

LOSING OUR RELIGION TO FOLLOW THE WAY OF JESUS

A sermon preached by the Rev. Cn. Mary E. Haddad
March 15, 2009, 11 a.m. Eucharist
Third Sunday in Lent/John 2:13-22

It was a long time ago, in a basic Christianity adult education class, when I first heard someone ask the following question, “When did Jesus become a Christian?” It was an entirely innocent question, asked in earnest, but it’s one of those strange questions that has stayed with me because it indicates how much we’ve imposed on these texts that we call gospel. Of course, the answer to that question is never. Jesus never became a Christian.

News flash —Jesus was born a Jew, was circumcised a Jew, and died a Jew. And what a different trajectory of history our faith could have claimed, how many lives could have been spared in the church’s complicity with anti-Jewish rhetoric, if we had simply remembered those bare bone facts.

This morning in John’s Gospel, we observe Jesus as the observant Jew who went up to Jerusalem and the Temple, for the Passover Feast. But whose observance also included a fierce critique of his religion’s customs, and a fierce critique of the institution itself, the institution that had lost its way, turned in on itself; the institution that began to exist for its own power and sake, as institutions are inclined to do.

So his dramatic action of turning over the tables of the money-changers is not just a critique of the abuses of temple worship practices which turned his Father’s house into a marketplace; it’s also a critique of temple worship itself and the power structures within it:

“Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.” In John’s characteristic play on words, Jesus speaks not of bricks and mortar, but the temple of his very body. No building can ever contain God, he seemed to be saying, not even this temple of stones. Wake up and smell the freedom beyond these walls.

That’s a very similar message he’ll give to the Samaritan woman two chapters later in John’s Gospel. She was concerned with religion, not unlike the way that we’re concerned with religion.

Which mountain, Jesus, which mountain is the right mountain for worship? Our mountain over here or their mountain over there? Which mountain is holier, Gerizim or Jerusalem? Our denomination or their denomination? In a message very similar to today’s, “Destroy this temple,” Jesus will say

that the hour is coming and is now here when the answer is 'neither' – neither mountain. True worshippers won't worship on this mountain or that mountain. True worshippers will worship in spirit and truth, in a religion without borders and boundaries.

Jesus gets the temple and the mountains out of our way, so we can see something new from God that we've never seen before. In the words of a Canadian prairie farmer, "The mountains are all right...but they sure do block the view." They block us from seeing that God can't be confined to time, space or churches or temples and that true worship of God is available to us anywhere and anytime and in places and in people we might not think to look.

If Jesus is losing his religion in this scene today outside the temple, it is highly doubtful that he hoped to replace it with another one just like it. Rather, he wanted to break out of the constraints and confinements of religion and open it up to include all of humanity. So, Jesus showed us in his life, a new way of being religious, that is, a new way of being connected to God and one another. He shattered the boundaries and categories of our own making – Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female – to name a few. He repeatedly showed us in his faithful observance of his religion's laws, an embrace of the spirit of the law over the letter of the law, leveling the Ten Commandments into two love commands: love of God and love of neighbor. More love and less law. More love and less religion.

And here, love includes rebukes with individuals like Peter in last week's gospel, Get behind me Satan; and here, love includes confrontations with systems like the moneychangers in this week's gospel. Love includes the zeal that consumes him and propels him to turn over tables and to turn over his life for the things that matter to God.

Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up. Both things happened. The temple made of stones was destroyed and the sacrificial system of settling scores along with it. The temple of his body was raised up in

three days, unbound by labels, unshackled and freed from death and available to the whole world as a force for life, bringing the way of peace, forgiveness and reconciliation to a sad and broken world.

Following Jesus didn't mean becoming a Christian in a new religion, it meant something more along the lines of losing your religion, losing the limitations and shackles of your religion, and finding through the raised up temple of his body, unlimited access for all of humanity to the sacred, transcendent, reconciling way of God.

Long after Jesus had died and been raised up, there's that place in scripture, in Acts, where it says almost as an aside, "And it was in Antioch, that the first disciples were called "Christians." They used to call themselves followers of the Way, and then they started calling themselves Christians. I would name this decision, one of the earliest and most far-reaching marketing mistakes of the early Jesus movement. Rather than being followers of the Way, capital W, (I love that), they emerged as Christians. Rather than continuing to engage in practices that served the common good and helped to repair the world, like good and faithful followers of the Way, they chose to be called Christians.

Eventually, the identity of Christians shifted from practices to beliefs, (from a verb to a noun), as the Jesus movement who followed the Way, became Christians who distanced themselves further and further from Jewish and Semitic Jesus, the bold and fearless non-violent revolutionary who turned over tables on the empire.

As Annie Dillard famously wrote, "It's a pity that so hard on the heels of Christ come the Christians... off and running trying to convert emperors and raise armies and take over the world." By the time the early Christians became the empire called Christianity, they were well on their way to rebuilding all the power structures that Jesus came to tear down. From the Roman Catholic Church in Brazil, here's a headline story that came out just in time for International Women's Day last week.

A 9-year-old girl goes to the hospital with stomach pains. As it turns out, she is pregnant with twins, a victim of rape by her stepfather. The doctors confirm that her life is at risk and perform an abortion on the 80-pound pregnant girl. Brazil law makes allowance for abortion in cases of rape and when a mother's life is at risk. Both applied here. The Archbishop of Brazil, though, excommunicates the mother and her doctors, but not the stepfather. The Vatican approves. Their defense: "God's laws are more important than human laws." In response, many in Brazil and around the world are extolling the virtues and humanity of human laws over God's laws in this case.

Somewhere in the gospels, Jesus asks, "Is there anyone among you who when a child asks for bread, you give them a stone?" All too often the institutional church remains utterly certain that our laws are God's laws and not human laws, and the church gives a stone to a family looking for bread; or the church gives a stone to a same-gender couple looking for love and recognition as a family. In response to the church in Brazil, one Roman Catholic theologian blogged, "Let this case signal the end of any credible claim to authority such bishops might make, and the beginning of a new era when local communities determine their own members. I daresay the world will be a safer, kinder place."

This story from Brazil coincides with a major study of US religion which found that more people than ever before, say they have no religion, and more Americans than ever

before have stopped identifying themselves as Christians. Might the 21st century be the time for this new era of local communities? Might the 21st century be the time for a new category in surveys of religion—those leaving Christianity and losing their religion to follow the way of Jesus?

I say, let's do it, let's lose our religion to follow the way of Jesus.

We lose our religion to follow the way of Jesus every time we turn the tables on war and violence, turn the tables on occupation, turn the tables on poverty, turn the tables on greed, turn the tables on misogyny and its subset, homophobia.

We lose our religion to follow the way of Jesus every time we feed at the table and the temple of his body raised up for the world that God so loves and we follow him back out into the world to feed and heal others.

We lose our religion to follow Jesus every time we engage in civil conversation with people of other faiths and beliefs.

We lose our religion to follow Jesus every time we make use of this great cathedral as a public sacred space that welcomes the same outcasts and sinners that Jesus welcomes; we lose our religion to follow Jesus every time we say to the ex-communicated: We'll communicate you.

Let's lose our religion to follow the way of Jesus. The more tables of exclusion and prejudice we can turn over boldly in his wake, the safer and kinder place the world will be.