

## Jesus Lets Go

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Isaiah 56:1,6-8; Mark 7:24-30 (for Matthew 15:21-28)

Some of you know that my cat Zachary has been sick, and this week I had to put him down. Most of you know how hard that is, and how, although I knew it was wrong to let him suffer, and even though I believe (well, I pray, anyway) it was the right decision; it hurt like anything to let him go. Kenny, our illustrious crazy walker and dedicated digger of holes, dug him a grave behind the manse, and a few of us had a little memorial service for him after the session meeting on Thursday.

So, I'm okay, but this week I'm thinking a lot about letting go. As are we all, I think. And wouldn't you know, this week the Lectionary Committee gives us a story that I'd never read in this light before, but this time around, I do. (The Spirit speaks *through* the Scriptures!)

We've had to let go of a lot lately. We've had to let go of our beautiful tree. We've had to let go of beloved church members. Some of us have had to let go of beloved jobs, service in which we really believed and felt fulfilled doing, or family, or marriages, or houses, and yes, even pets. And we've had to let go of hopes, dreams, and things that keep memory alive. And we're not so good at it; any of us.

My earliest childhood trauma was when my father and his siblings sold the Red House, our grandparents' farmhouse in New Hampshire, where we all congregated in the summer, after Grandfather died. Well, this summer, we learned that it might be up for sale again. And yes, it's as if those fifty-eight years never happened. We're right back there, full of nostalgia, and dreams, all of us.

What *would* happen if all of us tried to make that dream real again, and bought that house? We wouldn't be able to *fit* in there all together, with spouses and children and now children's spouses and children and all, and we have such different incomes and family needs that we'd never agree about priorities. This is why our parents decided to sell the farmhouse in the first place. And for my part, more recently, I personally promised myself, after letting go of that house up in Woodstock, that I'd never again try to stay on top of two houses, when I know I can't even stay on top of one. Still...*sigh*.

And then, one of you observed this week about a family member, "I don't really miss *her*, we've been estranged for years; what I miss is the close relationship I wish we'd had." And then we remembered together the best definition either of us had ever heard of *nostalgia*: "a yearning for a past that never was," which almost always includes an element of mourning an imagined *future*, based on that past that never was.

Now, here we have one of those stories about Jesus that don't fit our own, well, I might as well call it what it is—our own collective "nostalgia" about Jesus. (Think of him in another context, declaiming today's words from Isaiah, "My house shall be called a house of *prayer* for all people!" Go, Jesus!—as long as you're excoriating *those* people, who bring the World into the Temple. Crack that whip of righteousness over those sinners over there, those people who mar the Beauty of Holiness!)

But "My house shall be called a house of prayer *for all people*?" Well, based on today's lesson, some Christians might gleefully point out, even Jesus doesn't think that! Look at what he says here! "Let the children be fed first," he says. And Matthew's even more explicit: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel," says Jesus. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Ouch.

But we had some interesting questions raised just now, didn't we? Raised in that way so much of the prayers, songs, and liturgies of the Iona Community have, of getting right under our collective skin? What

might Jesus be doing here? What might he be getting at? Where does he want, or hope, do you think, for this encounter to go?

Now before we go on, let me take a moment to fill you in on two of the major heresies and controversies of the early Church, because guess what, they are still alive and well in the twenty-first century. I think if you know the background, where I'm about to go with it will make more sense.

The first, the very earliest widespread heresy we know about, was called Docetism. Here's what the Catholic Dictionary says about it (the Catholics have a lot of experience defining heresies!):

"Docetism, from the Greek *dokeo* ("to seem," "to appear to be") was the contention that Christ merely seemed to be human and only appeared to be born, to suffer, and to die."

Docetism came early on because the "New Age theology" of the day, the pervasive theological climate in the Eastern Roman Empire, assumed that anything divine couldn't possibly change, or die, and certainly not *decay*. That's just disgusting. It couldn't be divine at all—where divinity meant, chiefly, omniscience, omnipotence, and immortality. Not to mention polished, ideal *perfection*.

So the Docetists had what scholars would call "a very high Christology;" in other words, these were the folks for whom the *divinity* of Jesus mattered the most. So, that Jesus knows everything already, he's the ultimate authority (which became attached, in later centuries, to an *image* of Jesus as it developed in what became Christendom: the blond-haired, blue-eyed Jesus, whose very maleness was somehow a prerequisite for anyone representing him in the church)—oh yes, and he lives forever (in other words, not ever *changing* in any way, except, for orthodoxy's sake, regrettably dying—yet still moving at warp speed from Palm Sunday straight to Easter, since "if you suffer, you're not *blessed*").

Okay, the rant's over. A few centuries later, after the doctrine of the Trinity had evolved a bit more, there arose a whole bunch of very faithful people who were offended by the claim that a mortal human being was God, and for whom the Trinity seemed too close to the Pagan polytheism they'd left behind, so they decided, in a way that's more subtle than I admit I understand, that God was One, and that the Son was God's first, unique creation, divine in some way as we all are, and yet infinitely more so than any of the rest of us, but still a creature, even if first and unique among all other creatures.

I told you this is way over my head! That's why I'm a preacher and not a scholar. I prefer in this matter to apply Occam's Razor (sort of, anyway) and content myself with the fact that nobody has ever really explained the Trinity in a fully satisfactory manner. It just *is*, in all its category-defying mystery. And if you "test the spirit," that is, *act as if* you believe it, you find that it *works*, as your life unfolds in really wonderful ways. Much later, then, you come to understand the words of the Nicene Creed: "begotten, not made," "true God of true God, of one substance with the Father," and so forth.

So anyway, this second heresy, which was formulated by a third-to-fourth-century bishop called Arius, so it's called the "Arian" heresy (spelled "*i-a-n*," nothing to do with Hitler's *Aryans*, with a "y"), is based on the deep discomfort of many with claiming that any human being could ever be God. Indeed, if it were anyone else, C.S. Lewis pointed out once, it absolutely *would* be blasphemy.

But yes, the church did, many centuries later, return its attention to the suffering, the dying, the *humanity* of God in Christ, in the fourteenth century, in the appalling suffering of the bubonic plague: think of the gruesome Crucifixions in the art then. But today, a focus on the humanity of Jesus looks and sounds enough like the theology of so-called mainline churches, and even many secular humanisms, to cause some on the religious Right, who focus more on the divinity of Jesus, to say we're not Christian at all. And by their definitions, perhaps we aren't. But I don't think God thinks so.

Well, anyway, you see the dilemma. There were a lot more heresies, but for clarity I'm going to stop at those two, and get back to those questions we heard that led us down this rabbit hole in the first place. Jesus has just said something most of us find pretty offensive, to this poor hurting woman outside his particular ethnic group and faith community. But *now*, ask yourself, what might Jesus be up to here? What might he be getting at? Where does he want, or hope, for this encounter to go?

(And—well, yes, you're getting a hunch now how this might apply to our situation in America today, but be patient. We'll get there. And we'll be working it out for months to come.)

If it's most important to you that Jesus was divine, you see, then you might conclude that Jesus knew all along that this woman would rise to the bait, and assert herself, and that he was doing this in order to empower her to claim her place at the table. You might conclude, as well, that Jesus knew all along that the disciples would now be ready to learn from his example. There's a lot to be said for that.

If, on the other hand, it's most important to you that Jesus was human, then what would be most helpful to you in this story would be something like "even Jesus grows here, even Jesus 'gets his consciousness raised;' and in being vulnerable, in even being *wrong*, and in humbly (so therefore nobly) *acknowledging* that, he winds up giving this woman even more than she asks for, in fact, 'going the second mile,' and in so doing, he sets us all an example." There's a lot to be said for that, too.

And about now I bet you're thinking that both statements, both interpretations, can co-exist. And you know what? I think so, too—and more than that, I am willing to bet that God does as well.

But then just maybe, as Jesus points out elsewhere, *none of this is any of our business!* So how about this: let's try something *else* Jesus keeps doing. Let's *reframe the question*. Let's look at the whole story *functionally* for a minute, instead of doctrinally. What happens *then*, if we look at it *that way*?

The disciples—who, you remember, live a hundred years at least before Christians are going to start killing each other over who, or what, Jesus *was*—have simply, in this moment, witnessed Jesus *letting go*: letting go of an assumption about who's in and who's out. They witness him letting go of conventional wisdom, letting go of the heretofore established order: letting go of categories, and customs, and institutions, that have outlived their usefulness.

Now, the book of Acts and Paul's letters are ample witness that they don't really grasp this right away, once and for all, but right here *is*...the seed. "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all people." Isaiah said it, and here, not in what Jesus says, but in what he *does*, is a turning point in who gets to be a Christian. From here on in, we've been trying to live it. And boy oh boy, is it hard.

We've all watched with sadness as the carriage barn across the way, which is such a quaint piece of history and had settled on its site with such a charming rhythmic sway to the contour of its ridgepole (I'm glad I took pictures so I could paint it some day), began, after our last few heavy snows, to sag in earnest into its present dereliction. But when the hurricane fencing went up around it, and the sign appeared, "Save the Carriage Barn!" one of our church family remarked one day, "Isn't that a perfect metaphor for things we hang on to in the church, 'way after they've outlived their usefulness?'"

Now, I'm not saying the carriage barn is useless. Until recently it was delightful, and in God's creation, delight counts for a lot! And the carriage barn would, even now, renovated, be very useful indeed—to, say, a local museum of the horse-and-carriage era, if by chance there happened to be such a museum nearby. But I'm not on the board of such a museum, and I'm sure the last thing they, or any board, want to hear is good ideas somebody else has about what they should make happen for them, even if that somebody else happens to be convinced the museum can afford it...

Well anyway, you get the point. Jesus *does* let go, whether because he planned it that way from all eternity and now was the time to make the point, or because his mind actually changed at that moment. *Jesus lets go*. And yes, there are many things human beings have to let go of, for our spiritual health. And it can even be a joyful, delightful, liberating experience, as this congregation clearly knows, since (as I keep bragging) you are an amazingly loving, giving, pledging, pitching-in-and-helping, welcoming, inclusive community. That's just the truth, even if we know God's not done yet.

*But today*, and in these times, there is *one thing* of which I believe, and fervently pray, we'll all *refuse* to let go: *one thing* of which we know we must never let go, for which we must make the ultimate sacrifice, if necessary, to protect, because God, and so many of our forbears, did so for us.

And that one thing is the dignity of everyone God, in the person of Jesus Christ, died to save.

Our Facebook feeds have been flooded with denouncements of racism, of white supremacism and overt Nazism and those who propound or defend it. We know that we live in a high-tax, privileged area, and that even if we see that some of us have more or less privilege within that, the majority of us here are white, and our church is, by reputation and general habits even if not 100% by race, white—and this means that as a church, we do not have the luxury of silence. Our Presbyterian heritage, whether we were born into it or adopted it later on, forbids it. Better to embarrass ourselves by saying something less than fully evolved, than to say nothing and be counted as complicit.

We have diverse politics in our church, and very different beliefs about what to do about the crises in our nation, our world, and on our island right now, but I don't believe a single one of us in our church believes in white supremacy or Nazism. If anyone does, I'm sure that after today you'll say so, but as I say, I know and love you all, and I don't believe a single one of us does believe in that, no matter what else we do disagree about. And we are strongest together: even as we pursue different ideas, and might even seem to be at cross purposes, God still holds the reins of all the world's horses.

So, silence isn't an option. Facebook and Twitter are a start, but not enough, either. We've got to start not only speaking, but doing, however clumsy we are at first. Not necessarily all the *same* thing, not necessarily putting any *program* over any other; but rather, in *all* that we do, no matter how hard it is for any of us in a given moment, we are called to be "Matthew 25 Christians:" "You have done it unto me." The one thing of which we must *never let go* is the dignity of every human being. Christ died for the salvation *of the world*. That means everybody, and all creation. Period. But there's one hitch. God does show, over and over, a preferential option for the oppressed. [Matthew 25:31-46]

And why do we have this mandate, here today? It's in our DNA. We have it from Karl Barth and Martin Niemoller and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who wrote this in Barmen, Germany in 1934: "As Jesus Christ is God's assurance of the forgiveness of all our sins, so in the same way and with the same seriousness, Christ is also God's mighty claim upon our whole life. Through Christ befalls us a joyful deliverance from the godless fetters of this world, for a free, grateful service to all creation." [*The Declaration of Barmen*, in the Book of Confessions of the PCUSA]

And we have it from Jesus himself: if we seek to save our life, we lose it, but if we are willing to lose our life, we save it.

And *that's...* Letting Go. Jesus style.

Let's all help each other, shall we? Let's *let go* even as Jesus did, and go forth, and *do* this thing!

AMEN.