

God, Can't You Do Something?

From the series: God in the Mirror of a Human Face

Text: Mark 14:36

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
Lent, March 14, 1999

Transcription of the spoken sermon

It has been my contention this Lenten season that it is critically important that we get a proper fix on the historical Jesus, because if we get it right on Jesus, we'll get it right on God, and if we get it right on God, we'll get it right in ourselves, for Jesus is the human face that mirrors God, and the God that we worship, the God that we serve, the God that we imagine is the God that will shape us, determine the contours of our life, the attitudes, the posture of our spirit. So, it's so very important to get it right on Jesus in order to get it right on God, in order to be right ourselves.

We have seen thus far two varying visions of Jesus, one by John the Baptist and the other by Jesus. Now, both John and Jesus were looking for the end of the world, not the space-time world so much as the end of the world as it is, structured through its institutions, through its society, through the powers that be. Both John and Jesus believed that there was something fundamentally wrong with the world, that it did not reflect the justice and the compassion that were the intentions of God. Both John and Jesus believed that there was a divine mandate for world transformation. Both of them were committed totally to the bringing in of the kingdom of God, and both of them were looking for God to break in dramatically and to execute righteousness with violence, at least for a time. That was basically John's view, and there was a time in which Jesus identified with John. He was baptized by John. He and his disciples were baptizing and carrying on a mission similar to John in the vicinity where John was ministering in the early days of Jesus' ministry. John's vision was apocalyptic, the in-breaking of God, the purifying of the righteous, the damning of the wicked, the setting of things right, violently.

Something happened in Jesus' consciousness. Maybe it was reflected in the temptation narratives, where Jesus was seeking his own identity and the nature of his mission. But, there was a point, at least, when Jesus separated himself from John the Baptist. He moved from Judea in the south to Galilee in the north and there he was carrying on quite a different kind of ministry. We might describe it as a ministry of grace, a ministry of healing, a ministry that proclaimed good

news to the poor, that God had drawn near to all people, including all and excluding none. It was quite a different message than that with which he began, the message of John the Baptist, of the imminent judgment of God.

What happened? Well, whatever happened, John wondered, too. He was, in the meantime, imprisoned by Herod, and in the prison he heard reports of Jesus' gracious ministry, quite out of sync with that with which he had nurtured Jesus and mentored Jesus, and he sent two of his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one? Or, should we look for another?" Jesus said to the disciples that came from John, "Go tell John what you see and hear, how the blind see and the deaf hear and the lame walk and the poor have good news preached to them." But, as a matter of fact, what Jesus was saying is, "Go tell John the answer to his question is 'No, I am not the one he thought I was.'"

John's ministry, John's vision was that of a God of justice who affects justice on the earth violently. Jesus' vision and ministry was of a God of justice, non-violent justice, a God of infinite patience who would wait until justice would rise in the earth. Jesus distanced himself from John the Baptist, saying, in effect, to the disciples that came to him, "Go tell John I am not who he thought I was, because I have a different vision of the nature of God which, in turn, gives me a different cast to my mission to bring in the kingdom of God."

John, obviously, must have been disappointed, and we can understand that. Certainly we can identify with John. John was one who wanted God to do something.

Don't you often want God to do something? Aside now from the great affairs of nations, cosmic events, even in our own lives, don't we often want God to **do** something? Don't we want a God that does something? Isn't there something within us that stirs when we see corruption in high places and low places? Isn't there something within us that rises up and wants God to do something when we read of yet another hate crime, another brutal slaying, another abortion clinic bombed? Isn't there something in us that wants God to do something about the ugliness of all of the darkness in all of the tragedy that is visited upon humankind by structures of domination and oppression, by those in positions of power and privilege who would perpetuate that privilege and power by the oppression of the rest?

That was going on in Palestine at the time of John the Baptist, Roman commercialization driving the peasants off their land, driving them into destitution. There was enough reason for one like John the Baptist who believed in God, who believed in justice, who believed in righteousness, there was enough in John the Baptist, to cause him legitimately to cry out to heaven and to say, "God, why don't you **do** something?"

I can identify with that, can't you? If we can't, then we aren't aware of our own heart in which there resides always just beneath the surface the potential for violence in all of us. But, Jesus had come to the insight that by violence the kingdom of God could never come. Jesus must have arrived at the insight that it was only non-violent protest in the midst of the battle, in the heat of the day, consistently and firmly that would ever be the means of the transformation of the world. Jesus must have come to see that violence begets violence, begetting violence and more violence, even when it is the violence of God, for the kingdom of God could be imposed upon us violently, it could be brought upon us with coercion, it could be held in place by domination, and we would be the same as we are now. A totalitarian tyrant can enforce total morality and absolute justice, but that's not the kingdom of God.

Jesus must have come to see that the kingdom of God will dawn only when there is an inward awareness and a personal and social transformation of the world, and therefore, he followed the course that he did, a course which now led him to Jerusalem, to his denunciation of the establishment of the temple, to his last supper at Passover time on the eve of his death, of which he must have been fully aware, and he went to Gethsemane with his disciples to pray. That's where we find him, in prayer. Falling on his face on the ground, crying out, "O God, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me."

"Afraid to die, Jesus?"

Oh, probably not, although execution on a Roman cross is enough to create fear and trembling in anyone.

"Feeling the absence of God, Jesus?"

Probably not, at least in Mark's portrait we have Jesus using the most intimate address possible, "Abba," "Pappa."

"What was it, then, Jesus, this cup that you wanted removed, this foreboding, this sinking feeling, this being torn inside, this wrenching of your soul, this being totally distraught, this condition worse than death? What was it, Jesus? Was it that you were now in the position that John the Baptist had been a year earlier? When John sent his disciples with his question, when John was wondering whether he, John, had gotten it wrong, whether his whole life project had been wrong? Was it like that, Jesus? Were you wondering, did you get it right? Were you wondering in the face of the darkness that you were encountering, were you wondering in the face of the entrenched evil in the world, were you wondering whether or not your vision of God was adequate? Could a God of non-violence ever bring in the kingdom of peace?"

"Jesus, were you wondering whether or not that vision by which you lived that you learned in Isaiah, the suffering servant, the suffering servant who does not

crush the bruised reed or snuff out the smoldering wick, the servant who goes as a lamb to the slaughter, who resists not, are you wondering whether that model of your ministry which was reflective of your understanding of God - were you wondering whether or not it was adequate to the darkness of the world that you were facing? Is that what you were struggling with, Jesus? For, certainly in the heat of the battle, you must have sensed the overwhelming power of the way things are, which is fundamentally wrong.

"Did you wonder if maybe John, with his God Who affects justice through violence, might have been wrong, after all?"

Whatever he was wrestling with, he finally won through to freedom when he was able to say, "Not my will, but Thy will be done."

I suspect that if we could have encountered a conversation between Jesus and his Father in heaven, Jesus might have said, "Is there no other way? Can't you do something?"

And the answer would have been, "No, I can't **do** anything, given Who I Am, and the intention of creation and the goal of My dream. No, Jesus. There's no other way."

"What, then, must I do?"

"Stay the course."

"But, if I stay the course, I'll die."

"Yes. You will die."

Was it, then, the will of God that Jesus die? Absolutely not. It was the will of God that Jesus should continue to be what Jesus had been, continuing that non-violent protest against all that was wrong, standing for all that was right, revealing the compassion and the grace of God that embraced all and excluded none. That was God's intention and will for Jesus. But, it would get him killed, executed, the separation of his body and his blood.

Was there no other way? No other way, because violence, even God's violent, final solution, breeds violence, stiffens resistance, builds walls, and can never create community.

Jesus died, but he was free, he was free, because, you see, if I look into the mirror and I see at least some semblance of similarity to the contours of the face of Jesus, then I'll know that my face reflects what his face reflects, which is the justice and the grace and the compassion of God. And if I'm sure of that, I'm free. You can do anything. You can strip me of everything, but if I see the reflection of my face in the mirror that had all the reflection of Jesus, then I'm strong, then I'm free.

"God, why don't You **do** something?"

"Why don't **you** do something? You're waiting for me? I'm waiting for you. It's in your hands, this world that I've created."

"Well, then certainly a God like You, a pansy God, a milktoast God, a passive God will never bring in the kingdom. How long will it take?"

"I don't know. How long *will* it take?"

Is that God of Jesus too weak for you? Does it disquiet you a bit, that passive God of grace and justice?

Well, let me just remind you that we know the agent of imperial power resident in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus; his name was Pontius Pilate. We know him because his name was inserted into the creed that confesses Jesus as Lord. And Jesus, the one whose blood was separated from his body, through 2000 years has continued to elicit the best, create the highest nobility and commitment of those who have followed in his steps. Of course, it will cost everything ... as Gandhi found, Bonhoeffer found, Martin Luther King found. It will cost *everything*, but, by God, you'll be free.