prophets? "You will know them by their fruits." Maya Angelou has a similar line: "When people show you who they are, believe them." It just might be that while the administration doesn't know Jesus, they know using the name of Jesus is mighty powerful. There's a whole Commandment about that, by the way, something about using the Lord's name in vain, if memory serves. Among other things, it is the job of faith leaders to teach and interpret the scriptures. Jesus did it for most of his life, from a teenager in a synagogue to a resurrected stranger on the road. Popes, cardinals, bishops, deacons, priests, this is our job. One of our prayers says we're supposed to set forth the "true and lively word" of scripture, and there's no caveats there. We don't stop preaching Jesus' message of hope, integrity, and redemption just because it's contrary to the events happening around us. In fact, the more we plug into real life, the more lively the Word becomes.

Before baptizing an entire crowd, Peter preached an apparently compelling sermon, converting 3,000 on the spot. Did you know Paul once preached a sermon so boring that a kid fell out of a window and died? We may not all have the same gifts, but we've all got the chance to promote the way of Jesus in our own ways. That may mean lively preaching, just and kind works, identifying wolves in sheep's clothing. When those 3,000 heard about Jesus, they were moved but didn't know what to do. So Peter said, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." He didn't have to convince them that their world was corrupt. He didn't have to unpack AI pictures or list the offenses of the emperor. They knew something wasn't right, and Peter offered a better way.

Now, our crowds don't always recognize corruption, some even mistake corruption for righteousness. So unlike Peter, we do need to convince people of today's offenses, but we can't stop there. We've gotta offer a better way. And that better way, basic as it sounds, starts with teaching this generation to see, learn, and

recognize the face of Jesus. He's there in the stranger. He's there among the beaten, the imprisoned, the meek. He blesses the peacemakers and the merciful. He stands up to warmongers and lays down the sword to do it. The king we follow wears a crown of thorns in place of gold, shows his wounds rather than hides his weakness, and wears red on picture day. If Emmaus teaches us anything, it's that sometimes it's not all that easy to recognize Jesus, even if we know him well. But sometimes it is.