

# ‘IS JESUS’ MESSAGE FOR REAL?’

The Sermon at the First Parish in Wayland, Massachusetts  
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One could argue, it isn't right for me to give a sermon about Jesus at Christmas time after having not paid more attention to him in the rest of the year. I disagree.

It's like the intellectual quandary faced by the Puritans who gathered this congregation back in the seventeenth century. Their strict Calvinist theology told them that there was no such thing as sacred space or sacred time – that the force of holiness in their lives that they called God indwells every moment of every day and every place. They were rebelling against the leaders of the Anglican Church of their day, whose Reformation of the Christian Church from Roman Catholic practice had left intact, among many other things, the notion of sanctified time and space in places called churches.

They arrived here in Mass Bay colony with a chance to establish their own way of doing things. So the building where they worshipped was not the church – the church was the people who made up the local congregation. The building was the meetinghouse, where they also held other public meetings, stored their grain and arms, and the like. No particular space is sacred, nor any particular time.

And yet they were a practical lot. Theological fine points notwithstanding, it made good sense to have a time and place to do their religious observances together. Yes, you should be thinking thoughts of the Almighty on Wednesday afternoon or Saturday afternoon as you plowed or wove, and often you may have been, but it helped to have a Sabbath on the calendar when you knew you would stop and give ear to the preacher, as much as you hated the Anglican inclination to make everything routinized.

So Christmas comes to us not just as a chance for fun, family, familiar songs, and festivity, but also to remind us of the person whose memory occasions the holiday in the first place. Which makes me think of the presidential debates. (Don't worry, I really do want to talk about Jesus, but I have one more stop along the way.)

I have watched several of the debates between both the Republican and Democratic candidates for the presidency – or, if you prefer, using the language the President favors, between candidates in the Democrat Party and, to be consistent, those in the Republic Party.

I think they have been good. I have enjoyed them. Watching the Republicans, I like to imagine that most Republicans watching are heartened that while the candidates disagree on a few points, all except Ron Paul are on the same wave length, one favored by most mainline Republicans. Good for them.

As it happens, I belong to the other major party, and I have the same feeling watching the Democrats, being heartened that all the candidates are pretty much on the same wave length, except Mike Gravel and sometimes Dennis Kucinich, and it is one that I favor (although in fact Kucinich's deviations and even Gravel's often express my own take on things).

Watching the two parties' candidates debate, I have the positive feeling that despite the probably unavoidable squabbling and pot shots, each party has candidates fairly clearly taking opposite sides on major issues. I watch what is for me the other side and think, good, they are stating well the viewpoints that I hope will be rejected by the public, just as I think Republicans might be grateful to hear Democrats all rallying around viewpoints they hope the voters will reject.

In the midst of it all came a quote that I think is the one that drew the most notice, and rightfully so. It was Mike Huckabee's response to the question of whether Jesus would support

the death penalty. Huckabee, not just a politician but an ordained Baptist minister, said, “Jesus was too smart to ever run for office.”

It was a brilliant response. It was funny, self-deprecating, not obviously untrue. And it diverted the question – and in just the way that Jesus himself did when asked about whether it was okay for Jews like himself to pay taxes to the Roman Empire.

But Huckabee’s answer could also be heard in a disturbing way. I do not mean to be critical of him, but I want to wrestle with one natural implication of his clever remark, which is that Jesus’ messages are not meant to apply to real life. From this perspective, what a person might imagine would be Jesus’ opposition to capital punishment – given Jesus’ talk about turning the other cheek, forgiving extravagantly, and the like – would seem to be of little or no consequence even to people who self-designate as Christians.

I want to give Huckabee the benefit of the doubt. You could say that his point was that when politicians make decisions they have to have other concerns in mind than their personal religious faiths. Politics involves compromise, and that is not a good role for a prophet like Jesus.

I think that is fascinating discussion, how personal faith does or should determine a politician’s behavior. It has become a part of the current campaign for presidential nominations, especially as regards our former governor. But former Governor Huckabee’s answer raised for me the question: Is what Jesus said of use, not just to politicians but to anyone, maybe Christians in particular but to any of us?

So I went back to the New Testament to be reminded what it is that Jesus is said to have said. I went back to the book that was published fourteen years ago by the Jesus Seminar [*The Five Gospels*], a large collection of biblical scholars who spent six years creating a new translation of the four gospels plus another, the Gospel of Thomas, and rating how likely it is that Jesus said any of the things attributed to him.

Some of you know about Jefferson’s Bible. Thomas Jefferson took the Bible – or two copies of it – and cut out all the things Jesus says there and pasted the sayings into a book, so there was a record of all his spoken wisdom with none of the other stuff, the accounts of his birth, miracles, resurrection, and the rest.

Jefferson’s sense of Jesus’ contribution to religious life was echoed in the famous or infamous sermon by the radical Unitarian minister Theodore Parker, “The Transient and the Permanent in Religion,” in which he said that Christianity’s validity rested entirely upon the truth of its message, and not on claims about Jesus’ life.

Jefferson’s Bible, as it came to be called, was finally published at the dawn of the twentieth century – and a copy was given to every member of Congress, which indicates how that earlier age was both more and less religious than ours.

While Jefferson saved only what the Bible says Jesus said, the Jesus Seminar took the search further: they saved only what they think Jesus maybe really said, which they determined by vote. And that is what I read, having in mind the question, is this guy for real? My tentative title was, “Jesus Said Some Loopy Things,” because I wanted to ponder how seriously a person might take those things as guidelines for her or his life.

I mean, what’s with this: “When someone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other as well. When someone takes away your coat, don’t prevent that person from taking your shirt along with it.” [Lk 6:29] Really?

And by the time I’m done, I want to say yes, really, in a way, in Jesus’ way of saying things. But first let’s say what those things are that Jesus most likely said, according to these scholars.

First, he persistently challenged authority and convention: Jesus said that the Sabbath exists for us, not us for the Sabbath, so it could be violated in the cause of human caring; and that family ties were nothing compared to the bond between his followers. “Let the dead bury the dead,” he said, affronting a convention sacred not just to his own Judaism but to every culture. He

affronted kosher laws in arguing that what defiles is not what goes into a person but what comes out.

And they (the Jesus Seminar scholars) claim the one-sentence parable of the leaven “transmits the voice of Jesus as clearly as any record can.” The parable is simply this: “Heaven’s imperial rule [often translated as, the Kingdom of Heaven] is like leaven which a woman took and concealed in fifty pounds of flour until it was all leavened.” They think this would have been “striking to his audience” in a number of ways, among them the positive use of leaven, which Judeans of Jesus’ time took “as a symbol of corruption, while the lack of leaven [as during Passover] stood for what was holy.” [195]

Second, Jesus persistently sympathizes “with those who were marginal to society or outcasts.” [89] Thus, his injunction to “Let the children come up to me, and don’t try to stop them. After all, God’s domain is peopled with such as these,” [Mk 10:14] a “dramatic reversal of the child’s traditional status in ancient societies as silent non-participant.” [89] We will come back to this emphasis soon in discussing the Beatitudes.

Third, Jesus wants we shouldn’t worry so much. God will provide, as long as what we want most isn’t material wealth, which we shouldn’t. Here, I get squirmy, even though I like his urging us not to concentrate on wealth and fame, etc. But he does include two messages along these lines that I find problematic. One is, if you just ask for what you need, God will provide it, which can be interpreted in regrettable ways by lesser or less noble minds than Jesus’, like if a person’s hopes have been dashed it’s their own fault. The other is that the reason God will provide in this view is that God cares for people a lot more than God cares about, say, a sparrow. I’m not criticizing Jesus on that point – he lived in his time and I don’t. But insofar as his words come up in my time, the notion that humanity is somehow favored in the divine scheme of things seems wrong to me.

Unfortunately, when it comes to worry, my favorite remark credited to Jesus, “Sufficient unto the day are the troubles thereof,” the Seminar is convinced he did not say, not even maybe, or if he did he didn’t make it up.

So the first three I’ve cited are, Jesus challenged authority and convention, he sympathized with the marginalized, and he urged us not to be anxious or fret over things that don’t matter much. A fourth recurrent theme is the importance, even the obligation, of forgiveness. These are all not unrelated to the three matters that the Jesus Seminar cites as Jesus’ most basic messages.

So start counting again, big time. Number one: “Love your enemies.” Jesus says it that baldly: Love your enemies. The scholars say, “this is somewhere close to the heart of the teachings of Jesus to the extent that we can recover them from the tradition.” [147]

Number two, Turn the other cheek. I read before the admonitions as they appear in Luke. Here is how they are stated in the Gospel of Matthew (and the Seminar gives both renditions their highest possible ranking for authenticity): “Don’t react violently against the one who is evil: when someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn the other as well. When someone wants to sue you for your shirt, let that person have your coat along with it.... Give to one who begs from you....” [Mt 5:38-42]

And number three is the opening triad of blessings in the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount, a version of which we read as our responsive reading this morning, which began, “Blessed are you poor.” But the Seminar has a different translation, and it only thinks three on the list of blessings were ones that Jesus said, to wit:

“Congratulations, you poor!  
God’s domain belongs to you.  
Congratulations, you hungry!  
You will have a feast.

Congratulations, you who weep now!  
You will laugh.” [Lk 6:20-21]

It is Jesus once more overturning convention, in this case the assumption that the wealthy, well-fed, and happy are those who have found favor with God. Not the way Jesus sees it.

But the lines are open to many interpretations. The other major points are more straightforward and clear: Love your enemies. Turn the other cheek. If someone takes your coat, toss in your shirt. Really? Oh, and always give to beggars.

The Jesus Seminar is helpful here. It highlights what it describes as Jesus’ exaggerated imagery and his vivid and exaggerated language. For instance, Jesus said that “It’s easier for a camel to squeeze through a needle’s eye than for a wealthy person to get into God’s domain.” [Lk 18:24] Some have suggested that the translation is amiss – but the Seminar folk say it is not. It is just Jesus being colorful and visual and hyperbolic, as was his way. His point was, as it so often was, if you focus on worldly possessions – which you might be overly inclined to do if rich – you will be distracted from things that matter more. But how memorable the image of the camel and needle’s eye.

Just so, the seminar takes up my basic question – are we to take Jesus’ injunctions seriously? – in dealing with Jesus’ instruction to “Give to everyone who begs from you.” [Lk 6:30a] They write, “The admonition to give something to every beggar who asks is a global injunction. If followed literally, it would leave the agent destitute in a matter of days. Of course, Jesus was not interested in the letter of such injunctions, but in its horizon: for him that kind of indifference to one’s possessions was part of God’s imperial rule.” [295]

What a great way of putting it: Jesus was not interested in the letter of his injunctions, but in their horizon, hoping to turn our eyes in a certain direction, toward greater love, greater forbearance, greater generosity. Love whom? Love everybody, he said! But that’s not some law, that’s the desirable impulse, the right inclination to encourage, the right horizon to be turned toward.

That message, that voice, that Jesus is one well worth remembering, in this and every season.