

God, Jesus, Whatever

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1 Kings 19:1-15a; Galatians 3:23-28; Luke 8:26-39

“Jesus sent him away, saying, 'Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.' So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.” -- Luke 8:38-39

Those of you who have honored me with your presence and attention over the past half dozen years of my preaching here know that I regularly speak of something I call “the fateful step” when the religion *of* Jesus became the religion *about* Jesus.

That's not an expression I coined and it's not an idea I discovered; I wish I had – I might have been able to sell a few books from it. No, I learned it from my New Testament professors, all of whom recognized and taught what to me at the time was the astonishing twin facts that Jesus was Jewish and he did not preach himself.

Until I went to college and began to study the New Testament with considerable rigor with very learned teachers, I always thought Jesus was Christian – like me – and that he wanted everyone to believe that he was their personal lord and savior – as I did. It came as a profound shock to my theological system to learn that Jesus was, as I often describe him now to you, a first-century Palestinian rabbi and healer whose message was not himself, but rather the kingdom, the realm of God.

Jesus wasn't a Baptist Christian, as I was in the days when I learned some of the details about the historical Jesus. Nor was he a member of the United Church of Christ. He didn't go to church, as I always have. He never celebrated Christmas or Easter, the two occasions every year when closeted Christians find their nerve and their way to church. He himself was baptized, but he apparently baptized no one himself, which came as a real shock to this college student who'd been raised to believe that baptism was the gate to heaven.

In short, the more I learned about the historical Jesus, the more different he seemed from me and what I'd come to believe about him from my many, many years of church and church school. The dire prediction of some of the folks back in my hometown in southern Indiana was coming true: I was losing my faith at college.

But the faith I was losing needed to be lost, because it would never have survived my adulthood. As I said to you last week, all of us have to grow up spiritually just as we grow up physically and, we hope and pray, psychologically and emotionally.

The Bible exhorts us to do so: “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,” Paul told the Philippians when he wasn't able to be with them in person. Paul was saying that faith formation – the new name for Christian education – faith formation is an ongoing process, and if it's not simply repeating the same handful of facts and ideas over and over again, it will inevitably mean that the faith of our adulthood will and will not be the faith of our childhood. There will be some constants, to be sure, but many things will change.

And one of those things that changed for me, as I put away those cherished childhood faith ideas that Paul speaks of in 1 Corinthians 13, was my understanding of the relationship between God and Jesus, and how I was to proclaim the gospel of Jesus

Christ.

Now I know that in vast swaths of the Christian church, “leading people to Christ” is the point, the whole point, and nothing but the point. These are the folks – and the estimates say there are anywhere from twenty to seventy million of them in America today – who call themselves evangelical Christians. For them, Jesus is everything. He is God. And without him, there is no salvation. The second half of John 3:16 is the text blazoned on their battle standards: “[T]hat whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

Salvation comes from professing Jesus Christ as your personal savior, and unless you do that, you will go to hell. Period. Christianity is, at its rather cold and pitiless heart, in my opinion, as simple and as black-and-white as that.

I grew up being taught that version of the Christian faith – and remember that it is and has been the dominant version of Christianity throughout history – but I’m not sure now that I ever believed it, even back then. And I certainly don’t believe it now. I don’t believe it because I believe John 3:17 as much as I believe John 3:16: “For God sent not his son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved.”

Through him, not *to* him. Get it? Hear the difference? Leading people *to* Christ isn’t the point; leading people *through* Christ to God is. God is the point. God has always been the point. As God was for Jesus, which we would’ve realized if we’d paid closer attention to the stories and less attention to those who told the stories, and as God should be for us. It’s about God. It’s *all* about God. It’s all always about God.

But very early on, the people who came to see Jesus as the Messiah, the promised deliverer from God, lost track of that point. They got confused. They got excited about the miracles, about the signs, about the teachings, about the buzz that was building around the rabbi from Nazareth, about the wonderful things he – oops – was doing for them.

You see, it’s very easy to do. It’s very easy, as someone has said, to focus our attention on Jesus’ pointing finger rather than on the thing toward which he is pointing, which is God. Which is *always* God.

That’s what that fellow in our gospel reading from Luke did. He was the man possessed by demons – we’d say being controlled by destructive and self-destructive forces – whom Jesus miraculously healed. And after he was healed, Jesus told him to return to his hometown and tell everyone how much God had done for him.

But what did the man do? According to the second half of verse 39, “[H]e went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.”

Do you hear the difference? Jesus had told the man to speak of God; the man spoke instead of Jesus. That fateful step was being taken. The power behind the healer was being eclipsed by the healer himself. The miracle and its worker, rather than the God who made both the miracle and the miracle worker possible, were moving to the center of people’s attention. People were being so impressed with Jesus that they were forgetting to look to God. The faith *of* Jesus – faith in the God of justice and mercy – was becoming the faith *about* Jesus.

Now some of you may be wondering why I’m on this tear. Why does any of this matter to me? What’s the big deal? God, Jesus, whatever – they’re all the same, right? Isn’t that what we mean by saying God is a trinity?

Not really, and here’s the reason I’m bending your ears and minds this morning with what may seem to some of you to be a nebulous distinction. I believe that collapsing the distinction between God and Jesus, as many Christians do, and as we see that man doing in our gospel lesson, leads to a kind of religious chauvinism – my religion

is right and yours is wrong – that is not the message Jesus preached. I believe that we can preach Jesus in such a chauvinistic way that, far from bringing people into God's presence, we actually drive them away. We can make and often have made the gospel of Jesus Christ not beautiful but odious, and I believe that is a grave sin that will rest on our heads for all eternity.

In our zeal for Christ, we can become so narrow and so strident and so obsessive with our ideas about God and Jesus and their relationship to each other and to us that we actually make it impossible for people to hear the good news, which is that God has come to us and shown us what salvation looks like in the flesh. When we replace the destination – God – with the way – Jesus – and then we tell people that our way is the only way to God, we've tangled things up, and we shouldn't be surprised that our witness to God's love as it has been shown to us in Jesus Christ becomes so ineffectual and even offensive.

You see, I really am an evangelical. Some of you – and many evangelicals – think I'm joking or using the term loosely, because evangelicals can't be gay, can't be liberal, can't be inclusive, can't be highly educated critical thinkers.

On the contrary, I'm liberal, inclusive, and an egghead precisely because I'm an evangelical Christian. And I'm an evangelical Christian because I realized, many years ago, that God's love, shown to me in Jesus Christ, is far greater than anything I or anyone else can say about that love, and that if I said yes to the offer of that life-changing love, no one could keep me from it for any reason.

“For I am convinced,” Paul wrote the Roman Christians, “that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Paul got it right: the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Paul had his eye on the prize and he kept it there his whole life and ministry. The love of God in Christ Jesus *our* Lord.

How Buddhists may know God's love is not my concern, just as it was not Paul's or Jesus'. How Hindus, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, or Jains may know that love is also not my concern. It is God's concern and I trust God to be able to handle it.

What I preach is Christ crucified, the love of God that can handle anything this world throws at us, even its worst. What I preach is the love of God that is greater than every obstacle, including death itself, that seeks to separate us from that love. What I preach is the love of God that breaks down every barrier to holiness – male and female, Jew and Greek, free and slave, gay and straight, married and single, abled and disabled -- and invites all of us to the Lamb's high feast.

That's the message I preach. That's my story, and I'm sticking to it. What's yours?