

God of the Abandoned

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

Text: Mark 1:41

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
Lent II, March 7, 1993

Transcription of the spoken sermon

Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him. Mark 1:41

Religion is powerful stuff! Probably the most powerful phenomena in our human experience. It has the ability to galvanize whole communities of people into action. It has the power to solidify someone's purpose and to lead one to heroic heights or to horrible deaths. Religion is powerful stuff! And it can be absolutely divine, or it can be utterly demonic.

It may be too early to call, but the disaster at the World Trade Center may finally be traced to an Islamic Fundamentalist group. And, if that is to be the case, it is not a reflection on Islam, it is a reflection on religion in its fundamentalist manifestations, whether Muslim or Christian or Jewish. It was a week ago today that federal agents were making a move on the citadel in Waco, Texas, only to be gunned down and subsequently to have it in siege with an army of agents. An enclave led by a crazy, mad man, a religious leader, a man who claims for his authority the direct communication of God, who claims to be a son of God, a messiah, an anointed one. Religion is powerful stuff.

In the events of the week past we see the manifestation of its power in that negative form. We are a part of society somewhere in the middle, I suppose, aren't we? Christ Community, aren't we rather decent average types? A little above average, you say. Decent and good people, reflective I suppose of kind of the mid-section of society at large. So that it is not difficult for us to look at those acts of violence and to write them off as dehumanizing, as contradicting everything that we believe that religion ought to do for one. We are able, in that extreme manifestation, to recognize it as the utilization of this tremendous power in a demonic way. But religion is a power phenomena, and those of us in the middle, able to recognize that, might be troubled and threatened by some other manifestation of religious leadership – for example, that which was exemplified by Jesus. How do you distinguish a religious leader who says he speaks in the name of God? How do you know? How do you judge? How do you discriminate? Not so hard over against the Muslim bomber or the Waco Wacko.

But how do you think Jesus would do? How do you think Jesus would do if he were a part of our community this morning? You see he made claims not so different from the man in Waco. And when you get religious leaders making radical claims on one side or the other, most of us in the middle grow rather uneasy, don't we? I don't suppose Jesus would last a lot longer in our society today than he did then, because we can never forget that those whom he threatened were folks like us. They were that kind of middle slice of society. They were decent, serious, devout and sincere and, in most cases, led by religious leaders who had vested interests to be sure, who were interested in keeping the status quo. But the claims of Jesus were as radical as the claims of David Koresh.

How do you judge? How do you discriminate? I suppose the only way you can do is like Jesus said, "by the fruits." When a religious leaders' actions and calls to action result in violence, domination, dehumanization, coercion, manipulation, then we in the middle are quite quick to say, "that's wrong, that's an abuse of religion because it is an abuse of people." But what about the radical claims of Jesus on the other side? Well, you say, they resulted in quite the opposite. Jesus went about doing good. Jesus went about healing. Jesus went about lifting up. Jesus went about setting free, liberating. Jesus' whole ministry was a ministry of love and grace, and the consequence of that was quite opposite from what we have seen in our own time this past week. Jesus said, "Love your enemies. Pray for those that spitefully use you." There was a total contrast between this contemporary expression of religion and the religion of Jesus.

But we have got to remember that in both cases we are talking about individuals who made radical claims. Jesus, understood more clearly today perhaps than ever before, was a Jewish believer, rooted in his own culture, his own society, his own day, reflective of the value systems and the faith systems and structures of his people. But the point is that the people in the middle were as upset with Jesus who came at them from one angle as we are with a David Koresh who comes at us from another. Because, as I said last week, Jesus didn't die in bed; he was put to death. And in order to determine why he was put to death, we are looking during this Lenten period at the faith of Jesus, at Jesus as a believing man: his conviction about God and the things that were ultimately important to Jesus.

As we examine the faith of Jesus, we are maintaining during this Lenten Season that, at its core, it was trust in a gracious God. It was a God whose grace was inclusive rather than exclusive. The God of Jesus was the God of the abandoned, the God of the outcast, the God of the outsider. The God of Jesus was the God with whom there was no outsider. And it is all well and good to sing the praise of Jesus as long as we recognize that we certainly would have been a part of that middle slice of society, good decent, serious and sincere folk, led by religious leaders who wanted nothing more than to keep the structure of things, to keep society somewhat on an even keel, to keep intact orthodox faith structures and generally accepted moral standards. It was to keep society in a state of reasonable wellbeing. We cannot think of the Jewish leaders as being irresponsible, as being

conspirators, as being demonic. They were simply leaders of people who had their own vested interests, and their own agenda, but also who had the responsibility for doing the best they could to make things as good as possible for the society of their time. Jesus was a threat to that because his conviction, the heart of his faith, was that even in their decent application of religion, they had turned the heart of God's upside down.

The story of the leper is the case in point. Mark places it at the early part of the Gospel on the preaching tour of Galilee. Leprosy was an inconceivably horrible disease. The name covered a wide variety of diseases actually. But without real medical knowledge of its cause, recognizing the defilement, the disfigurement, society had ruled that the leper must be cast out, must be ostracized, must be isolated. It was a horrible disease that carried its own pain and suffering to a degree hardly fathomable. But added to that was the isolation from community, the declaration of being ceremonially unclean, being unfit for the gathering of the community of God's people. In the Middle Ages there was actually a practice in the Roman Church of leading the leper into the sanctuary and the priest reading over him the burial service. The man was dead...while he was yet alive!

The little vignette of the leper that we read as our lesson— Bishop Lightfoot, one of the New Testament scholars of a former generation, says that little story is more packed with emotion than any other story in the Gospels. For the leper himself displayed an urgency that caused him to break through the barrier that was erected against him. He had no right to address anyone. He was to go down the street with his head bared and his clothes wrinkled, calling out, "Unclean, unclean," lest anyone should come within distance of him. But, rather than do that, the leper breaks through, he comes to Jesus, he kneels before him and the language would tell us with great urgency says, "If you will make me clean...."

Jesus, the text says, "was moved with pity" — a more accurate text would say, "was moved with anger," — and said, "Be clean!" Moved with anger, anger, I suppose at the hellishness and the horror of what a human being can suffer. Anger at the disfigurement of the created intentions of God. Anger at the community of God's people that excludes and pushes away. Anger at all of that that is so wrong. Anger. There is a place for anger. There is a place for anger in society, in our lives. There are some things that should make us angry, that should move us to compassion which borders on anger, and anger that is filled with compassion. And then Jesus, likewise breaking through the booths and the barriers, the constraints of socially accepted behavior, stretches out his hand and touches God. Because it was Jesus' conviction that there is no one whom God has abandoned, that there is no such thing as an outsider, that it is impossible to be an outcast in the presence of God. Made folks very nervous. Threatened the structure of their social life and their doctrinal understanding and their moral behavior. Jesus turned it all on its head, in the name of God, claiming to be a spokesperson for God. Claiming to act out what he was convinced was true of God.

This weekend we have been engaged in a significant concentration on the HIV virus and the crisis that AIDS has brought to our world. And it has been a good weekend, full of information, education, alerting us, making us aware. It is important. We cannot put our head in the sand. It is also a terrible blight on the human body, and it is that with which we must all be concerned. It is important that we get behind every effort at education, and every health care movement to delimit the destructive power of this plague.

But here in worship, what I must say to you as a Christian congregation is that whatever we do out there, we must do it out of the conviction that we are called to follow Jesus in disallowing the possibility of anyone being abandoned anywhere, for any reason, that we are called to be a community of compassion and care - and to reach out and to touch, and to heal in the name of Jesus. The faith of Jesus found expression in the action of Jesus. And we are called as the disciples of Jesus to let love issue forth in compassionate ministry to bind up wounds, to embrace and to hold, to be with the suffering and the dying.

That large middle slice of society of which we are a part is able to look at a David Koresh and say, "That's wrong. That man is demonic." But what will we do with that one who comes to us from the other angle? Who makes as radical a claim upon us, and as radical a call to us? Religion is so powerful, but it can also be a power to block the flow of compassion.

Let me sum it all up in this - which is a bit radical and very dangerous. But let me suggest it anyway. Never let your theology (your doctrine), nor your morality, come in the way of following the lead of your heart to be compassionate. Never let your doctrine, or your morality, block the flow of God's love through you. Thereby, you'll follow Jesus.

Someone said to me yesterday, "Somebody somewhere is preparing a cross for you." And I said, "That's O.K. if it is for genuinely, faithfully following Jesus. Then I'll be in good company."