



A Congruent Life

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field
Sunday, September 28, 2008*

Matthew 21:23–32:

When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” Jesus said to them, “I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” And they argued with one another, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things. What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.”

A few years ago I heard the following story about Brennan Manning, a former Roman Catholic priest. Manning, banished from the priesthood and a recovering alcoholic, had spent a lifetime battling as he called it “the evil in his soul”—acknowledging that he had hurt people, hurt people even in the name of Christ. One day Manning and his wife Roslyn were taking a tour of the French Quarter of New Orleans. As they turned the corner on Bourbon Street, a girl with a radiant smile, about 21-years-old, approached them, pinned a flower on their jackets, and asked if they would like to make a donation to support her mission. When Manning inquired what her mission was, she replied, “The Unification Church.” Manning responded, ‘Your leader is Doctor Sun Myung Moon, so I guess that means you are a Moonie.’ “Yes” she answered. Obviously, she had two strikes against her, Manning thought. First, she was a pagan who did not acknowledge Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior. Second, she was a mindless, witless, naïve and vulnerable kid who had been brainwashed by a guru and mesmerized by a cult. He thought for a moment about how to respond to this earnest, but in his view, greatly misguided young woman before him. And then he turned to her and said, “You know Susan, I deeply admire your integrity and your fidelity to your conscience. You are out here tramping the streets doing what you really believe in. You are a challenge to anyone who claims the name Christian.” “Are you Christians?” Susan asked. “Yes,” the Mannings replied. Susan lowered her head and began to cry. After a while she was able to compose herself. “I have been on a mission here in the French Quarter for eight days now. You are the first Christians who have been nice to me. The others have either looked at me with contempt or screamed at me and told me I was possessed by a demon. One woman even hit me with her Bible.”

As much as I would like to say I am surprised by Susan’s story—surprised that those professing to be Christian would behave this way—I have to say I am not. Not in a world that seems to be increasingly polarized. Where the airwaves are full of people screeching hateful things at anyone who holds a different opinion about just about anything. Particularly in an election season it seems that demonizing the other and encouraging not only hateful speech but hateful behavior is all too common. And despite what I just said, that I am not surprised by this, on another level I am surprised at some of the hateful, intolerant things that are said and done in the name of Jesus.

It seems, unfortunately, that for some Christians, what is most important is what we say we believe. Having the right beliefs is what is of ultimate significance and importance. And, to some degree, this is built into the fabric of Christianity. Certainly from the fourth century on Christians have been greatly concerned about doctrine and orthodoxy, or “right belief.” People have even been murdered in these doctrinal fights. We have worried about doctrine in a way that other major religions mostly have not (kind of ironic given the amount of time Jesus spent railing against purity of words at the expense of actions). And so figuratively, and occasionally literally, people have beaten others up with beliefs, with the Bible. The goal for some is to persuade others to utter a particular phrase or affirm belief in a particular understanding of God in Christ, and they will do almost anything to accomplish that goal. Now this is not to imply that what we say isn’t important. Words have power. We cannot, for example, tell racist or sexist jokes or circulate them on the Internet and expect those outside the church to join us. We cannot spread gossip one minute and talk about what we are learning in bible study the next and expect those outside the church to listen to what we say. We cannot sit in traffic screaming and cursing at people in the cars around us and expect anyone to follow us into church.

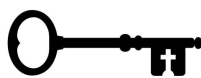
But when I look through the Biblical witness, I am hard pressed to find anywhere that Jesus required his followers to say, to profess a particular belief about him. He never asks his friends to assent to a set of theological arguments about who he is. Rather, he asks them to follow him on the way. He invites them to enter into his way of life, which is at heart a congruent life—a life in which beliefs and actions are consistent. Jesus could have gone through life without ever making a speech, ever preaching, and we would still know exactly what he believed—we would know just by watching him live. More than just words, beliefs, actions are important in kingdom living. What we do here and now is critically important. Some want to put all the emphasis on the next life, treating this one as if it were a dress rehearsal for the real life that is to come. Or as if it is a race whose goal is to reach the finish line quickly, shoving others out of the way if necessary. Jesus never seems to worry much about salvation, in the sense of life after life. And salvation, for Jesus, seems to be the starting point of any race not the finish line. Salvation is very much related to the here and now, related to what happens in this world, rather than linked solely to what happens next. And it seems to be more collective than personal. While I would contend that God is intensely interested in, even in love with, each of us individually, what God seems most interested in is salvation as the restoration of all creation to God’s original intent for it. Not whether any one of us crosses some sort of “finish line.”

So how we live in this world evidently is of deep concern to God. How is it that Jesus would want us to behave? What would restored creation look like? What do we think God has in mind?

Paul’s letter to the Philippians gives us significant insight: “in humility regard others as better than yourselves. . . . Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself.” Paul’s use of this early Christian hymn, sums up the Christian life as a life of humility, of following in the self-emptying way of Jesus. Being willing to pour out life to bring life.

Note Paul does not say the Christian life is self-denigrating or self-abnegating, but self-emptying, and further, he offers us a practical solution as to how to live a self-emptied, congruent life. “In humility regard others as better than yourselves.” Paul does not say that others actually are better than we are, he just advises us to regard others as better than ourselves. If we have this attitude, we won’t look down our noses at others because of their ethnic or national background. We won’t shake our heads condescendingly over the plight of the poor. We won’t think of ourselves as better than the mentally ill or mentally retarded. Just as importantly, we won’t consider ourselves better than other Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, agnostics or even atheists. When we view others through the lens of humility, we are seeing them as God sees them—as people of worth, indeed, people of immense value. Seeing other people from the perspective of humility will lead us to sympathize with, rather than judge, those in prison, those without jobs and those addicted to harmful drugs or alcohol. We need to develop our sense of self-esteem as a child and maintain it into adulthood, but at the same time, we need to understand what it means to consider others as more important than ourselves. And considering them to be of equal or greater importance to us, live as if we really believe it. All of this is incredibly easy to talk about and extremely difficult to do. Discipleship is hard. There will always be those around who will question by what authority we are acting. There will always be persuasive voices telling us that Jesus’ way is impossible or foolish. And the only way we will come close to anything like a self-emptied life is through individual perseverance, through the support of the community and with the presence of the Holy Spirit. But don’t despair because there are glimmers of that life all around us, even as close as the people sitting right next to you. It does not take a saint, someone of Christian “superstar” status to live out faith.

A self-emptying way of life led Chris Colliers to Guatemala in June and, being moved by what he saw there, considering those he met there to be important, he informed his Aunt that he did not want Christmas presents this year; rather he wanted to send the money that would have been spent on presents to the children of the Canterbury School in Guatemala. We don’t have to look very far to see examples of self-emptying, to see people who don’t need to tell us what they believe because we can see it when we watch them live. So profess your faith at all times and in all places. And, to paraphrase St. Francis of Assisi, you may even want to use words occasionally.



Open hearts. Open minds.