

Before Jesus Got Famous
September 26, 2010

It would be fair to say that every clergyperson of any denomination would remember his or her first sermon regardless how many years have passed. There's a certain notoriety attached in the initial effort to impart wisdom or a lesson that remains inseparable from disaster. It doesn't ever go as planned. It takes a while to adjust one's message to what the congregation can be expected to accept. Inescapably, people listen to a message through their own specific lens and perspective.

We get a good idea of this phenomenon in how even Jesus' first sermon did not exactly go over well with the crowd. In the fourth chapter of Luke we are privy to Jesus' first sermon, which he preached in what should have been the safe environs of his hometown. His initial sermon was delivered in a synagogue in Nazareth in front of family and friends, but it ended...badly...with the crowd anxious to drag him from the pulpit if not kill him with their bare hands if they could.

It started well as he repeated the words from the old Hebrew prophet Isaiah about bringing good news to the poor, liberty to the captives, and freeing the downtrodden. But then Jesus applied that text to present-day circumstances and the trouble began, or as is said in the black church: "The preacher ceases preaching and starts meddling." When Jesus applied the truths of the text to the lives of the listeners, he hit a wall of denial and resistance.

The episode ends as follows and I will quote directly from scripture: "When they heard this, everyone in the synagogue was enraged. They sprang to their feet and hustled him out of the town; and they took him up to the brow of this hill their town was built on, intending to throw him down the cliff, but he slipped through the crowd and walked away." I bet Jesus always remembered his first sermon although crowd reactions did not improve much over the course of his ministry.

Reinhold Niebuhr, back in the 1950's, is famous for saying that the point of a sermon is to afflict the comfortable and to comfort the afflicted. He may have had Jesus in mind because Jesus never preached a confirmation of the status quo but continually challenged or better yet – confronted the listener with the uncomfortable business of changing habits and perspectives and lifestyle in order to make life more just and equitable and holy.

I don't want to mislead you. This sermon is not about Jesus but about you and me in 2010 in Salt Lake City. I am inspired by some provocative questions raised by Wendell Berry, or actually, he refers to them as "tests." He asks us to forget everything we have read in the gospels about Jesus and we have no idea what a big name Jesus has made for himself these past two thousand years. Here's the point: If you had been living in Jesus' time and heard him teaching, would you have been one

of his followers? Let's say you just happened upon a crowd listening to him. You soon realize that he's saying something utterly scandalous...so contradictory to the norms of modern society. He's saying, "Don't resist evil. If somebody slaps your right cheek let him slap your left cheek, too. Love your enemies. When people curse you, you must bless them. When people hate you, you must treat them kindly. When people mistrust you, you must pray for them. This is how you must act as holy and good people of this earth." And then this fellow with these counter-intuitive life practices says: "I want to come to dinner at your house." How would you answer?

In our hearts, we would like to think we would have said to Jesus, "Sure, come on over. Cocktails at 6:00." In all likelihood, neither you nor I would have invited him over much less believe his teaching or remotely follow his radical message.

How receptive are you and I to receiving radical messages in today's world. Our lifestyles are quite comfortable for the most part. Imagine hearing the Sermon on the Mount for the first time. It begins in a very non-threatening way: Happy are you poor, for the kingdom of God is yours; Happy are you who are hungry now, you will be filled; happy are you who weep now, you will laugh.

Imagine hearing this and nodding away...prepared to say "nice sermon, rabbi" when it's finished, but then – you get it right between the eyes: How terrible for you who are rich now, you have had your easy life; how terrible for you who are full now, you will go hungry; how terrible for you who laugh now, you will mourn and weep.

This does not go over too well. Here's the real message: In order for the world to improve those who have much will lose it. It is not only a redistribution of wealth, (and we know how popular that message is in America today), but the premise that the world is out of kilter because we cling selfishly to our affluent lifestyle. So not only is the Tea party admonished, but also it's a rude message for all of us in that for the world to get better we need to let go of our good fortunes. It's the ultimate "inconvenient truth."

I'm reminded of Harry Truman who in the 1948 campaign for the presidency was told by a supporter: "Give 'em hell, Harry." And Truman replied, "I don't give 'em hell; I tell the truth and it sounds like hell."

The truth of how we need to live our lives today to save the planet environmentally and economically and socially sounds like hell. Hell for us in terms of what we must sacrifice. How prepared – really – are we to hear and absorb and follow the radical message for today? At the heart of Jesus' sermons before he got famous was "change." And the prophetic voices of today scream change and the crowd would just as soon kill them with their bare hands...and some of them already have.

Don't bring your scientific skepticism into the equation of evaluating Jesus if you were one of the crowd 2000 years ago. This is not about Virgin Birth or Resurrection - - just the radical message calling on us to live an altogether different lifestyle.

Forget about his reference to being the Son of God because the term properly translated from the Aramaic means “folks like us.” I imagine it would be a lot like listening to Bill McKibben these days. If he called himself the Son of God I’d tune him out pretty quickly. But if said: “Folks like us need to make some remarkably radical changes if this world is going to survive,” I’d listen. You would listen. How well will we follow the prescription because of its inherent demands that we make sacrifices? Haven’t we worked too hard to get where we are?

In an issue of the New Yorker back last May, Adam Gopnik wrote a piece about Jesus after trying to digest about 20 or 30 new books out on the topic of Jesus. In trying to assimilate this all, Gopnik writes: “What seems new about Jesus is not his piety or divine detachment but the humanity of his irritability and impatience. He’s no Buddha.” (I love that line). Gopnik continues: “Jesus gets annoyed at the stupidity of his followers, their inability to grasp an obvious point. ‘Do you not have eyes but fail to see,’ he asks his hapless disciples.

I am utterly embarrassed by my failure to change. I do have eyes that see very clearly the peril that awaits our sacred earth...I see the science of climate change and yet I apparently do not grasp the obvious and am as hapless as anyone who has eyes but fails to see.

It’s ironic somehow that Jesus is an apocalyptic prophet who is invested in predicting the end of the world, or literally: “The end is near.” And today, with thousands of scientists screaming about the approaching apocalypse – the end is near – the oceans are dying; the air will kill us; life as we know it will soon be unsustainable, we live in denial of such doom probably because for the immediate present - life is pretty good. I don’t REALLY see that the end is nigh. I don’t want to see it.

The other test posed by Wendell Berry might even prove more difficult to pass. If we would have listened to an illiterate Jesus 2000 years ago and accepted his radical message of how we should live our lives, the real test boils down to how well we would have followed his admonitions; his wisdom. Jesus says at one point: “If you love me, keep my commandments.” Would you or I have kept his commandments even under painfully crucial situations? Here’s a true story that brings the issue to the fore:

In 1569 in Holland, a Mennonite named Dirk Willems, under threat of capital sentence as a heretic, was fleeing from arrest, pursued by a “thief catcher.” As they ran across a frozen body of water, the thief-catcher broke through the ice. Without help, he would have drowned. What did Dirk Willems do then?

Was the thief-catcher merely an enemy to be hated, or was he a neighbor to be loved as one loves oneself? Was he an enemy whom one must love in order to be a child of God? Was he “one of the least of these my brethren?”

Dirk Willems turned back, put out his hand to his pursuer, and saved his life. The thief-catcher, who then of course wanted to let Willems go free, was forced to arrest him. Dirk Willems was brought to trial, sentenced, and burned to death by a lingering fire.

The cost of discipleship is huge, even today. You and I would like to think we are principled enough to follow through on our fundamental beliefs regardless of penalty, but acting upon our beliefs is often met with contempt, violence, and sentencing at a trial.

The imperatives of how to live were faithfully delivered by Jesus. Rather than follow them the crowd today prefers to hear them in a different manner...one suited more to their personal needs and agenda. That's why my favorite book title from the past few years, written by Linda Seger, is called: "Jesus Rode a Donkey: Why Republicans Don't Have the Corner on Christ."

In that book she explains, for example, that despite Jesus' endless pleas to help the poor, conservative Republican Christians claim that we are asked to help the poor ONLY if we so desire. Charity should come from those who wish to give.

So if Jesus can be interpreted in such light, there's not much chance, really, for the prophets in our time who essentially offer the same message demanding radical change. It must follow, then, that living sustainably applies only to those who wish to live sustainably.

What the Hebrew prophets preached...what Jesus preached...what Gandhi and King and Mandela preached...what the prophets of our day are preaching all have one thing in common: An invitation to the future. Radical change must transpire in our lives if we or our children or their children are to have a future at all.

You may have recently heard about a young preacher, 20-something, who has a 4300-member church in Birmingham, Alabama. He's not your typical evangelical preacher; he sounds much like Jesus did in his first sermon which could get this guy named David Platt into a lot of trouble. Platt uses the word radical as he describes the justification that having everything you want is part of the American Dream. Not so he says. The so-called American Dream that fills you with wants and desires for your own lifestyle sits in direct contrast with anything resembling a sustainable future. Our greed and our materialism are soul-destroying and you can't have it both ways: Being a good Christian according to the dictates of Jesus and also buying into the culture of possessing whatever you want. The two remain irreconcilable. He hasn't been thrown down a hilltop by a mob... yet.

I have no doubt that everyone in this congregation recognizes that the Gospel of Wealth, the American Dream, I worked hard for what I have, is untenable in a world where the end is near. It is antithetical to regarding life as sacred and following the

dictates of living with justice and holiness. And yet we are as hapless as anyone who has eyes but fails to see.

Truth, by definition, must be inconvenient. Truth, by definition, confronts that to which we have grown accustomed and comfortable. It requires change and sacrifice. It requires unpopular and nonconformist approaches.

How ready are we to receive truth and act upon it? Would we have accepted the radical changes Jesus proposed before he got famous? Are we ready to accept the radical changes called for by our prophets of today? Do you believe that the end is near? What are we doing about it?