

Smashing Idols – Again and Again

From the series: The Faith of Jesus: Trust in a Gracious God

Text: Mark 3:5-6

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

...he was grieved at their hardness of heart...conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him. Mark 3:5-6

Jesus died the way he died, because he lived the way he lived. He lived the way he lived because of the faith that he had, because of his conception of God, his understanding of the nature of God, and the spirit and attitude of God. We are trying in these Lenten weeks to discern the faith of Jesus - Jesus as a believing person in the midst of this world. Because our concrete actions and our attitudes, our behavior, really finally stem from what we believe, deep down. And if we can get to the faith of Jesus, maybe we'll understand something of the life of Jesus. But we might not want to do that. Because if we ever discovered it and ever truly followed it, we might end up as Jesus ended up, of course – crucified. He didn't die in bed, remember. He was put to death.

We are trying to see that larger canvas which reveals the faith that he had, leading to the life that he lived, bringing him to the death that he experienced. We are able to do that better today than probably any time in the last nearly 2000 years. It's not easy to find a historical Jesus. There are volumes and volumes written about the quest for the historical Jesus. Particularly in the 18th century when the whole science of history arose, there was a great quest to find the Jesus of the Gospels. The historical methods that were used and the way the documents of the Gospels were treated led to a blind alley, a dead end. And then for a time the possibility of discovering anything about the historical Jesus was just given up. All we had was the Christ of the Gospels, the Christ of the New Testament Church. We couldn't get back to history itself.

The reason it's not easy to get back to history is because you are talking about Gospel documents which were already many decades removed from the life of Jesus. No one followed Jesus around with a stenographer's pad. And then of the manuscripts we have which record the early Gospel accounts, already removed by two or three decades or more from the event, the best manuscripts are out

another century or so (the earliest around 200 CE). And so, by that time, there was a lot of interpreting and a lot of shaping, because it was a very polemical period, it was a controversial period, and so it is not easy to find the historical Jesus. But I am saying to you that today we may have a better chance of getting some sense of the historical Jesus, the believing man, the Jew in the Judaism of his time, than has been true to this point.

There are a number of recent studies out right now. One of the most significant is by John Dominic Crossan, a Roman Catholic scholar, who has written *The Historical Jesus, a Story of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*. It's an excellent, scholarly work. Fascinating book. Not the kind of book you read for devotions for Lent. It's a scholarly treatment. It assumes a lot of background. But there is kind of a neat image he uses for Jesus in his concrete life. He speaks about Jesus as "proclaiming the *unbrokered presence of God*." The "unbrokered presence of God," proclaimed by Jesus meant God's presence, God's nearness, God's accessibility to anyone and everyone, everywhere, at all times was proclaimed. The "unbrokered presence of God."

You know what brokers are? They are people who don't own anything, and don't do anything, produce anything, they just make money on other people who do. (That's supposed to be funny!) (Laughter) But I am glad there are brokers. I love brokers. Don't leave, brokers, I'm going to redeem you yet. Because you see there are a lot of things that I want to do in my life and I don't know how to do them. You know - detailed paper work, contracts, and knowledge I don't have. But I want to get this thing effected, so what do I do? I call my broker. My broker does it for me. For a fee. But, it's worth it. I get it off my back. Details I don't have to worry about, get the job done, pay a little fee. I would rather pay a few bucks and get the job done for me. That's what brokers do.

Crossan says that Jesus "proclaimed the unbrokered presence of God." The "unbrokered presence of God." In other words, you don't need me as a broker of religion. And as an ecclesiastical institution, you don't need Christ Community. And we don't need the Reformed Church in America. And we don't even need all of the structures of the whole Christian Church because, according to Jesus, God's presence is immediate - available - accessible. The "unbrokered presence of God!" Well, if he's right, I am out of business. I mean, I work hard. You don't really want to read all of the theology I do, do you? Do you want to worry yourself about it? Do you want to have miserable Saturday nights like I do? No! You would rather go out for dinner. Have a nice evening. Get up on Sunday morning, yawn, stretch, come here. And I do it for you. I work hard, and I earn my fee.

But now, here comes Jesus, and he says, "All that isn't necessary, folks. You really don't need him." Well, I can understand why they killed him. (Laughter) I am serious. That's really what was going on. Because if you were a part of the religious establishment, if you were a part of the temple and the priesthood, and the sacrificial system, and the holy days, and all of that, plus everybody that got to

set up a hotdog stand outside the temple on special days and pay the fee for that. I mean, it was good for business! It was quite an institution! And anybody that threatens institutions like that is touching the economic life, and the social life, and the religious life of the community. And anybody who comes in with that kind of iconoclastic plan is probably going to pay for it with his life if he is making any kind of inroads at all.

In the passage we read, if we had started earlier in the second chapter, about Jesus being in a house. You can't get in the door, so some desperate friends of a paralyzed man chop a hole in the ceiling and they let their friend down, right in front of Jesus. He says, "Your sins are forgiven!" And they said, "Who is this - to make that kind of a claim? Only God can forgive sins." He said to himself, "Well, you don't think I can do that? Which is easier, to say that, or to actually make the man walk? Man, stand up." The man stood up.

But, you see, in the traditional establishment of things, there was a connection between sin and sickness, and you needed the whole priesthood, the whole mediation of the religious institution in order to provide the way by which sins could be repented of and forgiveness could be pronounced, and healing could be effected. But if you bypass that by taking a lame man into your presence and say, "Your sins are forgiven," that undercuts the whole decent and orderly structure of things.

They came to him and they said, "Your disciples don't fast. Why don't they fast?" Jesus played fast and loose with "fast." He said, "They can't fast when the bridegroom is there." Because when you have a wedding reception, you don't fast. At a wedding reception, you toast the bride and the groom, and you dance, and you have a wonderful party. Jesus was saying, "My presence is the presence of the Kingdom. God's presence doesn't need to be mediated here. And the time of the "unbrokered presence of God" here at this time, is not a time for fasting. There are not some little religious practices that you have to do, to say, "Pardon me, I am having a wonderful time, but I am going to take time off in order to do these little religious things." Jesus said, "For goodness sakes, stay at the wedding reception."

And then, of course, there are the two instances in the third chapter about the Sabbath. The Sabbath is probably the finest gift that Judaism has given to the world. The gift of the day of rest, ceasing from labor, ceasing from figuring, planning, conspiring. Ceasing from everything, and simply being for 24 hours - the presence of God. Great gift! And I am sure Jesus observed Sabbath. We have lost Sabbath. We don't keep Sabbath any more - to our loss.

But, even such a great gift as Sabbath can become a bondage, and it can become a barrier to doing what one needs to. In the case of the disciples, it was a humane thing to feed people. There are not some religious rules that need to be followed. If someone is hungry, for goodness sakes, eat! And in terms of the healing of the man with the withered hand, Jesus was angry. He was angry at their hardness of

heart. Paradoxically, religion can make people so hard of heart, hard of heart in the execution of their religious duties. Jesus said, "For God's sake, forget it!" "Man, come here. Stretch out your hand." He said, "Is it right to do good or ill on the Sabbath?" Certainly God is into doing good, into healing, into giving life.

Well, the sixth verse of that third chapter says that they went out and began to conspire to kill him. Because those are just examples. Mark marshals them in one after another, in order to show that the whole presence of Jesus was a challenge to the religious establishment. It is not a case of where the Jews were bad people or that the New Testament gives them such a bad rap, but they were just people like us. They were simply the prisoners of a traditional religious pattern of things. They were caught up in the structure of the institution, and Jesus challenged the institution at its most basic level. He spoke of the "unbrokered presence" of God. He said, "You don't need an institution. You don't need a temple. You don't need the priesthood. You don't need me. I don't have a franchise on the presence of God. God is such that God is available for everyone and anyone, every time, any time, everywhere." Well, in saying so, he relativized the importance of the religious institutions and the religious functionaries. And so they killed him.

I don't really think though that Jesus was against religion in its institutionalized forms. I suppose Jesus knew what all of us know. Spirit always needs form. There have always been institutional forms, institutional expressions that have been the particularization and the concretization of the religious motivation, the religious quest. And, I think, that's legitimate, necessary and good - until it becomes an end in itself and becomes a barrier to the free flow of the Spirit of God, and the love and grace of God in the world, as so often has been the case. You say, "Well, Jesus mediating the unbrokered presence of God to anyone, anywhere, any time - What about all of the statements of the New Testament that say things like 'No one comes to the Father but by me,' and 'Jesus Christ the only mediator between God and humankind,' and all that?"

Well, I'll tell you about all that in the New Testament. Do you know what the New Testament is? It is a collection of the documents of the early Christian Church. Now think with me for just a minute. What do you have in the New Testament? Do you have some objective, unbiased statement of timeless and eternal truth? No. You have in the New Testament a polemical document of an early community, which was very fragile, very vulnerable, weak, fragile, fledgling, insecure. It was trying to find its own identity over against this massive institution of Jewish religion out of which it comes.

Jesus destabilized the temple. Jesus destabilized the priesthood. Jesus destabilized the whole Jewish system without, I think, intending to be anything else than a good Jew. But he destabilized it. And there were those who, after his death, believed he was with them still. They experienced his presence. And so unexpectedly, who would have believed that this rag-tag community might grow and become like a spreading flame through the Roman Empire? But in those

early decades they were seeking to find their identity over against this massive institution from which they had derived. They didn't know if they were Jews or what. They still went to the temple. They still said their prayers. They still had their feast days. They were also followers of Jesus, thinking he was the Messiah.

They were really in a transition period. They were about to jell, but they weren't really yet what they were going to become. They didn't know where they were going. But one thing they knew is that Jesus had been crucified by this religious institution and, over against that institution and its legalism, and its moralism and its oppressive tyranny, its domination of people, this community of followers of Jesus were saying, "No! Jesus is the Way." It is really no wonder that the scribes and Pharisees come off pretty poorly here. You would almost think that they were some kind of demonic folk when, as a matter of fact, they were people just like us. And so, in this attempt to bear witness to their absolute conviction that Jesus was God's presence here and that Jesus was indeed the way, the truth and the life, they put all their eggs in that basket, and these documents aren't at all balanced objective accounts of what was, but they are the faith-ful witness of those who found everything focused in Jesus.

And so, within a relatively short time, this infant community with all its vulnerability and fragility took on strength, numbers, power, form, structure. This infant Christian community, in the name of Jesus who destabilized the whole Jewish institution, found its sea legs and put stabilizers out and formed an institution over against Judaism, another brokerage house of religion, Christianity, just as much a brokerage house of religion as Judaism, and no more legitimate.

By the year 312 CE, the Emperor Constantine made the Christian movement the established religion of the Roman Empire, an amazing success. And it was a fatal hour because now the state co-opted the Church, and the altar and the throne became one, coupling with faith the powers of state and religion to dominate people and control masses. Christianity had arrived in the world and it became exactly what Jesus had tried to smash in his own Judaism.

So now we have not only Judaism, we've got another brokerage house. Merrill Lynch has got a real Paine 'n Webber. (Laughter) Each one claiming to have the absolute truth. Each one claiming to have the only way. Each ostracizing the other and excommunicating the other. Each trying to penetrate the other side and bring it over and make it like itself. It is the tragic story of religion throughout 2000 years, and it had gone on, of course, before that. So, you see, it just may be that if Jesus came back now and looked at the Christian Church, he would shake his head and say, "I thought that's what I died to prevent."

I was in a discussion group this week where I mentioned the fact that I grew up thinking that the whole globe was going to be Christianized, that there was going to be world evangelization – everybody would become Christian and then Jesus would come again. I don't believe that any more. It could happen. You never say

never in history, but I don't see the world becoming Christian. I see the resurgence of the great religions of the world and the absolute necessity of the religions beginning to talk to one another, because if we don't the prophetic historical religions - Judaism, Christianity and Islam - are going to blow up the globe. Waco, Texas, the New York Trade Center, the killing outside the abortion clinic in the Panhandle of Florida - it's all in the name of God, my friends. The historical religions - Judaism, Christianity and Islam - they are called prophetic religions, and someone in the discussion group said to me, "Well, religion needs to be institutionalized." They said, "Christ Community is an institution." I said, "Yeah, tell me about it, I know." They said, "What do you see? What do you see?"

I said, "I don't know. But I do believe this, that the Christian Church, as it is currently organized into three great branches and the branch of which we are a part is fragmentized into hundreds of small little competing companies, brokerage houses." They said, "We are all pouring energy into the survival of those institutions while the world is about to be blown up." And, it seems to me what we need to do is align new alliances and new coalitions - the old ones aren't working. And then someone told me a rumor that was circulating in Catholic circles. It was only a rumor he said, but he has some connections that make me think that there might be something to it. He said that the word out of Rome is that the present pope is rather seriously ill. I hope that's not true, because I don't wish him any ill, but certainly the present pope is to me the epitome of the barrier and blockage of what needs to happen in our world in terms of movement forward on a whole variety of issues. But, nonetheless, maybe he is ill. I don't know. But, in Africa there is a black Cardinal who can speak Arabic and who has connections to Israel, who is being spoken about as the next Pope. And I began to dream.

I began to think. You know, three years ago we would have said that the east-west ideological standoff was something that was seen to go on and on, and the arms race and the nuclear threat, and then suddenly out of the blue, to the amazement of the whole world, the candles were lighted and prayers were said, and the walls tumbled down and Eastern Europe began to unravel. And, of course, that creates its own set of problems but, nonetheless, there is more freedom and more potential for democratic humane existence in the world than we would have thought possible just three or four years ago. Things can happen. History is open. History is dynamic, and the Spirit of God moves through structures and sometimes structures that seem impregnable get blasted. Sometimes something happens and the kind of accommodation with all kinds of demonic compromise gets blown sky high and there is newness, and the new wine of the kingdom begins to flow.

And I thought to myself, what would happen if there appeared on the scene someone with the charisma of a Jesus and the spirit of God who could say to the Christian religion, "Unwrap yourself. Go back to your founder. Go back to Jesus. Undo your trinity. Undo your Christology. Undo your elaborate theories of the

atonement. Go back to Jesus whom you rejected and see him as an advocate of the best of your covenant religion.” One who would say to Islam, “Look into the face of Jesus and see if Jesus is not really what you are all about.” You know my dream was that Jesus *could* become the Savior of the world in a way that I would never have dreamed. Jesus will not become the Savior of the world as the Christ, the exalted Christ of the Christian religion. But Jesus might just become the Savior of the world in the alchemy of God’s grace by the smashing of the respective religions in order that the truncated images of God represented in each one of them might unite to reflect that one true God, might somehow or other shine through the broken fragments into a newness and freshness that we have not yet dared to dream of. Wouldn’t that be something? I wonder if we would dare give up our Christianity for a world-saving fresh vision of the true and eternal God whose “unbrokered presence” would embrace one and all.

You know when I went out to Brandeis last fall and I told you what I was going to suggest they consider: what might have happened if the Jews had not rejected Jesus; the Christians, Mohammed; the Romans, the Greek Orthodox, and you clapped. You applauded. I believe you are like people all over the world, Christians, Jews, and Muslims. I believe people all over the world like you, good people, spiritually hungry people, sincere people, morally serious people would just love for all the institutional trappings to get out of the way and that people would soften in order that you could all embrace your neighbors and we could all worship before the *one* God who was full of grace.

It will take some idol smashing. Got your hammer ready?