

## ***ORTHODOXY OR DISCIPLESHIP?***

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**Reading: Mark 8: 31-38 (NRSV)**

**Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all of this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”**

**He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”**

In this time of war, the threat of terrorism, and financial downfall it is not unusual for people to want to hold onto something. Fear is gripping the nation and when people are afraid they search for some certainty in their lives. It is not unusual that people turn to God and return to the church during national or personal calamity. It reminds me of the story of the atheist and the Loch Ness monster.

The atheist was spending a quiet day fishing when his boat was suddenly attacked by the Loch Ness monster. In one easy motion the

monster tossed the man and his boat high into the air. Then it opened its mouth ready to swallow the man.

Still falling from the sky the atheist cried out, “Oh God! Save me!” Suddenly all motion froze. The atheist was suspended in mid-air. Hanging there the man heard the commanding voice of God, “I thought you did not believe in me.”

“Oh, come on God,” pleaded the man. “I mean give me a break. Two minutes ago I didn’t believe in the Loch Ness monster either.”

Throughout my ministry I have always encountered people who demanded that I offer them a solid accounting of my faith. They complain that they are often uncertain of my beliefs or the doctrines I subscribe to. Despite my repeated insistence that I have limited use for creeds and theological formulas they grumble, “I just don’t know what you believe.”

Now I understand, of course, that what these people are searching for is an affirmation of what they believe. Or, they are hoping I will shore up their faith, cast aside their doubts, and fortress them for the inevitable struggles of life and death. It is also quite likely that they do not understand the important distinction between orthodoxy and discipleship. That is to say, these people think that it is more important to be right than

it is to love unconditionally – it is more important to be theologically correct than it is to serve other human beings.

Orthodoxy means “right belief.” A religious institution establishes right belief and you are able to join that church if you subscribe to those beliefs. A clear example is the Catechism – to be learned by every person before he or she is brought to be confirmed by the Bishop in the Episcopal Church. The Bishop inquires of the catechumen if he or she is bound to believe in the Articles of Faith and God’s holy commandments. The affirmation of these is followed by a recitation of the Apostle’s Creed.

Like a lot of you I grew up in a very similar tradition. We recited the Apostle’s Creed every Sunday morning in church. We memorized the Ten Commandments and studied the Articles of Faith. We were even taught that the Bible contains everything sufficient for faith. I imagine that most people have the kind of faith that is structured with such certainty and there is little room for theological or ethical flexibility. They want to know what to believe and what is expected of them. They want their faith to be right, or as a friend said the other day, “absolutely right.”

This is the same kind of religious climate that Jesus entered into during his ministry. Think about the many times that Jesus was

confronted by Pharisees, scribes, and lawyers. Their conversation was almost always about how to interpret the Law of Moses. Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan in response to a lawyer's question, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus asked in return, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?"

The lawyer replied, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as your self."

The entire conversation, like so many others, is the question of Jesus' orthodoxy. Will he give right answers about the scripture? Inevitably his response to the orthodox challenge was one that turns the teaching on its head. And when charges were brought against him he was brought before the chief priests as a blasphemer. He committed treason against the right beliefs of his day. His accusers asked him if he is the Messiah, the ultimate question for heretics. He did not answer their question and simply asserted, "but from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God." They asked him again, "Are you, then, the Son of God?" He replied, "You say that I am." And that was more unorthodox heresy than they could manage. Then they

said, “What further testimony do we need? We have heard it ourselves from his own lips!” (Luke 22: 66-71)

Do you see what happened here? The making or breaking of the Messiah was a matter of the right answers passing over his lips. It is often the case that we punish or execute those who do not give us the absolute right answers.

Think of all of the people who were excommunicated, tortured, burned at the stake, beheaded, or drowned because they did not subscribe to the church’s answers. Papal censorship of dissidents continues into modern times. The late paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was censored by Rome in the 1950’s for his views on science and religion. Father Thomas Reese, former editor of *America* magazine, was investigated in 2002 by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith because he had taken a different position than Rome on issues such as HIV prevention, reproductive rights, sexual orientation and human sexuality. (It’s always about sex with them, isn’t it?) Protestant clergy have lost their pulpits because they did not give “right answers” on Sunday mornings on issues such as pacifism, reproductive rights, stem cell research, or the literal fact of heaven and hell. It did not matter what side of any of these issues they took. It only mattered to a few influential

members that the preacher did not take their side, did not ape their orthodox position. I know of a young Baptist minister who was fired from his church because he tried to bring to his congregation the recent scholarship of the Jesus seminar.

Now I don't mind if you fire a preacher because he is boring. By all means let him or her go. But don't fire the preacher because he thinks, or most especially, because you disagree with her.

But here is a more important question. Where in the gospels of the historical Jesus does he call people to be right? I don't recall that he ever said, "Come follow me. I have the answers to life's most persistent questions." Where does he demand that his disciples cough up the right answers? Nowhere! Jesus does not call us to be right. Jesus calls us to love one another unconditionally. Jesus does not call us to orthodoxy. Jesus calls us to take up our cross and lose our lives to the weak and wounded, the marginalized and destitute, the disenfranchised and misunderstood. Or to put it another way, no one needs my theology as much as they need my love.

Perhaps you have heard of the story of the bridge keeper. He sat in a control shack of the railroad bridge. Most of the time the track was parked parallel to the river, keeping the river open for boats. The trains

had regular schedules and it was his job to make certain the railroad span was in place when the trains needed to cross the river.

One night the bridge keeper was waiting for the last scheduled train to make its journey across the river. It was a passenger train on the run from Chicago to New York. As he checked his schedule and watch he heard the far off moan of the train whistle. He would see dimly the lights of the oncoming train. He dutifully turned the switch that would make the bridge swing out over the river and lock into place on the other side. He was jolted by the reality that the locking mechanism was not working. Without the bridge securely locked into position the strong vibrations of the train would unsettle the bridge and cause the train to derail.

The only possible response the bridge keeper could make was to run across the tracks and manually lock the bridge down. He could have to hold the locking lever in place until the train had made it across the river.

He ran across the bridge as fast as he could. With all of his strength the bridge keeper leaned into the locking handle. He could hear the whistle and feel the rumble of the oncoming train. Just as the train began its approach to the bridge he heard a child's voice yell, "Daddy, where are you?" It was the voice of his son who often went to the control shack in

the evening to walk home with his father. The father peered into the night and could see that his son was halfway across the bridge. The boy would not be able to outrun the train back to safety.

The bridge keeper faced the most difficult moral decision of his life. He could let go of the lock and send the train into the river, or he could hold tight and sacrifice his six-year-old son.

The train sped past him as he gripped the lock in mortal horror. The train sped past him to safety to the other side of the river. No one on board that train ever knew of the tiny broken body thrown without pity into the river below. They did not see the bridge keeper walk home under the greatest burden of his life. He had to tell his wife they had lost their only child.<sup>1</sup>

It would be an understatement to say that the man offered unconditional love that night. His would be a sacrifice for the lives of many people most of us could not contemplate. I doubt we will ever be in such a situation. But it makes the point I am trying to share this morning.

I do not know what church that man belonged to; what he believed; or how he worshipped. It finally does not matter. It certainly would not

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<sup>1</sup> This is a story that I heard over thirty years ago. There are many variations on it. Go to “Inspirational Stories of Faith” at <http://www.websites-host.com/insp/istoreis.html>.

matter to the people on the train who lived. They lived, not because of his theology – whether it was orthodox or not. They lived because he loved.

That is the call to discipleship, to lose our lives so that others may gain theirs. And Thomas Merton reminds us that love can be kept only by giving it away.<sup>2</sup> You cannot hold love in your heart in order to feel good about yourself and the human condition. You cannot hold love in your mind as an idea to improve human relations. You can only love to the extent that you offer it to others. Such love may be nothing more than helping someone load their groceries into the car, listening to someone who had a horrible day, or holding hands with the lonely. Whatever needs come your way, love yearns for expression.

During this season people wonder what they should “give up” for Lent. This is the wrong question. I think it is the time when we give ourselves away. It is the time to offer grace and love to a world that is so desperately hungry for such bread.

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1955), 3.