

“Let’s Talk About Jesus”

Rev. David Gregory

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Realm of Christ



The Beatitudes Sermon
James Tissot

First reading

Richard Rohr and John Feister in

Jesus’ Plan for a New World: The Sermon on the Mount

The Bible is surely the most controversial book ever in print. It has done an immense amount of good. Unfortunately, it probably has also caused more damage than any other text. Throughout history we clearly see how many Christians acted in oppressive, ignorant, and abusive ways in the name of Jesus and the Gospel (two of the most damning examples being the support of slavery and the subjugation and colonization of indigenous peoples). It seems that to many Christians it did not matter what Jesus really said or did. They just needed an imperial God-figure, and Jesus was used to fit the bill. It could just as well have been Howdy Doody.

Most Christians preconceive Jesus as “the divine Savior of our divine church,” which prematurely settles all the dust and struggle of his human experience. Such a predisposition does not open us to enlightenment so we also can have the mind of Christ, but in fact, deadens and numbs our perception. Too often we read the Bible with an eye to prove this understanding of “our” Jesus so that our ideas and our church are right—and others are wrong. If we are honest enough to admit this bias, we may have a chance of letting go of it for a richer understanding of the Gospel.

Second reading

John 18:33-37 Common English Bible

Pilate went back into the palace. He summoned Jesus and asked, “Are you the king of the Jews?” Jesus answered, “Do you say this on your own or have others spoken to you about me?” Pilate responded, “I’m not a Jew, am I? Your nation and its chief priests handed you over to me. What have you done?” Jesus replied, “My kingdom doesn’t originate from this world. If it did, my guards would fight so that I wouldn’t have been arrested by the Jewish leaders. My kingdom isn’t from here.” “So you are a king?” Pilate said. Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. I was born and came into the world for this reason: to testify to the truth. Whoever accepts the truth listens to my voice.”

Several years ago I was part of a team in the New York Conference of the United Church of Christ that focused on the beginning of new congregations. With that in mind, early in 2012 I gathered a small group of people around a table in a diner in Kingston, New York to test the waters and see if there might be some interest in a new kind of congregation, one based in contemplative practice, creative arts, and social justice. (I was pretty much looking to create a “CCC.” I just didn’t know what that was yet.)

I will never forget this little eclectic gathering over some cups of really bad coffee. I was hearing things like, “I really don’t know what I think about Jesus.” “I’m spiritual, but I’m not really religious.” “I’m not really comfortable with the word, ‘God.’” I remember thinking to myself, “This is really interesting. How might we create a faith community with people who aren’t really sure if Jesus is relevant to them, or if ‘God’ is even a good way to refer to the divine?” Even though that group never really got off the ground, that evening launched a quest in my own life to find the relevance of this person we call Jesus, and to get to the very heart of what it means to be part the thing we call church. That quest ultimately led me here, to the established version of what I was exploring as a possible new community. Like most New Yorkers, I had yet to realize that whatever I might dream up is probably already happening . . . in California.

So here I am, an ordained minister in the United Church of *Christ*, serving at Community Congregational *Church*, as together, hand in hand, we live out the questions without ever fully embracing the answers. As I told some of the folks in last Monday’s Inquirer’s Session, this is pretty much a “church for grown-ups,” which is not in any sense intended to sound elitist. It’s really just an expression of the fact that we’re a little messy in our approach to things that usually define churches. Most religious communities are far more prescriptive when it comes to governing what their “adherents” adhere to. It is in the DNA of this congregation to listen to and to honor many paths, but this does not mean that we don’t have some really important things to talk about when we talk about Jesus. And although through the centuries Christianity has been employed as a tool of a lopsided, left-brained patriarchy, invested mainly in its self-perpetuation, this doesn’t mean that we should reject the enlightened teachings attributed to Jesus of Nazareth simply because the language has been co-opted by a system that no longer resembles him.

Richard Rohr is a Roman Catholic priest, a Franciscan friar, a Christian mystic, and a prolific author. The thrust of his message is that spiritual practice supersedes dogma. His view is that the top-down hierarchical nature of western Christianity (since Constantine) has held ecumenical traditions back for centuries, and that the future of people of faith will have to be an awakening to a bottom-up approach. The bottom line for me is that Richard Rohr is one example of why I can still refer to myself as a Christian. There, I said it. Out loud. In this room.

Beginning next Sunday, we shall embark on the journey we call Advent, the beginning of a new calendar year in the Christian tradition. We’re all aware of the beauty of this season: the darkness, the stillness, the gestation of the story that we’ll be talking openly about on Christmas Eve. The last Sunday before Advent, which is today, is traditionally given the proud moniker “Christ the King Sunday” in all of its Constantinian glory. I love Richard Rohr’s take on such an idea. “To many

Christians it did not matter what Jesus said or did. They just needed an imperial God-figure, and Jesus was used to fit the bill. It could just as well have been Howdy Doody.”

In today’s gospel reading, when Pilate asks Jesus if he is a king, he answers, “You say that I’m a king. I came here for one reason and that is to tell you the truth.” That truth, as we have seen and heard, is not popular among those who are invested in wielding power, those who seek to subjugate the hated “others,” those who feel threatened by the messiness of the simple message “love your neighbor as yourself.” What Jesus was saying to Pilate was essentially “You’re all worried about maintaining power. I didn’t come here for that purpose. I came here to speak truth to power.” We all know how well that went. So instead of celebrating this myth that Jesus was born in order to subjugate the human race under a hierarchy of doctrine, we can celebrate this culmination of everything he did and taught—namely the speaking of truth to the one person who had the power to either let him go or send him to his death.

It appears that Jesus did not shrink away from his message or his mission. Instead of hiding in a cave where people could sit at his feet and learn, he was out there, comforting the afflicted, afflicting the comfortable. And if we were to follow this Jesus here at the Community Congregational Church, it would mean that we do not sit up here on this rock and wait for people to find us. It would not mean that we simply love ourselves for who we are and what we have. In loving others as we love ourselves, we are moved to the bottom of this hill, into the avenues of the world around us, caring for the kids trapped in an educational system that disadvantages them, caring for immigrants trapped in a housing situation that holds them hostage, caring for those whose healthcare has been turned into a political football. It would involve feeding the homeless, clothing those who have no means, finding sustainable shelter for those who have none. It means standing for basic human rights for everyone, regardless of race, religion, physical ability, gender identity or expression, or any human condition at all.

Just who is this person we call “Jesus?” I’d like to propose that we find out. Next week as we begin to tell the story again for the millionth time, let’s tell it in a new way. Let’s figure out a way to get the story of this Jesus into the consciousness of those around us, perhaps even into our own consciousness for the first time. Instead of Christianity being a tradition we’re afraid to embrace, why not boldly state the terms under which we are willing to be referred to this way. When someone asks you if you are a Christian, perhaps it is time to say, “Well, it depends on what you mean by that. Let me tell you what I mean by that, and I will answer your question.”

The times in which we are living require that we be grounded in spiritual practice, that we speak clearly, stand firmly, love generously and welcome extravagantly. We have to have a firm grasp of who we are, and the ability to reach across all lines and demographics to express ourselves within the human race. We need to honor and embrace the enlightened teachings that pull us ever forward. Let’s spend the next year telling the story, and a year from now on this very Sunday, let’s get together and see what we think of Jesus then.

Amen.