

Retrieving a Dangerous Dream

From the sermon series: The Dream

Text: Luke 22:19

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

My life and ministry has been changed through the observance of Lent. It is in the observance of Lent that I began to focus rather intensely on the story of Jesus, and in the last few years that focus has been transforming. I grew up in the church and in a wonderful Christian home and was taught as a child to love Jesus, and I was taught the whole story of Jesus and identified Jesus as Son of God, the One Who came into this world to die for us. My piety was expressed in the old hymn, "Jesus paid it all, all to Him I owe. Sin had left a dreadful stain, He washed it white as snow."

Then I began to realize that, while I should love Jesus and admire and trust and adore Jesus, as a matter of fact, there were people in the course of history who moved me more than Jesus. It's a strange thing to confess to you, but it's true. It began to bother me somewhat. Why is it that, for example, as a kid having to do a book review on a biography, I read a biography of Gandhi, and I was so impressed with that person? And then later, studying the while Civil War and recognizing the leadership of an Abraham Lincoln, I was really impressed. And in the 60's, with the Civil Rights struggle, Martin Luther King and the non-violent leadership patterned on Gandhi's methods -I was moved by this human person and began to realize that Jesus did not affect me the way some of these people affected me.

And then it was such that in the study of the Gospels there was a development or movement that looked at Christology from below. You see, my Christology, my understanding of Jesus Christ, was from above, from God's point of view. That's the way you've learned it, too. I can remember struggling with that at some points. For example, at seminary one studies Christology. And I can remember studying that section in the Gospels about the temptation - you remember, Jesus was tempted in the Wilderness - and, according to our good Reformed theology, Jesus was really tempted, but Jesus could not have sinned. Now, maybe you didn't know that, but believe me, that's true. In our good theological systems, Jesus is tempted, but Jesus could not sin. Jesus was not only human, Jesus was divine. If Jesus Christ, human and divine, would have sinned, God would have sinned. That's impossible, so the temptation was real, but Jesus could not have

sinned. When it came to exam time, I had to write the answer to the question, "Could Jesus have sinned?" So, I wrote the right answer, because uppermost in my life was always to get all As. My father had taught me that. I wrote the right answer. But, then I wrote what I really felt. And I let the professor have it. I mean, the page smoked. I said it disgusts me, this kind of game we play, when you read the Gospel story and you've got Jesus in the wilderness in temptation, and then later we observe that and say he could not really have sinned. I really got rid of all my passion. I got my exam book back and the professor wrote across my answer, "Feel better?" And, indeed, I did feel better!

So, there were those times that I struggled with the fact that my Jesus Christ was second person of the Trinity, Son of God come down to earth to live and to die, to take care of the atoning necessity and to go back to reign, and I treated Jesus Christ as a kind of divine interloper, one who dipped down here for a time. But, Jesus, for me, lacked something of that flesh and blood passion that I experienced in my own human experience. He was not really my brother. I was more impressed by Gandhi. To be sure, Jesus was pretty heroic. After all, he had a leg up on us.

Then came to me that development of Christology from below, where there had to be some research into the real historical setting of Jesus and, as I began to reflect on that, I came to see that God certainly embodied Jesus, or Jesus was embodied with the Spirit of God, but Jesus was my brother. Jesus was flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone, and then I began to reflect on the whole Gospel story from that angle. On April 15, 1984, Palm Sunday, I preached a sermon entitled, "Jesus, You're Really Somebody." And that was a turning point for me. I was invited to come to Western Seminary to lead a Lenten preaching seminar and there were about 40-50 colleagues gathered there and I shared with them my excitement about how my preaching during the Lenten season had come alive with my understanding of Jesus as genuinely human. Well, it wasn't very well accepted, frankly. But, no matter. I continued to pursue that line, until in 1991 during Lent, I preached about The Way of Jesus, the Sign of the Cross. And then the next year the same thing, and the next year - The Way of Jesus, The Way of the Cross, the way of a human being fully open to God who proclaimed a different world and who died for the way he lived. And I come right back in 1995 and I want to say in these Lenten weeks, that Jesus had a dream. He had a dream of a new world, of a different way of being, and in dying he asked those who followed him to remember, to keep the dream alive.

So, this morning we begin with the retrieval of a dangerous dream. Retrieval is a technical word. If you were in literary circles and engaged in the interpretation of literary documents of the past, which of course is very critical to interpretation of the Bible and very critical to the interpretation of the Constitution, but it's also done broadly in the literary field. Interpretation of documents of the past. How do you bridge the past and the present? The endeavor to do that is called the science of hermeneutics. Hermes was the messenger of the gods. Hermes was the god of communication. How do you take an ancient story and have it come alive

so that it impacts us today, shaping our future? Well, in the study of literary documents in today's world, which is quite a broad endeavor being carried on by many, many people, there is what is called the hermeneutics of suspicion. You go to an ancient document and you don't just take it at face value, but consider, "What was going on in the society and the culture? What was the political situation? The economic situation? Why would this author put things this way?"

An example of this in the New Testament is when the interpreter will go to the Gospel of John, where you have a whole controversy between Jesus and the Jews, and say, "At that time, when John was writing, there was real conflict between the Jesus movement and the ongoing Jewish community. There was real tension." And that tension will probably reveal itself in a document written at that time. Hermeneutics of suspicion doesn't just take it at face value, but asks what was going on behind there?

But there's another hermeneutics, and that's what I really want to use in our Lenten discussions, and that is the hermeneutics of retrieval, where there is an honest effort made to retrieve, to bring back, to elicit from the past that meaning, that disclosure in order that it may become a disclosure experience for us today. The kind of thing when you read an ancient document out of another time and another place, a whole other world, and suddenly a light goes on and that which came to expression there, comes to expression again. That's retrieval. And what I hope we can do and where we want to begin this morning, is to try to retrieve that dream of Jesus. It's more possible to do it today than has ever been possible before, because there's been such intensive research into the Gospels and into the life of Jesus.

One of the books that some of you have read and we've passed around is by Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again For The First Time*. Marcus Borg is a member of the Jesus Seminar that gets a little press once in a while, and he makes a very interesting and helpful distinction between the pre-Easter Jesus and the post-Easter Jesus. They're not the same, you see. The pre-Easter Jesus is the Jesus that lived, ate, slept, sweat, taught, wept – the actual, historical Jesus. Pre-Easter Jesus. The post-Easter is that Jesus remembered after Easter, some decades down the line, in terms of the present experience of the risen, living Christ. Our Gospels are post-Easter Jesus remembrances.

But, through research today, we have access more than ever before, to that pre-Easter Jesus. Studying his times. Studying his cultural situation. What were the politics of the day? What were the economics of the day? Does it matter, for example, that Jesus was at the lower end of the peasant scale, that Jesus' family had lost their property? Does it help us to understand Jesus if we understand in that day that life was organized according to a kind of holiness code, where you ate with some people and you didn't eat with other people. You followed certain practices in your diet and your ritual life. There were all sorts of ways in which life was structured then, just as there are now. But, what we're able to do now is

to go back and paint some of that, to understand some of that which was going on. So, we're looking at the pre-Easter Jesus. But, to remember Jesus is to recover a dangerous dream, because Jesus is not just the pre-Easter Jesus of history, Jesus is the living Lord of the Church, and throughout all of these centuries here and there, now and again, someone or some movement has remembered, has been captivated by the memory of Jesus and that energized them and changed them and they have become transformative agents in the world.

For example, in the Second World War, in France, when the Nazis overcame the French government, there was a French puppet government put in place that cooperated with the Nazis, specifically in rousing out the Jews and sending them off to the concentration camps. There was a French Reformed pastor named André Trocmé. His story is told in the book *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*. Trocmé struggled with what he as a Christian had to do in the face of his context in time in France - should he cooperate? He could not cooperate. But the thing that shaped Trocmé in his very concrete decisions in that very existential situation was his memory of Jesus. He writes, "If Jesus really walked upon the earth, why do we keep treating him as though he were a disembodied, impossible, idealistic, ethical theory?" You see, if Jesus is just some kind of impossible ideal, then Jesus can be admired, but not necessarily followed. Trocmé says, if he were a real man, then the Sermon on the Mount was made for people on this earth. And if he existed, God has shown us in flesh and blood what goodness is for flesh and blood people.

What's dangerous about remembering Jesus that way? It put Trocmé in danger of his life. But it's dangerous in the deeper sense; it's dangerous to the collaborationist government. It's dangerous to the ruling regime. The memory of Jesus is subversive. When Jesus gets a hold of one, when one says, "Oh, I see. I see a different world. I see a new possibility. I see the contradiction of my life, I see the contradiction of my society, of my church," when one is energized by that dream, that memory, one can become a dangerous person. One becomes a destabilizing person then. One becomes as Jesus was, a thorn in the flesh of the status quo and the established structures of life.

Jesus' memory is dangerous, but it is precisely in the Lenten season that we are called to remember, and how better to enter the season than around the Table, the Table of our Lord, the Last Supper. As I said at the Table, it was his custom to eat with all people. To eat with all people was a political statement. It was counter to the accepted ways, the conventional wisdom. It was radical and it was disruptive. People were offended by Jesus. Particularly the religious people were offended with Jesus. When he came to his last night, it was as natural as breathing for him to say to his disciples, "Join me at table." And knowing that he was going to die, he broke the bread and he said to them, "Remember me. Don't let the dream die." That's really what it was. It was really no more than that. The dream has so many applications and we can't begin even to scratch the surface

this morning, but let me just give you a concrete illustration of what it would mean if we remembered Jesus at the Table.

This Table, my friends, is here because Jesus gathered at table with all sorts of people. He scandalized the righteous because he would break bread with anybody. But this Table in congregations in churches all across the world, rather than being the Table of Jesus that invites all, has become one of the great divisions even within the Christian church. There are Christian churches that gather and I'm not allowed to come to the Table, because I don't believe just the way they believe, or believe and live just the way they believe and live, or recite just the right words. Isn't it ironic? Isn't it ironic that the Table, which for Jesus was the radical sign of inclusivity, could become a means of division even among Christian people? The Table was simply a sign of that broader inclusivity of Jesus who welcomed all, who ate with publicans and tax collectors, accepted the devotion of prostitutes, reached out and touched the leper. And yet the Church is a Church of walls and barriers. It is not simply the people who are hungry for grace and forgiveness. We have our walls up and our barriers erected. Isn't it ironic?

If we really remembered the dream, it could be dangerous, couldn't it? For the Christian Church. For my life. That's what this season is all about. Remembering that Jesus died because he had a dream of something different. Remembering that world that he conceived of - a world of grace, of compassion, of inclusiveness, and seeking in this season to be transformed by the memory in order to keep the dream alive.

Lent has changed my life and my ministry. I love Jesus. And it is the passion of my life to follow him. Will you join me?