

"Many Will Come in My Name" A sermon based on Luke 21:5-19 delivered by Rev. Alison Andrea Young on November 16, 2025 at the First Congregational UCC of Onekama, Michigan.

"Then Jesus began to say to them, "beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray." As people of the 20th and 21st Centuries, we hardly need to search very far to know what Jesus was trying to warn us about. Who can forget Jim Jones at Jonestown administering the grape Kool-Aid communion, which was poisoned, killing hundreds of people in his name? This event was so significant that a catch phrase "he or she drank the Kool-Aid" has become part of our vernacular. Waco Texas had the Branch Davidians—78 people died all in the name of David Korech who purported to be like Jesus. And then there were the followers of sect leader Belgian Canadian, Luc Jouret, who killed 23 men, women and children at Cheiry—and even 100 miles away 25 more bodies were found in a mountain hamlet—in his name.

And still today there are many of these kinds of cults operating in the United States. Take the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, which is a polygamous offshoot of the Mormon Church that's been criticized for its treatment of women and children. Under the leadership of Warren Jeffs, who is currently serving a life sentence for child sexual assault, the group enforced strict rules about marriage and obedience. Many young girls were forced into underage marriages. While Jeffs is behind bars, the FLDS continues to operate in isolated communities in states like Utah and Arizona. Former members have described it as a community built on fear and control.

And, maybe most disturbing is the remnant of the "People's Temple" of Jonestown which still operates today. While the infamous Jonestown massacre occurred in 1978, some survivors of the People's Temple continued to carry on Jim

Jones' teachings. Small groups of followers exist today, keeping Jones' ideology alive through private gatherings and online forums. They reject mainstream narratives about Jonestown, often blaming external forces for the tragedy. Critics argue these groups perpetuate dangerous revisionist history. The lingering presence of the People's Temple is a haunting reminder of its dark past.

Why? What was going on here? Over 2000 years ago Jesus warned us to beware of just such men who claim to be like him—some have even claimed to BE him. And yet, countless people still fall prey to the evil of cults and sects—often in the name of living a fuller Christian life. Is our need to belong so strong and our need to be told what we should believe so strong that our brain power shuts down in the face of such men?

I don't have an answer—but I do have some observations. When I lived in Bangor, Maine—there was a huge Independent Baptist Church on Broadway just outside of town. I had to pass it every day as I went to and from work and school. Coincidentally, I also had to pass the small Congregational Church across the highway which had died giving birth to this monster of a Baptist Church. The key to this transformation from a small Congregational Church to a large Independent Baptist one was the strong charismatic personality of a non-seminary trained pastor—and his greed for power. Once he out-grew the white-steepled Congregational Church building—he sold it to the Assembly of God denomination and began to build a huge facility across the highway. It was really a church and Christian School complex, not just a church—and he had plans to build a Christian College in the fields that they owned behind the present complex. Now—the building and growing of churches and Christian schools is not bad in itself—not at all. But what was evil—was the way the pastor went about it. Calling on the faith of his flock to "move mountains," they were encouraged to take out second mortgages on their homes and to donate that money to the church for its building fund. Many, many

people did this and when the job market turned sour, these people, mostly lower middle class, blue-collar workers in one of the poorest states in this country, lost more than their jobs, they also lost their houses. When they turned to the church, they were told "Sorry—that was your choice to do that—and the money is already spent."

Then—it came out that the pastor, while preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ from the pulpit, was being sexually inappropriate with many of his female parishioners behind the closed doors of his office. These victims were mostly widows. It took the public confession of his organist, who had been recently widowed as a young woman, to bring this out into the open. It was brought out that he had promised to divorce his wife and marry her. The pastor finally resigned, but not before he said that all should be forgiven and he should be able to keep his expensive car and house which had been purchased by the church!

Many beautiful and pious words can come out of people's mouths. They can talk the talk, but it is their behavior, how they live their lives and how they walk the walk that counts. This is what Jesus was trying to warn all of us about in our Gospel lesson this morning. This is what all those tragic people in Jonestown, and Waco, and Switzerland, and even Bangor, Maine, had forgotten. They had forgotten that words mean nothing. Bible pounding means nothing. All of that surface glitz means nothing if the actions of the one doing the talking are opposed to the gospel. If, in short, evil is allowed to rule a person's life then they are living a lie.

And this is so important to talk about, because we are a people who tend not to remember very well. We do not seem to learn well from our history. We let history repeat itself. That seems so clear to me, because maybe ten years after the Bangor pastor had resigned, there was a feature article in Yankee Magazine about how he has moved back into town and taken over another small struggling church,

and how the people are just thrilled to have him as their minister. Transformation is possible. The man could have changed completely, because we know that everything is possible through Christ. However, if I were his parishioner, I would be very careful not to get so enthralled with his beautiful words and speeches that I forgot to watch where his feet were taking him!

There is a classic story that is told about an evil, treacherous man, whose face was disfigured by the evil thoughts that he had and by his lust for power and material things. Called “The Happy Hypocrite” and written by Max Beerbohm in 1897 it goes like this:

The protagonist is named Lord George Hell. A worldly man, he is a dandy, fond of gambling, drinking, womanising, and the like. He is enjoying lavish outdoor entertainment in London with his lover, La Gambogi, when a young and innocent dancer named Jenny Mere performs on the stage. A dwarf sitting with Lord George, revealed to be Cupid, shoots his arrow into Lord George's breast.

Lord George boldly proposes marriage to Jenny, but she says that she will only marry a man with the face of a saint. Confused, Lord George spends the night wandering the streets, heartbroken. In the morning, he stumbles upon a mask maker shop of a man named Mr. Aeneas. He purchases a saint's face mask, custom altered to bear the mark of true love. La Gambogi, who sees him leave the shop with his new false face, confronts him, but he pretends not to know her and retreats to Kensington, intending to return to London that evening to see Jenny perform again. However, while viewing his new look in the reflection of a brook, he sees Jenny, leaps across the brook and proposes marriage. Jenny accepts.

Starting with signing the marriage register as "George Heaven", Lord George makes a total moral conversion by returning ill-gotten wealth to gamblers he had cheated to the rightful owners, donating excess money to charities. He then buys a woodman's cottage to live a quiet, modest existence. The newlyweds lead a simple life subsisting on "bread and honey and little strawberries ... seed-cake and dewberry wine".^[5]

One month after the marriage, as the happy couple is celebrating the occasion, La Gambogi shows up and refuses to leave until she is granted one last look at Lord George's true face. A scuffle between the three people results in La Gambogi tearing off George's mask. Although he fears that his true love is lost, it turns out that his face has assumed the contours of the mask. Jenny concludes with ecstasy that he was testing her fidelity for a time before revealing his true beautiful face.

La Gambogi leaves the couple happily kissing as the mask melts in the sun.¹

Yes, transformation can happen—as in the story of the evil man with the mask—but notice HOW that transformation happened—it was through a habitual change in behavior. It was not through empty words from his lips. In fact, he was unaware of the change until it had already happened. He had acted "as if" for so long that he actually became the good man that had always been buried deep inside!

It is behavior that counts, not empty words. Jesus was well aware of this, for when Jesus warns his disciples "Many will come in my name and say, 'I am He!'", he finishes off by telling them to beware because what those people say is not all there is to it. He says, "and they will lead many astray." It is the leading astray, the wayward behavior, the negative actions that Jesus is worried about, not the words! People claiming to be Jesus with their lip is not what causes the damage. It is only when people believe that lie and make changes in their behavior because of it that damage happens. Jim Jones, David Korech, Luc Jouret, our Bangor pastor friend, the survivors of Jonestown, the continuing followers of the Fundamental Church of Latter-Day Saints and so many more are saying they are the ones we should listen to. Many will come in my name—Jesus warned us—Beware—and watch your feet—lest you get lead astray! Amen.

¹ Wikipedia