

“The Well-Behaved Christian”

Rev. David Gregory

February 24, 2019

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany



The Sermon on the Mount
James Tissot

First reading

Robin Meyers in *Saving Jesus from the Church:*

How to Stop Worshiping Christ and Start Following Jesus

We have come to a moment in human history when the message of the Sermon on the Mount could indeed save us, but it can no longer be heard above the din of dueling doctrines. Consider this: there is not a single word in that sermon about what to *believe*, only words about what to *do*. It is a behavioral manifesto, not a propositional one. Yet three centuries later, when the Nicene Creed became the official oath of Christendom, there was not a single word in it about what to do, only about what to believe

The difference between following and worshiping is not insignificant. Worshiping is an inherently passive activity, since it involves the adoration of that to which the worshiper cannot aspire. It takes the form of praise, which can be both sentimental and self-satisfying, without any call to changed behavior or self-sacrifice. In fact, Christianity as a belief system requires nothing but acquiescence. Christianity as a way of life, as a path to follow, requires a second birth, the conquest of ego, and new eyes with which to see the world. It is no wonder that we have preferred to be saved.

Second reading

Matthew 5:1-11 – New Revised Standard Version

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

“What are we going to do?” This was a good question for the earliest followers of a first century teacher from Nazareth named Jeshuva, who had a following among the poorest, most desperate people of his day. People who are starving don’t have much use for dogma; they need food. People who are feeling displaced and unsafe have little interest in how the world came to be in its current situation; they just need a place to call home. And so it follows that this young rabbi wouldn’t gather people on a hillside to tell them that all of their needs will be met if they believe the right things. That kind of propositional teaching would have fallen on deaf ears, much like it does today. “What are we going to do?” It was a good question for the apostles after the crucifixion, gathered in an upper room in Jerusalem, not knowing what might happen to them if they were to be discovered. People who live in fear and uncertainty aren’t in the mood to debate the finer points of theology. They just need to know what they are facing, how to proceed, much like they do today.

In those early days, before the councils, before the creeds and doctrines, before anything resembling institution, there was a “way to live,” and those who followed it were called “People of the Way.” And though many of the oral traditions circulated for decades before being written down, it is quite likely that the source material for the sayings of Jesus began to be written down in the first ten or fifteen years after the crucifixion. This source material makes up what has come to be known as the Sermon on the Mount, taking up three chapters in the Book of Matthew. It probably wasn’t a singular event, but rather a collection of sayings that people remembered hearing from Jesus. It is said that people found his teaching profound and authoritative, and of a quality far different from that of the scribes and Pharisees. They were teachings that resonated with the outcasts, with the victims of religion and empire, the people who were marginalized, tossed aside, considered unimportant to those in power, people who were unloved, disrespected. People who were unhappy. It was to these unhappy people that Jesus spoke these words, “Happy are the poor in spirit, for to them belongs the kingdom of heaven.”

You’ve got my attention. Hopefully you’re going to feed me, but tell me more. “Happy are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” Sounds a little crazy to me, but keep going. “Happy are the meek, because they are going to inherit everything.” Well that’s just plain crazy. Is dinner ready yet? You get the idea. They are desperate and hungry, and he’s telling them that there is a hunger and a thirst that is deeper than the one they’re feeling. It’s a tough sell, but it gets their attention, and once they start receiving physical food, once they’re healed, once they are respected and treated as human beings, they begin to drop what they’re doing in favor of something else, in favor of someone else. Until now, no one had given them hope. There had been other insurgents who would rise and fall. There would be more in the future, but this one, this teacher, this rabbi taught like none of them. These words form what Robin Meyers calls a behavioral manifesto. They come, as he says, from a Jesus we can follow rather than from a Christ we must worship. And this is the Jesus that we are uncovering layer by layer here at Community Congregational Church throughout the coming year.

We’ve had a lot of detours over the last two thousand years. The message has gotten lost in institutional power structures, in patriarchy, in systems designed to control and to preserve power. And every once in a while, at least every five hundred years or so, the detour becomes so blatantly obvious that the most vulnerable among us say, “Enough! Let’s do something about this.” It’s how reformations happen, and I think it’s why one is happening now.

Children and young people have been preyed upon by those who were supposed to be their spiritual leaders. And the root of the problem is not just a Catholic problem, or a Protestant problem or an evangelical problem; it is an institutional problem. Once we've taken the detour and become defenders of the doctrine, we forget how we're supposed to be in the world. It's a short step then to saying, "As long as I believe the right things, it doesn't really matter what I do." And when Jesus says, "If anyone causes one of these little ones to stumble, it is better that a millstone is tied to them," and you know the rest. How can something so blatant, so heinous, so obviously wrong continue to prevail among the institutionally religious? We don't need any more church councils to study the issue. We just need to dig this out from the roots and start over. The root of the issue, as Meyers says, is that

Christianity as a belief system requires nothing but acquiescence. Christianity as a way of life, as a path to follow, requires a second birth, the conquest of ego, and new eyes with which to see the world.

My earliest seminary training was more of an indoctrination than an education. It was more about proving ourselves right and others wrong, and less about spiritual practices or about how to live. This is the greatest heresy of our generation – that belief supersedes practice – and it's a heresy that our younger folks can smell from forty miles away. So when we say that we are looking for the rebirthing of God, when we talk about the catastrophic collapse of Christianity, when we call ourselves midwives of that which is being born in its place, what we're really saying is that we need to abandon our most recent detour, the one where church is about dominance and control. We need a serious examination of our shadows and a firm commitment to get real, to stop preaching and start practicing. We've got to ask ourselves the question everyone else is asking, "Why church?" And if we cannot come up with a decent answer to that one, we need to get busy with something else.

We've now spent a year together in this place, and whether you're new to our community or have been here all along, every milestone is really a crossroads. There's no choice that we make that can be once and for all. We must choose again and again and again. Every day is a choice. Every Sunday you make a choice to be here. Let's figure out why, and together let's figure out what we're going to do now.