

By: Rev. Wendy Depew Partelow

Rev. Wendy Depew Partelow is Vice President of the American Baptist Churches of New York State Board of Missions.

The Real Deal

I pondered this phrase I read recently by Carlo Carretto: “He who has told us, *Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you* (Luke 6:27), is scarcely likely to behave by another standard himself!”*



And so I began to think about that, about how Jesus never *broke character*. We have people we admire, people we look up to, mentors we want to emulate or leaders we want to follow; but at some point during our association with them we have to accept their flaws, overlook their faults and even forgive their sins. In short, we have to realize that they are only human with all of the frailty and vulnerability that that entails.

But with *Jesus*, with *Jesus* we don't have to accept that he is other than who he is - the Good News of the kingdom of God drawing as near as is possible: Jesus claims that with his coming the kingdom is near us, upon us, and within us. And we can trust what Jesus says. Jesus is The Real Deal, he is who he claims to be.

For example: Isaiah 61 begins: *The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners...to comfort all who mourn...* (61:1-2). It is prophecy and promise for deliverance and God's glorification.

Then at Jesus' first sermon in the synagogue, straight out of the temptation in the wilderness, he turns to Isaiah and reads the beginning verses of Isaiah 61 and follows it up with: *Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.* (Luke 4:14-21). The crowd of course says: *How dare you say that?!* But he doesn't back down, and he just *passes through the midst of them and goes on his way.* (Luke 4:30)

Ezekiel 34 speaks of God himself being the shepherd of his flock. God says the shepherds have not done a good job of caring for their sheep; they have grown fat themselves while their flocks have grown sick, wounded, and weak. They have allowed the flock to stray from the pasture and have not sought them and brought them home. And so God says, *I myself will search for my and sheep, and will seek them out...I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered...*

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will feed them on the mountains...I will feed them with good pasture...they shall lie down on good grazing land...I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep...I will seek the lost, and...bring back the strayed...bind up the injured...and strengthen the weak...I will feed them with justice. (Ezekiel 34:11-16)

Then Jesus comes claiming to be *The Good Shepherd, who looks after the sheep.* (John 10:11; Luke 15:1-7). He even leaves 99 sheep to look after themselves while he goes after that one sheep that has lost its way. And the dull-headed ask, *But what about the other 99?* Apparently they will be ok because somehow they got it, they got how to get along in the world, where that one who is lost keeps wandering away. He/she is the one who needs rescuing while the others just manage to live within the confines of the life that is set before them.

And Jesus *is* the Good Shepherd, he doesn't leave anyone out, and no matter how far they stray, he doesn't leave anyone behind. He calls to him *all who are weary and heavy laden and promises to give them rest.* (Matthew 11:28-30).

God gives instructions to Moses regarding immigrants: *The alien who resides with you shall be to as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.* (Leviticus 19:34). And the Psalmist advocates justice for the poor: *Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to the king's son. May he judge your people with righteousness and your poor with justice...may he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy and crush the oppressor.* (Ps. 72:1-4).

Then Jesus comes to his disciples saying, *Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me...Whenever you did it for the least of my family you did it for me.* (Matthew 25:34-36, 40).

And so it is safe to follow Jesus, because Jesus can be trusted. We don't have to accept his flaws, overlook his faults, or forgive him when he lets us down because he doesn't. Jesus is true to what he says, he does not back down when things get tough, he does not back-pedal when put to the test, and he doesn't make excuses when things go bad; he just promises that he will never leave us.

Yes, we can trust Jesus to act *in accordance* with what he says. When he says love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, he shows us how to do that, like when he is hanging on the cross all bruised and bloodied, and he prays for God to forgive those who put him there. (Luke 23:34) His steadfast love is true to the bitter end - which turns out to be only the beginning.... Yes, Jesus is the Real Deal, he will never let us down. Amen

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