

“What If Jesus Was Right?”

a sermon by

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Text: “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls in to the earth and dies, it will remain just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24).

I recently came upon a remarkable little book by Peter Gomes entitled *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*. Since 1974, Peter Gomes has served as the Plummer Professor of Christian Morals at Harvard University and as the Minister of the Memorial Church on the campus of Harvard. In this book he makes the point that over the years the church has domesticated Jesus. Gomes points out that the church, in its desire to speak a word of “good news,” often skims over some of the more scandalous sayings of Jesus. The gospel, asserts Gomes, is not good news for those who do not wish to be disturbed. It is offensive and always overturns the status quo.

Through the years, he points out, we have tried to make the message of Jesus manageable. We point out that Jesus really didn’t mean what he said about divorce. We claim that he wasn’t really serious when he said that it was more difficult for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a wealthy person to enter the Kingdom of heaven. Likewise we have tamed Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount. Who of us really believes in loving one’s enemies, in turning the other cheek, in going the second mile, in feeling blessed when people revile us and utter all kinds of evil against us?

In recent months I have become more convinced that those of us in the church have really tried to sanitize the words of Jesus. As such, our churches today resound with shrill speeches of ear and exclusivity or tepid retellings of a health and wealth gospel.

I think that if most of us were asked, we might reply that Jesus’ words are certainly idealistic. They are lovely and alluring. But what if Jesus was right? What if he actually meant what he said? This morning I want to preach a sermon that will not comfort you, but disturb you. I want to look at several of the difficult sayings of Jesus and raise the question, “What if Jesus was right?”

I.

Take, for example, the saying of Jesus from which we just read in John's gospel. In this passage a group of Greeks came to see Jesus. Like everyone else in Jerusalem, they had heard about Jesus. But Jesus replied to them by saying that his hour for glorification had not come. Then he quoted for them this saying: "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls in the earth and dies, it remains a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." Jesus then continued this saying about loving and hating life and about the importance of serving.

Now there is something scandalous about this saying. Most of us are concerned about preserving life. We diet, we exercise, we go to the doctor. And yet, there is something fundamentally right in these words of Jesus. It is only when a person learns to give himself, that he ever finds life.

One of the most remarkable movements in this country, and in England as well, was the so called "Social Gospel" movement. It was a movement that began in the Nineteenth Century when Christians began to become more and more aware of the evils of industrialization: poverty, oppression, and the terrible plight of the poor in so many urban areas. One of the most effective spokespersons for this movement was William Booth, who in 1878 founded the Salvation Army. Booth had been a traveling evangelist for the Methodist New Connexion before he founded the Salvation Army. His approach was a militant assault on the social evils of his day. He once expressed his creed as follows:

"While some weep as they do now, I'll fight; while little children go hungry, I'll fight; while men in prison, in and out, in and out, as they are now, I'll fight; while there is a drunkard left, whilst there is a poor lost girl upon the streets, while there remains one dark soul without the light of God, I'll fight. I'll fight to the very end."

He did fight, until he died on August 21, 1912, and 150,000 people attended his funeral service at Westminster Abbey. His life became an embodiment of the words of Jesus that only those who are willing to lose their lives will gain them.

II.

There is another saying of Jesus that is troubling to people. One of the beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount is the saying of Jesus, "Blessed are the Meek, for they shall inherit the earth." Now, at first sight, nothing could be further from the truth. When have the meek ever inherited the earth? In Jesus' time, it was the Herods and Caesars of the world who inherited the earth and it has been that way ever since. So what did Jesus mean when he said, "The meek shall inherit the earth?" If by meekness we mean the "Uriah Heeps" of the world, then of course Jesus was wrong. Jesus certainly didn't exercise that kind of attitude. He did not cringe and fawn. He was not passive, submissive, compliant, lacking in spirit, stamina or moral indignation in the face of wrong. People who demonstrate that kind of meekness do not get crucified.

But if by meekness he means those who have humility, who come at life like a child with curiosity and wonder, then the saying takes on a very different meaning. That is the quality of

mind and character which the beatitude celebrates. Blessed are the humble, the teachable, men and women with minds open to new truth. Blessed are the devoted who move from proud self-centeredness to give themselves humbly to something greater than themselves. Blessed are the souls who find life by losing it in self-commitment to a cause they care for more deeply than themselves. In that sense no one except the meek has any chance of inheriting the earth. Vanity, pomposity, arrogance, and pride in the long run go down the drain.

One of the greatest speeches ever made was William Wilberforce's plea against the slave trade, delivered in the British Parliament. He spoke for three and a half hours to a fascinated audience. Edmund Burke said afterwards, "It equaled anything I have ever heard in modern times, and is not perhaps to be surpassed in the remains of the Grecian eloquence." But listen to what Wilberforce himself felt about this magnificent speech he had delivered. Listen to what he wrote in his diary: "Came to town today sadly unfit for work, but by divine grace was enabled to make my motion so as to give satisfaction—three hours and a half. I had not prepared my language, or even gone over all my matter, but being well acquainted with the whole subject I got on. I hope it pleases God to make me able to impress people with the persuasion that I am serious, and to incline them to agree with me." That is humility and it is very powerful.

III.

There is another saying of Jesus that has puzzled people over the years. In the Gospel of Matthew we read these words of Jesus: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10:34). Now, surely Jesus did not mean that. After all, did he not say, "Peace I leave you, my peace I give you. Not as the world gives, give I to you" (John 14:27)?

This is another word of Jesus that we have sanitized. In Luke's gospel the word is "division," not sword. The truth is that Jesus brought division. He stood for something. As someone once said of Jesus, "He was not crucified because he said, "Behold the lilies of the field, how they bloom." They crucified him because he said, "Behold the thieves in the temple, how they steal."

Hans Kung, in his book *On Being a Christian*, speaks of Jesus as what Kung calls a "skandalon"—a small stone over which a person might stumble. As Kung puts it, "He was aggressive on all sides, now he was attacked on all sides. He had not played any of the expected roles: for those who supported law and order, he turned out to be provocateur, dangerous to the system. He disappointed the activist revolutionists by his non-violent love of peace. For the devout, he was too uncompromising. For the silent majority, he was too noisy and for the noisy minority he was too quiet, too gentle for the strict and too strict for the gentle. He was an obvious outsider in a critically dangerous social conflict: in opposition both to the prevailing conditions and to those who opposed them."

Tomorrow, we celebrate the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In April of 1963, Dr. King was jailed in Birmingham, Alabama for disturbing the peace. A number of the most prominent ministers and clergymen in Birmingham had criticized King's coming to Birmingham as "unwise and untimely." While in jail, King wrote a letter to the clergy of Birmingham that is now referred to as the "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." In that letter King wrote:

“In your statement you asserted that our actions, even though peaceful, must be condemned because they precipitate violence. Isn’t this like condemning the robbed man because his possession of money precipitated the evil act of robber? Isn’t this like condemning Jesus because his unique God consciousness and never ceasing devotion to God’s will precipitated the evil act of the Crucifixion?”

You see, the point that I am making is that we have tried to domesticate Jesus. We have tried to tame him, when he cannot be tamed.

In his book, Peter Gomes tells of preaching one Sunday in the parish church in Windsor Great Park, where the royal family attends Sunday worship when in Windsor. The parish church is tiny, Victorian, and Gothic, complete with a choir composed of estate workers, and on this particular Sunday both Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and the Queen mother were in attendance.

To Gomes’ great delight, after the service he was invited by the Queen and the Queen mother for drinks at Royal Lodge, the Windsor resident of the Queen Mother. The Queen Mother was then 102 years old and in splendid spirits. She remarked to Gomes that she appreciated his sermon that day and then, with that world-class twinkle in her eye, she said to him “I do like a bit of good news on Sunday, don’t you?”

Now, all of us need a bit of good news on Sunday morning. But we should never forget that the good news that Jesus brought into the world was proclaimed against the conventional wisdom, not only of his day, but our day as well. He was also a person who took up with unacceptable people and advanced dangerous, even revolutionary ideas, most of which still remain to be discovered and acted upon. It was G.K. Chesterton who noted that “Christianity is not a faith that has been tried and found wanting, but a faith that has been wanted and never tried.”

But what if Jesus was right? What if in his teachings we are able to find something that does not just comfort us, but challenges us? What if we find something that calls us as a church beyond a simple passivism to an activism that is determined to turn the world upside?

As Christians, we are called to live as those whose lives have been redeemed by God’s grace and challenged to build a world that conforms to the will of the one who came to save us.

As Richard Baxter put it,
“In necessary things, unity
In doubtful things, liberty;
In all things, charity.”

Amen!