

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at First Congregational Church, UCC, Columbus, Ohio, Lent III, March 15, 2009, dedicated to Erin Elizabeth Dean on her baptism 3/14/09, and in memory of Jody Carrico, and always to the glory of God!

“Jesus and Confrontation”

John 2:13-22; Matthew 10:39

(Part IV of VIII in sermon series “Jesus Before and AFTER Christianity”)

*“Those who find their life will lose it
and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” - Matthew 10:39*

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Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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“The most certain and well-attested fact about Jesus of Nazareth is that he was tried, sentenced and executed by the Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate, on a charge of high treason. This does not make him unique. Many thousands of Jewish rebels and revolutionaries were crucified by Roman rulers during this same period.”

This comes from Albert Nolan’s book *Jesus Before Christianity*, p. 113.

Jesus was a marked man. When he entered Jerusalem the last week of his life, all eyes of religious, political and military authority were upon him. In the collective eyes of power, it was clear he had to be eliminated. In six days time, he was framed, tried and executed as an enemy of the state. The “monkey trial” that preceded his death sentence and execution on Calvary was a mockery of justice and righteousness. But the inscription above Jesus’ cross (“The King of the Jews”) leaves no doubt about the charges that were leveled against him.

In the end, the only question that remained was, “Was he guilty as charged?” At one extreme, we have those in authority who maintained he was all about a religious-political movement aimed at overthrowing the Roman powerhouse. He was, in their minds, a zealot who must be crushed.

On the other extreme, followers maintained he was innocent of political charges. He was a spiritual king and a political pacifist who wanted nothing to do with politics. The truth is not so much “in the middle,” as it is the words, life and actions of Jesus.

First, the Jews of Jesus’ time made no distinction between politics and religion. Issues that we would today classify as political, social, economic and religious would have all been thought of as a God and the law (Nolan, p. 114). Purely secular problems were inconceivable.

Jesus, like most other Jews in Palestine, wanted Israel to be liberated from Roman imperialism. He set about trying to make change, not through overthrow or a change in government, but by changing the hearts and minds of people. He pointed out to his fellow countrymen and women that an attitude of “might makes right” meant the destruction of all who did not have the weapons of the empire at their disposal.

Instead, Jesus called for his followers to: “*Love your enemies, to do good to those who hate you, and to pray for those who treat you badly*” (Luke 6:25). With these nonviolent principles of confrontation, Jesus radically questioned all relationships to power and went about turning the world around him upside down. He was political to the core as he entered places and dealt with people no one else would touch or talk to. Throughout his life and in the midst of all these interactions, Jesus was a dangerously subtle and subversive revolutionary.

He was subtle until the day that he turned the tables over in the temple and challenged those taking advantage of the poor in the House of God. On that day, he gave his opponents and adversaries new evidence that his was a transformational and radical movement of change. He was angry AND very active in confronting the abuse of his people in the house of his father. This was a turning point.

While some may have taken this temple table-turning tirade as a sign that Jesus would be violent as well as transformational, he used this event to point to the corruption in the empire and in the religious community of this time. There is no question that Jesus was nonviolent in practice and principle. But his usually “cold” anger, an anger that would focus on a message of change, became hot with rage. His usually cool demeanor gave way to defender of the defenseless.

Jesus also confronted the powers through suffering, even suffering unto death. I believe this was his most radical act of all! He had come to expect judgment and persecution. That was part of the landscape of his time. He also knew this to be the reaction to the biblical prophet’s message – and his message was without a doubt in the tradition of Old Testament prophecy, which was daily challenging First Century Palestine.

But, Jesus also knew (and proclaimed) that to enter the kingdom of heaven one must suffer and perhaps even die for what they believed.

In the depth of his compassion, Jesus entered deeply into the paradox of compassion itself. And this is it: As he saw the suffering of those around him, he came to realize that the only way to destroy suffering is enter into it and suffer with those who are suffering. Only one's willingness to suffer can conquer suffering in this world.

Nolan writes:

“Compassion destroys suffering by suffering with and on behalf of those who suffer. A sympathy with the poor that is unwilling to share their suffering would be a useless emotion. One cannot share the blessings of the poor unless one is willing to their sufferings.

“But, Jesus went much further than that. Death is paradoxical in much the same way as suffering. There is a riddle about life and death that occurs in all the traditions in several places, in the gospels in a variety of forms. It is this: Anyone who saves his or her life will lose it; anyone who loses his or her life will save it . . .

“To save one's life means to hold onto it, to love it and become attached to it and therefore to fear death. To lose one's life is to let it go, to be detached from it, and therefore to be willing to die. The paradox is that the person who fears death is already dead, whereas the person who has ceased to fear death has at that moment begun to live. A life that is genuine and worthwhile is only possible once one is willing to die.” (pp.138-139)

The question becomes: What are you willing to die for? Jesus defined the answer to this question most fully by showing that his was a willingness to die for all people, not just a certain subset of

people or a group with whom he felt solidarity. He was willing to die for all people in Jerusalem – King David’s royal city. And he was willing to die on Calvary – which was the city’s garbage dump. He went to his death knowingly and willingly. This is beyond doubt.

Jesus of Nazareth laid down his life for all people, for all time. This is beyond doubt as well. How humanity receives this gift of life, this ultimate sacrifice for all people has varied through the ages. But, the truth of Jesus giving himself for all humanity is unquestionable.

I love what Nolan says near the end of *Jesus Before Christianity*. He writes, “Jesus was a much underrated man – underrated not only by those who think of him as nothing more than a teacher of religious truth, but also by those who go to the opposite extreme of emphasizing his divinity in such a way that he ceases to be fully human” (p. 143).

Jesus was a man with immense courage, independence, sensitivity, imagination and authenticity. He was not impressed by those with greater knowledge of the law. He was not impressed by those who had wealth, power and prestige but no compassion. Jesus was genuine. He was fearless. He was undaunted in his pursuit of justice and righteousness.

It is ironic that time and time again he rejected the titles “Son of God,” “Messiah,” “savior.” But in the end he referred to himself as “the son of man.” Ironically, this was no title at all. It meant nothing other than, “I am the son of human beings.” He used the title with an infinite sense of humor to say, “You call me the ‘Son of God,’ but I call myself ‘son of humanity.’ ” It showed Jesus’ unique ability to toss titles and authority out the window. He was more interested in the fulfillment of the prophecies of scripture than in being the one to fulfill them.

In the full humility of his presence on earth, Jesus was bursting with God's own emotion and feelings (to quote Gerhard von Rad). God's compassion and God's overcoming evil with good, and God's healing power and presence, and God's presence with people in trial and rejoicing, and God's justice and peace, and God's humor and delight and God's solidarity with humankind was embodied in Jesus of Nazareth. In this way, Jesus was "God with skin on." But, throughout it all, in true humility, Jesus did not wish for his disciples to name him as such.

All hope, all life, all light, all love was embodied in this man. Why then, was he destroyed for this? Why? It was because God showed us in every way possible what was good, and just and right. The essence of sin is humankind substituting ourselves for God. The essence of salvation is God sacrificing Godself for humankind. In the end, Jesus was tried and put to death for treason and blasphemy. He died in love with humanity. When he died, he laid down his life for all humanity.

Those who chose to follow his way and will come to know the fulfillment of his riddle in Matthew's gospel: *"Those who find their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."* (Mt. 10:39)

I pray that you follow him. I pray that we will seek to follow and solve Jesus' riddle, by discovering its truth by living into its meaning. Amen.