

"The Way of Jesus: After Jesus"

A Sermon for University Congregational Church

Sunday, May 30, 2021

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Traditional Word

There are two ways, one of life and one of death, and there is a great difference between the two ways. The way of life is this. First of all, thou shalt love the God that made thee; secondly, [love] thy neighbor as thyself. And all things whatsoever thou wouldest not have befall thyself neither do thou unto another.

--From The Didache [The Teachings of the Apostles] Chapter 1:1-5

Contemporary Word

"...communities have a history—in an important sense they are constituted by their past. Real community is a community of memory, one that does not forget its past.—
Robert Bellah

"The Way of Jesus: After Jesus"

There's an oft-quoted saying of Gandhi's about which I have grown ambivalent. It goes like this: "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ." My ambivalence stems from the fact either he's right, and we've completely missed the boat on this whole Christianity thing, or he's wrong, and our modern practice of the Way of Jesus is spot on, and Gandhi just doesn't get it. He certainly packs a lot of judgment into that one pithy little phrase, though, doesn't he? He's basically telling about one-third of the world's population that he doesn't like us and that our interpretation of Christianity is way off the mark. And he does have a point; it often seems that the status of our faith may have missed the mark in regards to how we ought to live. I am curious as to how this came to be. Today marks the first Sunday of Robin's sabbatical and the first Sunday of our new sermon series, The Way of Jesus. I thought it might be helpful during this Season of Sabbatical to reflect on the roots of our faith and how this thing called Christianity came to be. And not only that, but also explore how we then live that faith in the world and how we have ordered our lives to be "Christian."

What really happened after Jesus? Well, we don't know. There are no video recordings or audio recordings or many written documents from this time in our history. What we do have are copies of copies of those documents, and what we can try and glean from them in concert with one another becomes the tenets of our faith. I have also found it extremely helpful to make one significant distinction at the

beginning. When we talk about Jesus Christ, we are actually talking about two distinct understandings. The first is the Jesus of history. A man who taught a new way to be in the world. A new way of life and living. A man who gathered disciples around him to teach about this new way and to then spread the "way" throughout the entire world. This is the Jesus of History—Jesus of Nazareth.

The other division is what we like to call big "C" Christianity—I often call this Corporate Christianity or Cultural Christianity. Big "C" Christianity is Christ, Constantine, Christendom, Calvin, and Christian America. I would add Corporate Christ™. It's the Church and what the Church has done with Jesus and his teachings.

The big "C" story goes like this: "Jesus came to the earth to save us, but he founded the Church instead. That Church suffered under Roman persecution until the emperor Constantine made Christianity Legal. With its new status, the Christian religion spread throughout Europe, where popes and kings formed a society they called Christendom, which was run by the Catholic Church and was constantly threatened by Muslims, witches, and heretics. There were wars and inquisitions. When people had enough, they rebelled and became Protestants, their main leader being John Calvin, who was a great theologian but a killjoy. Eventually, Calvin's heirs, the Puritans, left Europe to set up a Christian Society in the New World. The United States of America then became the most important Christian nation in the world, a beacon of faith and democracy." (pg. 5) Many thanks to Diana Bulter Bass for that last bit of history there—it was from her book, *A People's History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story*, and it's the one I'm using for this summer's sermon series.

Thus goes the story of Corporate Christianity™. It teaches that if you find the right branch of the correct denomination of the proper division of Christianity, then your place in heaven is assured, and you may live out the rest of your life in peace because you have all of it figured out. It's that easy. And yet, that is not the "way" for me. That is not "The Way" of Jesus for me. That is a way of Jesus, one interpretation. My understanding leans more towards the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, not towards a stack of doctrinal beliefs that must be professed before you can claim the title, Christian.

Sometimes it's difficult for us who lean towards the Jesus of history rather than Jesus the Christ—as one famous French Catholic Theologian put it: "the primary dilemma of contemporary religion is the loss and reconstruction' of memory.". How we remember the Jesus event reflects how we have built our foundations of faith. Who wants to be a part of a faith system that spurs critics to say disparaging things, like Gandhi's comment about not liking Christians—it gets us to the point where the famous anti-theist, Christopher Hitchens, declares that: "Religion poisons everything." That's quite a statement—one that should concern all religious people from all faiths.

Sociologist of Religion Robert Bellah once said that... "communities have a history—in an important sense, they are constituted by their past. Real Community is a community of memory, one that does not forget its past." If Bellah is correct, that all communities are actually constituted, are made up of their pasts, then the primary calling of the faith community is to remember. And that is a big part of what we do here on Sunday mornings. We remember. We celebrate. We mourn. We forgive. We move on. But it is our remembrance of Jesus and the Christian story, a story still being written and one that includes everyone in this room--this is what drives our faith.

We here at UCC practice what is called Generative Christianity—a living tradition to reconsider faith as a community of people who practice God's love and mercy through time. Generative, Lived Christianity cannot be understood in terms of that Big-C story; it is best experienced as a community that remembers the ways in which Christian People have enacted the Great Commandment in different times and places. You remember the Great Commandment—love God and love neighbor, right? An honest Christian practice would have that Commandment at its core and then base everything it does on fulfilling those two criteria: Love God. Love Neighbor. This is the crux of what Jesus was teaching way back then, and we've been trying to get it right ever since. And the Church developed its teachings, not around that great Commandment, but around how to keep the Church, big C, in power. The traditions of the Church are not so much about Jesus as they are about power. Who belongs? Who can serve? Who can teach? Who can preach? In other words, who matters.

One of our proud grandparents shared their grandchild's Confirmation Essay with me that they recently completed and thus were confirmed in the Methodist Church. There was such joy in this young person's writing, but one phrase has stuck with me this week: "To me, Jesus is a friend...someone that will always be there for me, and someone who will never judge." This young person has learned of the Jesus of history and his teachings and has now made a new memory of Jesus that will inform her for the rest of her life: Jesus is a friend. New Memories of Jesus. New interpretations of old stories.

Diana Butler Bass references this in *A People's History of Christianity* like this: "The Jesus who captures the imagination of generative Christians is Jesus, the religious revolutionary, the one who teaches wisdom and resists the world's domination system to instead preach the kin-dom of God." (14) His is not a revolution of militant, military victory, rather of humility, hospitality, and love. His teachings are the ones that make a young Wichitan call him their friend. And it is these teachings that this community has built its covenant around and what sustains our missions.

Since Albert Schweitzer's classic book, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, appeared in English in 1910, Protestants have actively pursued the question of who

Jesus really was and what Jesus actually taught. The difference between the Jesus of History and the Christ taught of by the church and church doctrine is often difficult to discern. Organizations such as the Jesus Seminar, now called Westar, have worked to give to the world solid, extensively investigated, and rigorously explored new interpretations of what we believe Jesus of Nazareth actually did and said—not interpretations or editions of sayings that have been slighted altered throughout the centuries to transfer more power to the Church—power that should reside in our love of the Holy One.

My first seminary class on church history was entitled: Early Christianities. And we spent a significant chunk of time during our first class session discussing why the professor chose the plural of that word, Christianities, as opposed to the singular, Christianity. And it was precisely this dedication to the details of history that led us to understand that there has NEVER been one true monolithic belief system that is called Christianity. The Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches might disagree with me, but history shows that even at the height of Roman Catholic and Orthodox power, there were plenty of us heretics around with differing interpretations of what it meant to be Christian. Why? Why so much human energy spent on this philosophy—this Jesus? Why did the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth catch the world on fire and spread to every place on the globe?

It tends to settle around this fact: "Christianity seems to have succeeded because it transformed the lives of people in a chaotic world. "The power of Christianity lay not in its promise of other worldly compensations for suffering in this life, as has so often been proposed. No, the crucial change that took place...was the rapidly spreading awareness of a faith that delivered potent antidotes to life's miseries here and now!" The Way of Jesus offers a new way to be in the world that has positive benefit for people.

"Bass reminds us that: "The Way [of Jesus], with its transformative power, challenged the status quo and infuriated ancient defenders of Roman religions, many of whom argued that the new Christian religion was an immoral sect, with secretive rites and rituals that undermined traditional Roman values of loyalty and family." The Way of Jesus is transformative: Jesus the Christ is a mender of lives—the healer—the Great Physician who inspired Justin Martyr to write: "We who formerly valued above all things the acquisition of wealth and possession, now bring what we have into a common stock, and communicate to everyone in need; we who hated and destroyed one another, and on account of their different manners would not live with men of a different tribe, now, since the coming of Christ, live familiarly with them, and pray for our enemies." Justin Martyr recognized this new way to be in the world! Instead of being in conflict with each other, as Rome would wish it, we seek common ground in direct opposition to what the Roman authorities expected.

Since the first teachings (or doctrines) of "the church," The Greatest Commandment has actually been at the forefront. Even the first document about these teachings, The Didache (dee-duh-kay), begins with a familiar call: "There are two ways, one of life and one of death, but a great difference between the two ways. The Way of life, then, is this: First you shall love God who made you, second, love your neighbor as yourself, and do not do to another what you would not want done to you." First Century Christians would have taken this to heart and based the rest of their learning and their living and their way of being in the world on that Commandment, just as I base my theology on the same.

But something happened to that foundational teaching, and it grew to be less and less critical to the Big "C" church. Instead of focusing our love on God and neighbor, the doctrine began to change more into a love of Church and priest. Love of God began to take a back seat because the teaching became this: The Church represents God on earth, so love the Church, and it's just the same as loving God--and we know that's not true. Love of Church requires uniformity of belief, and our sincere Protestant hearts bristle at being told what we must believe.

Diana Butler Bass sums up this first chapter of her book like this: "The Great Commandment gives us common ground with the early Christian Communities, not because of any similarity between the ancient world and today, and not because they knew how to be better Christians—they tried to live the Way and failed as many of us do. Yet, even in those shortcomings (or because of them?), we walk the Way of Jesus with them. We are in sacred covenant with the early Christian communities and with the Holy One as we journey together on the Way of Jesus.

We can organize our lives around a love of God and a love of neighbor. We can embrace the past in a life-affirming manner built on the transformative practice of love rather than doctrinal belief. We might even reimagine some ancient stories to give us new insight. We can recapture wisdom from ancient Christianity. As you practice the Way of Jesus in your life today, this week, this year, be open to the possibility of reimagining your stories, your memories, of Jesus, for it is in this reimagining of the Holy One's life-affirming dream for us that this congregation, this community, this collection of souls will find a firm foothold as we journey into our future together. Amen.

RESOURCES USED:

Holy Bible, NRSV

Diana Butler Bass. *A People's History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story*, HarperCollins, New York, NY, 2009.