

Plastic Jesus Sermon Series  
Sermon #1: Spiritual Suburbia  
September 10, 2023  
Rev. Dr. Kory Wilcoxson

In the late 1950s a group of Disciples who were members of Central Christian Church in downtown had a vision for starting a new church on the very outskirts of Lexington, an area that was still fields and farmland. But the city of Lexington was growing, and that group knew that those fields would soon become houses and that farmland would be taken over by Walgreens and Starbucks. And so, in 1959 Crestwood Christian Church was born, far away from the hustle and bustle of downtown, nestled in a quiet, growing neighborhood.

The church is still here, the neighborhood is here, and many of you live near here, or in some other suburb that use to be farmland on the outskirts of Lexington. Our city may not be big enough to claim to have suburbs, we can easily claim a suburban mentality. Suburbs became popular in our country because people were looking for a certain quality of life that an urban setting could no longer offer: safety, security, comfort. But is that the life to which Jesus calls us? In the passage I just read, Jesus says, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” Are we living the abundant life to which Jesus calls us?

That’s the question I hope to explore as we start a new sermon series today called “Plastic Jesus.” I want to make the case for the existence of a suburban spirituality, which is colored by the qualities offered to us by a life in the suburbs. No matter where you live, you are susceptible to pursuing those qualities, things like convenience, security, and comfort. While on the surface those sound like good things to have, I want to argue that they are actually threats to our spiritual life. How do we keep ourselves from settling into a spiritual comfort zone so deeply that we replace the real Jesus with a plastic Bobblehead model that simply nods yes to all our requests? Or, as I read recently, how do we continue worshipping Jesus as our Lord instead of treating him like a mascot? Our suburban existence works against that.

I spent the first four years of my first marriage living in apartments. It wasn’t a terrible existence. The places we lived in were somewhat bigger than my car and the roaches were very polite. But from the moment I got married, I had a dream: to own a house.

That dream became reality once we moved to the Chicago area in 2001 after I graduated from seminary. We bought a 3-bedroom, 2 ½-bath home on a corner lot in a northern suburb of Chicago. We met our neighbors, found the nearest grocery, bought a lawn mower. I had this satisfying feeling of arrival. We had escaped the hand-to-mouth existence of cheap apartments and part-time jobs; we had graduated to the suburbs. And that felt...well, here’s what writer Eric Bogosian said: “If you say the word ‘city’, people have no problem thinking of the city as rife with problematic, screwed-up people, but if you say suburbs, there’s a sense of normalcy.” I finally felt...normal. House. Minivan. Brown picket fence. Basketball goal in the driveway. A 7-11 on the corner. Comfort. Security. Convenience. We had made it.

But, the longer we lived there, the more I had this nagging question in the back of my mind. Was Jesus calling me to be...normal? Was my quality of life best defined by

comfort and security and convenience, or as a follower of Christ should I be using another set of criteria? I found myself resonating with author Eric Sandras, who lamented the fact that, in the suburbs, he found himself “living in a spiritual suburbia with nice sidewalks and picket fences around my Christianity.” He says following Christ is supposed to be an adventure, but there’s nothing adventurous about a suburban spirituality.

But, let’s be honest: Do we really want adventure in our faith? To the contrary, our lives contain a lot of evidence that what we want most is comfort and security. Our existence and our culture revolve around risk management. We like adventure as long as it’s confined to a ride at King’s Island or ziplining on vacation. But when we’re home, we don’t want adventure; we want assurance, we want routine. We want insulation from adventure, relief from risk. Think about it: we have dual side airbags, security systems, and home insurance, life insurance, car insurance, flood insurance, fire insurance, earthquake insurance, and faulty insurance insurance.

And from God, we want “I’m a good person” insurance, which insures we stay off of God’s naughty list. David Goetz, in his book “Death by Suburb,” says we have a contractual arrangement with God: I do good things, God blesses me. We go to church, we give money, and we serve when asked, as long as we have time and aren’t overscheduled.. But doing good things can sometimes be the enemy of the deep, intimate things that need to happen at our spiritual core. We pray and plan and organize in an attempt to protect ourselves from the capriciousness of life to the point that when life doesn’t go as we plan and tragedy strikes, we wonder where God went wrong. “I thought we had a deal! I’ve done a lot of good things!” A suburban spirituality creates in us the illusion that we can protect ourselves from change, from tragedy, from our own mortality. And we expect our mascot Jesus to play along.

This has always been the temptation of the people of God – to tame him. If we let God be active in our lives, that increases mystery, because you never know where God is going to call you. But we don’t want mystery. If you don’t agree, how do you feel when the dishwasher repair guy says he’ll be at your house sometime between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m.? We don’t like surprises, not even from our Savior, so we do our best to domesticate him. Sandras says we treat Jesus like a cosmic pizza delivery person. We call out to him, but only open the door halfway and limit just how close he can get to us in order not to feel uncomfortable. We sometimes think his only job is to deliver to us what we are asking (preferable in 30 minutes or less). That is comfort and security and convenience, all things we value. But that is not the life we have been called to live by Jesus.

The goal of suburban spirituality is not to live a Christ-like existence; it is to maintain a certain quality of life. And we expect God to help us do that. Author Marva Dawn says it quite pointedly: “The Good News is no longer life-changing. It is life-enhancing. Jesus doesn’t change people into wild-eyed radicals anymore; he changes them into nice people.” Nice people. Is that all Jesus is calling us to be?

I think this question of what kind of Christians we are formed to be is at the heart of our existence. Because I believe, deep down within our soul, we know something is wrong. This isn’t a feeling that we should be doing more; it’s a realization that there’s a difference between being a Christian and being a follower of Christ. We are desperate for the something more that Jesus offers. Jesus says, “I have come so they may have life, and

have it abundantly.” Jesus wants us to have a full life. Is this it? Does a full life mean a full schedule, a full credit card, and a house full of stuff?

We are good at living lives full of appointments and activities, but that only produces breadth. Isn’t one of the biggest dangers these days “spreading myself too thin”? In spiritual suburbia, we have breadth, but we lack depth. We are so spread out that we end up with a shallow spirituality, with no means or guidance on how to go, not farther or faster, but deeper. And in that shallowness, we only have time and energy and bandwidth to practice maintenance Christianity, to squeeze in an occasional book on Christian living or a spiritual podcast. We trade being a follower of Christ for being a consumer of Christ.

What I hope we can do together in the next several weeks is explore some different things we can do together to go deeper. Much of what we experience in spiritual suburbia throws up roadblocks to doing that. The cacophony of noise discourages silence, the incessant scheduling stifles Sabbath, and the subtle but pervasive competitive spirit leaves no room for humility. How do we keep ourselves from seeking comfort, security, and convenience in our spirituality? How do we join Jesus on the adventure of faith?

That’s the choice we face, and in a world where we are absolutely overrun with choices, it may feel hard to deal with one more. But this choice is potentially life-changing, because when we truly get to know Jesus, we will realize he is asking us to choose. Which empire do you serve? What God do you bow down to? What qualities do you want in abundance? We might dream occasionally of escaping this life, full of responsibilities and demands and choices. But can we really escape a mortgage, a lawn that needs mowing, and a full calendar of school plays and parent-teacher conferences?

The other option is to realize that Jesus is here with us. But he doesn’t look like we think he should look, or even how we want him to look. He’s not comfortable, he’s not safe, and a life lived in Christ is not convenient. We have become convinced that there are more important things to pursue than a deep, meaningful relationship with God. But the power of Jesus lies in offering us a better way, of moving us from desperation to transformation. Christ offers us a full life, a deep life, a life lived in him, if we are willing to move beyond just being nice, just maintaining our faith. We can either courageously explore our longing for something more, or we can pat our mascot Jesus on the head and act like everything is fine. Is everything fine? We don’t need to escape our spiritual suburbia; we need to develop the kind of life that helps us find Jesus there. And that life is anything but normal.