

Gary Harder, November 10, 2013

“Why I am still...a Christian”

“Why I still find Jesus so compelling”

Texts: Matthew 5:1-11; 43-48

Philippians 2:1-11

I am sure that you Montrealers are now quite envious of us Torontonians. I'm thinking mayors here. You have a brand new mayor who has rather quietly been elected by 13% of you, or 32% of those of you who actually voted. Not particularly impressive, but neither did it make world headlines. Our mayor, on the other hand, has gained world-wide attention and celebrity status, even making guest appearances on late night shows around the world. Wow. And with this glare of publicity on him, his approval rating in Toronto is over 40%. Aren't you just a bit jealous? Ah, the mysteries of politics.

Another part of our human condition – perhaps human mystery – is why we give such high approval ratings to violence – violence in our games (especially hockey and football), violence on our t.v.'s, and the violence behind our ever growing military budgets here in Canada. It's already hard to remember Canada's once good reputation as “peace keepers”.

Tomorrow is Remembrance Day. What is it that we want to remember about the end of a World War? What remembrance would incline us more to a way of peace rather than a way of violence?

Introduction

My conviction is that we need to remember the life and words of Jesus as the most-clear alternative to a culture of violence. One reason that I chose to preach on the theme “Why I still find Jesus so compelling” is because of Remembrance Day, and because I see in Jesus such a powerful force for peace.

I must share with you a twist of perspective that Marilyn Zehr, pastor in T.U.M.C. gave us in her sermon last Sunday. She was preaching on the story of Zacchaeus. She said that some people can testify that their own lives were really messed up, and then they met Jesus, and everything got sorted out again. In that sense, meeting Jesus fixed them and resolved their messed up lives. But there are other people – Like Zacchaeus - who were doing just fine, thank you, life going quite well indeed, until they met Jesus, and meeting Jesus got them all messed up. Just look at what Zacchaeus did after meeting Jesus – he gave half of his possessions away and reimbursed all those he had defrauded four times what he had stolen from them. Meeting Jesus really messed up his life. What does Jesus mean when he says, “today salvation has come to this house?” What did salvation mean for Zacchaeus when it destroyed his high class living?

Or take the disciples of Jesus. Life was good, and normal, going on with earning a living, maybe fishing or collecting taxes, and suddenly they meet Jesus and life gets turned up-side-down. “Leave your nets and follow me”, comes the invitation. And they follow – they follow to uncertainty and then fear, and some to execution – their lives really got messed up by Jesus, didn’t they?

So, yes, we can and do bring our messed up lives to Jesus for healing and fixing and saving. But maybe he also invites us into a messed up way of living, a counter-cultural, counter violence way of living. And maybe observing remembrance in a Jesus way is to risk permanently having our lives messed up – messed up by putting his way of peace at the center of them.

In some ways it is both more difficult – and yet also in some ways easier, to talk about Jesus in our post-Christian context today. It is more difficult because we live in a world where less and less people name themselves Christian, and where in a multi religious world you want to be tolerant and you don’t want to be offensive. It is also more difficult because for many people the name Jesus has become associated with both theological and political fundamentalism which sees Jesus as a warrior condemning anyone who hasn’t given their heart to him.

But in some ways it’s easier to talk about Jesus today. For many people you can start from scratch because they know almost nothing about him - people will listen. And so, for example, in our Muslim – Christian dialogue the Muslims want us to talk about Jesus, just as they want to talk about Mohamed. They do talk about Jesus as a prophet, and want to hear how we see Jesus. One of our Muslim friends from Iran teaches Christianity in their Seminary. He has memorized the Gospels, and speaks very reverently of “Our Lord Jesus Christ”

But why do I still name myself a Christian – a Jesus follower? Why do I still find this Jesus so compelling?

Personal context

The answer to the question of why I am still a Christian isn’t that self-evident. There have been many times in my life when I have failed miserably in being a Jesus follower. And there have been a few times when I have really questioned my earlier commitment and wondered whether I even still wanted to be called a Christian. It was hard sometimes to read or hear about what some Christians have done, and continue to do, supposedly in the name of Christ – some of the most brutal wars in history, some of the most unloving behaviours within the church - so much oppression and repression and judgmentalism, imperialism and excommunications – all in the name of Jesus who lived and taught none of these things. It was hard sometimes to want to continue to be known as a Christian – until I would read Jesus again in the Gospels and fall in love all with him all over again.

We have had some fascinating discussions with Muslim friends, both about how we see Jesus, - especially his way of peace - and about our insistence on adult believer’s baptism – about the personal choice we have to make to become a Christian. To them this is very strange. You are born a Muslim. Period. There is no personal choice. And once a Muslim, always a Muslim. You can be a good or pious Muslim, or you can be a non-practicing and impious one, but you can never not be a Muslim.

The personal choice thing is quite incomprehensible to them. And yet our Muslim friends do honour Jesus – as a great prophet, not as a saviour, the son of God.

Personal anecdote

It was while we were visiting Iran in 2000 as guests of some of the religious leaders of Iran that we were asked a specific question about Jesus. We were touring the city of Shiraz, and were taken to meet with the University president, Ayatollah Khamenei's representative, and to be interviewed by the editor of the student newspaper. His last question surprises us and catches us a bit off guard. Muslims in Iran are mostly Shiite. Shiite's talk about the 12 Imams who lived on earth. An Imam is "one appointed by God as a spiritual leader". The 12th Imam lived on earth some centuries ago, and just "disappeared" from visible sight, but is still thought to be invisibly present. When the time is right, he is expected to reappear on earth to "conquer and rule the world for Allah". Question? You Christians also believe that Jesus will return to earth in the future. Could our 12th Imam and your Jesus be one and the same person?

Good question. Doesn't our text for today from Philippians say, "Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father". Is Jesus then not also coming back to earth to "conquer", just like the 12th Imam?

We are tempted to give a quick, easy answer to avoid the deeper implications of the question – could easily be that the coming to earth of the 12th Imam and of Jesus are one and the same thing. But we are too uncomfortable with that. The picture we had been given over and over again of these Imams and of most Iranian heroes, and of Mohamed himself, is that piety and violence are always combined – they are the two sides of a complete whole. On the one side is piety and compassion and love, and on the other side always the sword or the gun.

We knew that this was also true of how the majority of Christians see Jesus and what it means to be a Christian. Jesus will come again conquering and destroying all the evil people, all the enemies of God in the great battle of Armageddon. And so it has been from the time of emperor Constantine who made the Roman Empire Christian in the 4th century who said "In the cross of Christ, conquer", to the crusades, to Nazism, to the chaplains who blessed the plane and crew carrying the atomic bombs to Japan, to the way the church in Canada joined the government in trying to kill the Indian in our aboriginal people – all in the name of Christ.

But notice how our text from Philippians describes Jesus. "Let the same mind be in you that was in Jesus Christ, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking on the form of a slave, being born in human likeness, and being in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Therefore. Therefore, he is exalted, and every knee will eventually bow before him – not because he has conquered them, but because he has loved them into his embrace.

And so we finally responded to the question – “No, we don’t think the 12th Imam and Jesus could be the same person”. And we tried to explain how we saw Jesus, and his invitational, loving, non-violent way of being in the world and winning even enemies into becoming friends. We talked about Jesus ruling with the power of suffering love.

Some while ago T.U.M.C. sponsored Joseph, a Palestinian Muslim living in Lebanon. He had rather innocently joined a group that he then learned was rather violent in its methods. He left the group, who then vowed to kill him, so he fled to Canada. Canada then determined that he had been a part of a terrorist group, and refused to give him landed status. He couldn’t stay in Canada, and he couldn’t go back to Lebanon. He was stateless.

He started attending our church, and was struck almost immediately by our commitment to peace – in the name of Jesus. He said all the Muslims and all the Christians he knew in Lebanon espoused violence. And here he learned of another way of living, a peace oriented way, based on the life and teaching of this Jesus. That appealed to him immensely. He decided to become a Christian, and he asked for baptism.

Personal confession

Why am I still a Christian today in this post-modern, secular, post-Christian world? I am still a Christian because the Jesus of the Gospels is so appealing to me, so compelling really. I am a Jesus follower because the Christ of faith makes sense to me both theologically and spiritually. And I am still a Christian because I continue to experience this Jesus the Christ as a saving power in my life.

- 1) I am still a Christian today because I find the Jesus of the Gospels so winsome – and so startling – and so compelling.

The conquering Imam’s of history do not appeal to me. The Jesus of the Gospels appeals to me immensely. In the Gospels I discover a Jesus who shows me who God is and what God is like – a God I can love with all my being.

- a) I am persuaded by Jesus’ teaching. The Sermon on the Mount, in both Matthew and Luke, is the most comprehensive statement of the teachings of Jesus. It is probably a summary, rather than one long sermon he preached in one sitting. Mennonites have seen the Sermon on the Mount as the key to understanding what Jesus expects of his followers. Hard words they are, in some places, and in some respects almost impossible to fully live out. Many Christians have abandoned them because they are impossible to live out, they say. And so many Biblical scholars have found ingenious ways to explain how these teachings aren’t applicable today, an impossible ideal meant for another time, or for only a few saints.

How can you “love your enemies” in times like these?

Jesus said, “How blessed are you who are poor in spirit (or as Luke puts it, how blessed are the poor), for yours is (present tense) the Kingdom of God. How blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” Everything is turned on its ear.

Everything seems turned upside down. It goes against the grain of common sense. And yet it rings so true to me.

And then Jesus gets very, very practical. He talks about things like anger, about adultery, about divorce, about legal oaths, about a false, pretend piety, about prayer (including teaching the Lord's prayer), about money, about worrying, about judging others. So very practical, daily stuff for us all. Some of it sounds very difficult to live out, but we know inside that it touches the core truth of life.

"You have heard it said, 'you shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Be fully compassionate, therefore, as your heavenly Father is compassionate." (Many translations say "be perfect" which I think is a very unfortunate translation. Be fully compassionate is a much more accurate translation).

Very challenging words. And yet the deepest part of me breathes a yes to them, even though I can never fully live them out.

Other teachings too appeal to me powerfully, especially the many parables. They are so explosive, so disarming, so charming, so challenging. They slip right through my defenses. Like the parable of the prodigal son which shows me again what God the Father is like, always waiting with open arms for my return from wandering off the path.

I am so persuaded by the teaching of Jesus.

- b) I am also persuaded by the life of Jesus, by how he lived, by what he did, by how he gave evidence to the reality that he was the Son of God in a way that you and I aren't.

Mostly I am persuaded by his loving, compassionate way of life. Most of his public ministry was going about healing people of their physical and emotional and spiritual and relational illnesses. He showed an immense compassion and demonstrated an immense power to heal. He could look into the core of someone's soul and know exactly what that person needed in order to be healed, to become free again, to be a full member of the community again.

Along the way he challenged and confronted the religious and political leaders who were holding onto their own power. There was nothing meek and mild about him. He became angry. He called people on their hypocrisy. It was mostly the religious leaders though who felt his wrath, not the so called sinners and outsiders against whom the religious leaders directed their wrath. To all who were hurting he showed an amazing compassion, and amazing love. He related to women in a caring, mutual, non-exploitive way almost impossible to imagine in that society.

I am persuaded by the life of Jesus, in the way he showed us the very face of God.

- c) And I am persuaded by the death and resurrection of Jesus. Unfortunately, in my mind, over the centuries we Christians have developed some strange theories and doctrines about why Jesus had to die. I don't want to get into these theories today.

Much more compelling to me than any of these theories is that Jesus was so convinced that love was more powerful than violence, that he chose to die rather than kill, chose to love his enemies to the end rather than to bring down his troupes of angels to destroy his enemies. In choosing to die rather than to kill, he demonstrated the ultimate kind of loving – God's kind of loving. That is incredibly winsome to me.

And then God said, "yes, that is my kind of love", and raised Jesus from the grave, an ultimate sign of the ultimate power of that love. I do believe in a literal resurrection. And I believe that this kind of love and power – this kind of resurrection love and power – is loosed on the world as God's great saving power. And I believe that we Christians, and we as churches, are called to live out this kind of resurrection love.

The root Hebrew word for Jesus is "Yashah". It has two meanings. To become broad, and to be set free. When life becomes enclosed, claustrophobic, bound, un-free, Jesus invites us into healing, into his salvation. We can be set free from those things that still bind us, still hold us back, still empty life of meaning and joy. Free to love more deeply, free to enter the lives of people in pain, free to work passionately for a better world, free to live counter-culturally.

As Jesus himself put it, "I have come that you may have life, and have it abundantly". (John 10:10). Abundant life, full life, purposeful life. What more could anyone want or need.

Conclusion

On this Remembrance Day week-end I do remember our wars, I do pray for the victims of war, I do pray for peace. And so I turn again to Jesus, who most clearly shows us the true heart of God.

I conclude with a short poem by Peter Ediger, another very flawed follower of this Jesus.

"He (Jesus) is the son of God, truly divine.

Yet nowhere does human life
find such full expression

As in Jesus.

He is the son of Man, truly human.

Yet nowhere does divine life
Find such full and complete expression

As in Jesus...

He is my friend...

Yet he belongs to everyone.

He belongs to everyone.

Yet he is my friend.”