

Show of hands: Who’s seen the series of commercials titled “He Gets Us”?

“He Gets Us” is an ad campaign about Jesus Christ. It’s aired in prime time since the billion-dollar initiative began last year, funded by a wealthy group of Christian donors. With videos, social media posts, and billboards, these ads never actually show the face of Jesus. Instead, they show ordinary people, like you and me.

One video depicts images of different families fighting with each other; the final frame says, “Jesus disagreed with loved ones, but he never disowned them.”

Another commercial opens with the line “a rebel took to the streets,” as photos show young people—some heavily tattooed, many people of color—running, skateboarding, and driving down city streets. It closes by saying “Jesus was wrongly judged.”

Instagram posts proclaim, “Jesus experienced pain,” “Jesus ran with a rough crowd too,” and “Jesus was a refugee.”

Bill McKendry, head of the ad agency responsible, says “the campaign aims to ‘raise the respect and relevancy of Jesus...and he hopes it encourages Christians to ‘reflect Jesus better in their life.’”¹

The mostly anonymous donors behind this effort purport to span political parties and ideologies. McKendry says, “We’ve gone to great lengths to make sure this is not politicized. There’s no agenda here other than we just want people to see what Jesus modeled, and we believe we would be a better society if we all learn from that.”

¹ <https://www.mlive.com/public-interest/2023/02/what-is-he-gets-us-michigan-agency-behind-20m-super-bowl-ad-for-jesus.html>

Some reporting claims the effort is tied to conservative, evangelical Christian groups that may have other motivations—and it has stirred up no small amount of controversy.²

Whatever is behind the movement, I find the ads themselves intriguing—and the message, “He Gets Us,” a powerful one.

Another show of hands: who’s watching the Superbowl tonight?

So, the He Gets Us ads are actually going to run during the Superbowl—two spots worth \$100 million.³

Think about that. During the most-expensive airtime of the year, where people sometimes talk more about the commercials than the game, we will see ads for Jesus Christ.

I find that absolutely fascinating.

Who knows if this ad campaign for Jesus will achieve its stated goals—the jury is still out. But whether you’re for or against the initiative, one thing’s for sure: it has people talking about Christianity.

One could argue though, that the best way to get people to know Jesus—the most-effective marketing—is how we Christians live our lives—both privately and what we show in public.

Our scripture today seems to focus on the public side—the law, rules, and commandments. In Deuteronomy, Moses tells the Israelites, “If you obey the

² <https://www.cnn.com/2023/02/11/us/he-gets-us-super-bowl-commercials-cec/index.html>

³ <https://www.npr.org/2023/02/06/1154880673/jesus-commercial-super-bowl-billboard-he-gets-us-hobby-lobby-evangelical-billion>

commandments of the Lord your God...by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess.” Psalm 119 says, “Happy are they whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord! Happy are they who observe his decrees and seek him with all their hearts!” And the Gospel harkens back to Old Testament commandments against murder, adultery, and swearing falsely in the Lord’s name.

If we’re being honest, such a heavy focus on laws and rules can be a little off-putting. And certainly, across history, people have perverted the law for their own agendas and their own gain. We see it used today to discriminate against different groups, from people of color to LGBTQ communities. We see it used to rob women of their rights. We see it used in the relentless pursuit of power, to oppress others, to try to suppress their voices and erase their history. We see it used to erect walls and fortify borders, to keep out people we think are not like us.

So, these readings can cause some discomfort. But it’s worth unpacking this and exploring the ways the message isn’t really about following the letter of the law.

In today’s Gospel, for example, Jesus turns our attention to the intent behind God’s commandments—to the offenses often known only to ourselves. He says, “...When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.” He draws radical comparisons between murder and the “more-benign” sins of holding grudges, harboring anger, and insulting others. Why? Because in word

and action, Jesus has always been about stepping away from judgement and moving toward reconciliation.

And let's be clear, Jesus' definition of brother and sister is—across Scripture—a broad one, just as his definition of neighbor is broad. We need only look at who he spent time with—those considered sinners, those outcast from their communities, those on the lowest rungs of society. We need only look at who Jesus broke the “rules” over—dining with hated tax collectors, interacting with women of ill repute, healing those afflicted by demons—those no one else dared to touch.

Jesus speaks often of how we are to treat “the least of these,” these, our brothers and sisters.

It can be easy to overlook our own failings and point to others. “At least I'm not a murderer.” “At least I'm not a thief.” At least I'm not...”...fill in the blank. But Jesus calls us to a different way of seeing each other, of getting each other, of loving each other.

What are the inward, private biases and tendencies toward judgment that ail us? In what ways are we still infants in Christ, prone to, as Paul says to the Corinthians, jealousy and quarreling and behaving according to the flesh?

How are we vulnerable to the temptations of our society, where, as Moses warns the Israelites, our hearts turn away and we do not hear—we are led astray and end up serving the gods of the world—those that keep us from living our fullest life in God.

The world is a breeding ground for the gods of pride and self-centeredness and lust for power—and the seeds of darkness hibernating in each of us. But

Epiphany illuminates not only on God present with us but also *within* us, a light far more powerful than those seeds of darkness sown by a broken world.

There is much going on today to be divided on—to cause quarreling and strife. As the Church, we have the opportunity to show people who Jesus really is—to be the walking, breathing advertisements for the manifestation of Christ among us. Through building of relationship, through acts of reconciliation, through respect for the dignity of every human being. As Christ's disciples, we don't just go to church. We *are* the Church—we represent Jesus in the world.

How will we help demonstrate that Jesus gets us, and that through Jesus, God offers us the choice for life?

We could start by being honest with ourselves. By not purporting to be “Good Christians” while harboring anger and hurling insults toward our fellow human beings, by being willing to name and own those things within us that keep us from spreading God's message of love.

From there, we can move toward identifying places where we can help foster relationship and reconciliation. We can move toward the kind of spiritual maturity Paul speaks to, realizing it is God who gives us growth, that under a common purpose we are God's servants, working together...God's field, God's building.”

Here at Christ Church, I believe we embrace a broad definition of neighbor. In many ways we support people on the margins, in our community, across our nation, and around the globe, from those in our community suffering from housing and food insecurity, to the people of Syria and Turkey devastated by recent earthquakes.

We also foster the concepts of healing and reconciliation. Consider, for instance, the almost \$8,000 we've raised for the diocesan reparations fund. Reparations that our diocese and the national church have called a fundamental calling—a calling that stems from our baptismal covenant vows to strive for justice and peace, to seek and serve Christ in all persons.

It's an effort not about me taking personal responsibility for the evils of slavery, or about taking money from my pocket and putting it into the pocket of a Black person. Rather, it is about supporting initiatives and programs to make significant impacts to advance underserved Black communities—in areas such as education, healthcare, affordable housing, and job creation.

I am grateful to all here who've given to support reparations. I've seen how generous the people of Christ Church are. We've raised \$5,000 in a two-week period for school supplies for Lake Elkhorn Middle School. In a short amount of time, we recently raised over \$10,000 for handbells for our choir.

I would be remiss, though, as we sit in the middle of Black History Month, if I didn't point out that we are more than a year out from when we first put out the call for contributions toward the reparations fund. And we are not there yet—we have not yet met our very reasonable \$10,000 goal.

If we want to show that we recognize and want to help rectify the wrongs of the past, that we truly want to eradicate the ongoing injustices and inequities born of our history, we need to do more than put a "Reject Racism" sign on our front lawn one month out of the year.

I pray that as individuals and as a church community, we search deep within for the ways we need to dissolve bias, apathy, and hardness of heart in all its forms. May we find the courage to move toward reconciliation on the many issues that call us to stop pointing fingers, to stop ignoring the plight of our brethren, and to truly live into the promises made at our baptism.

Before we can show the world that Jesus Gets Us, we need to get ourselves, and we need to get each other. Let us pray for an open heart and mind and a discerning spirit, to allow Epiphany to shine a light on those places within where we can more closely follow the spirit of God's commandments—the greatest of those being to love our neighbor—so we may be empowered to serve as living embodiments of God's message of radical hospitality, radical inclusivity, radical love.