

The Park Road Pulpit
Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church
Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

It's Hard for the In-Laws to Follow the Outlaw

Isaiah 52.13-15; Matthew 11.16-30

Russ Dean, October 26, 2008



An introduction to the text from Isaiah:

Today's sermon is not an exegesis (a specific, detailed study) of this text. These verses of Isaiah serve as an introduction to the final message of the so-called "Suffering Servant" (which is fully contained in Isaiah 53). Those words are some of the most familiar and often quoted words from the Old Testament (as used to interpret the death of Jesus): *Surely he hath born our griefs, carried our sorrows... he was wounded for our transgressions... by his stripes we are healed...* etc... The text is also one of the most complicated passages that I have ever studied. It brings together several different streams of Isaiah's thought: the Suffering Servant... the servants (presumably the Nation of Israel)... and "the nations" all come together in this text – and commentaries struggle to help the "Joe Six-packs"¹ of the preaching world (me!) to try to disentangle all of this. I wanted to offer this qualification before I read this text because I am using this multi-layered text for a somewhat superficial reason...

Isaiah says this Suffering Servant (and no one knows specifically to whom Isaiah originally referred) was, literally, unrecognizable due to his suffering... and yet God used him to "*shut the mouths of kings*" and to "*startle many nations.*" I would like for that very literal interpretation to stand on its own today, as a symbolic way of introducing us to a Jesus who was, and, I think still is, "unrecognizable" to so many – not because of any physical abuse, but because we have made the real, historical Jesus into "Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild." The Church has tamed his wild streak, inverted his subversive thinking, transformed his very unconventional wisdom into "orthodoxy." It may be the world's most supreme irony that one of the most unorthodox teachers who ever lived has been subdued, and made the founder of Christian Orthodoxy. (That word has come to mean "right thinking," and it implies a kind of lock-step agreement, and a safe, conservative, traditional view of the world.) For Jesus to show himself with the power he originally claimed, we will have to strip away twenty centuries of theological sweetening... and let Jesus the rebel, Jesus the "shock jock," Jesus the iconoclast stand, again, on his own...

Well, any sermon based on this text, which recalls the accusation of Jesus as a "*glutton and drunkard,*" might as well get all the churchy drinking jokes over early. What do you think?

There's the one about the preacher and his passionate sermon on temperance. With great emphasis the preacher proclaimed, "If I had all the beer in the world, I'd take it and throw it into

¹ In the current presidential race "Joe Six-pack," as an epithet for the common person has become a household expression.

the river." A little stronger, he pounded the pulpit and wailed, "And if I had all the wine in the world, I'd take it and throw it into the river." And finally, wiping his brow as he noticed his increasing pulse, he shouted at the top of his lungs, "And if I had all the whiskey in the world, I'd take it down and throw it into the river." There were a few requisite "Amen's" as the preacher closed his big leather Bible and sat down. And then the song leader stood, unable to cover the slight grin at the corners of his lips, as he said, "Everyone please turn in your hymnal to number 365. Let's stand and sing together, 'Shall We Gather at the River'!"

And then one of my favorite jokes of all time: Why do you always take two Baptists fishing with you? The answer... because if you only take one, he'll drink all your beer!

I begin with two jokes about drinking, quite intentionally. It's not that this text, or any other in our scripture, has anything to say about the morality of imbibing alcohol. As an older Baptist minister friend of mine taught me years ago, "drinking" has almost nothing to do with religion – and almost everything to do with culture. But in our culture (perhaps not Park Road Baptist Church's culture), but our southern culture at large, as with many religious circles, there is still a moralistic taboo associated with "drinking." So I think it is an appropriate way to begin a sermon about Jesus as an iconoclast – that is, a breaker of cultural mores, of traditional understandings, of accepted rules.

To contemporize the text a bit, it was as if the meeting of the Metrolina Baptist Association was held across the street from Max's biker bar, down on South Boulevard, and the preachers disbanded their monthly prayer meeting just in time to see Jesus with a group of well-tattooed HOGs enjoying a table full of ribs and one round of Budweiser's too many. And as they came out, they said, "Look at those drunks – and that Jesus with them! He's just a carouser who

hangs out with the wrong crowd. What kind of preacher is that? What's this world coming to? And what would his mama think!?"

If you're offended with the thought of Jesus as a frequent member of Max's biker bar gang, you probably have not allowed the Jesus of history to emerge through the thick layers of a more acceptable reputation which the church has given to the Christ of faith. Jesus of History. Christ of Faith. You see, it was specifically this sullied reputation that got Jesus into trouble in the first place. He simply hung out with the wrong people. Too often. He ate in their homes. They were his friends. He was guilty by association. And, when Jesus had the chance to set the world straight, for all generations, should it have been the case that his so-called carousing was just a matter of the slander of his enemies, Jesus passed up that opportunity. He could have said here, in this very appropriate venue, that the rumors about his lifestyle were overblown. He could have added that drinking was of the devil. He did not. In fact, looking at the text we see that he entertains their accusation only after his own matter-of-fact statement: *The Son of Man came eating and drinking* (this was not an accusation – this was Jesus' own affirmation). They say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard..."

The student of the Bible will not be able to miss the obvious allusion to the text of Deuteronomy:

If someone has a stubborn and rebellious son... They shall say to the elders of his town, 'This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard. Then all the men of the town shall stone him to death. So you shall purge the evil from your midst; and all Israel will hear, and be afraid (Deuteronomy 21.20-21).

The writer of Matthew's gospel has made this allusion verbatim, so as to highlight the obvious tension between the Jesus in whom his disciples had found such life-giving spirit, and

the repressive Law by which the religious elites were, understandably, offended by Jesus. (And they were, understandably offended.)

Folks, a few weeks ago I told you that because of the emotional place Jesus occupies in our religious experience, I wanted to always be careful not to “mess with your Jesus.” But... we must see him for who he was, if we are to understand the power he held in his first century world of religious piety and religious certainty. His very life, his iconoclastic lifestyle, was a direct affront to their sincerely held religiosity. It seems to me that who Jesus was, was one who thoroughly knew how to enjoy himself. So much so, that as the child of a Baptist minister, I would have been offended in my childhood to think of him this way. Perhaps it’s time that we all grew up a bit and saw him as he was. The real Jesus will never speak to us until we do.

Yes, if you are offended by biker Jesus, you will likely miss the impact his message had on the refined, sophisticated, reputable members of his culture. And ours. And if you are not offended... at his words to Chorazin and Bethsaida, you will be just as out of touch with that message. Chorazin and Bethsaid were towns in Galilee. Jewish towns. Reputable towns. Part of the nation of Israel. You know, God’s chosen. The nation, we might say, of its own “manifest destiny.” Yet Jesus, the disreputable Jesus, compares these towns to Tyre and Sidon – Gentile enclaves, which, by definition, could not have been recipients of the Grace of God – they were not part of the chosen. Do you hear the implications? Whom have we excluded because of our acceptable religious definitions? Jesus compares the supposed faithfulness of these good, Jewish cities, to the reputed faithlessness of their pagan counterparts, and even to the infamous Sodom. His words could hardly have been any more inflaming to Jewish ears. *On the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for you.*

To contemporize here a bit, let me suggest... Watch out, Charlotte, NC, “City of Churches.” Look out, Greenville, SC, home to Furman and Bob Jones Universities... on the day of judgment... Bagdad and Kabul will fare better than you!²

Over nearly twenty centuries the Christian Church has built a fortification it calls religious orthodoxy. The word orthodox literally means “right praise.” We sing a doxology, a song of praise, each Sunday. *Ortho – doxology*, then, is “right praise. Yet, ironically, incorrectly, the Church has made of belief in Jesus, not right praise – by our right living – but an orthodoxy, by which it means “right belief.” Thinking the correct things. The acceptable things. The agreed upon things – agreed upon, that is, by the already orthodox. So the Church has managed to do what I think Jesus would find unthinkable, and that is to invert his completely subversive message. Jesus turned things upside down. And the people who claim to be his followers have, too often, turned them right back up.

Jesus’ message was one of inclusion to all people. You don’t need a Bible verse to proof-text. Just look how he lived, with whom he associated. Orthodoxy has somehow turned that message into an exclusive claim: only those who think like we do, act like we do, believe like we do are “in.”

Jesus’ message was one of good news to the poor. Much of the Church in America today hardly has any contact with the poor. And to listen to our preaching, not to mention our political rhetoric, being poor is still the unforgivable sin in America.

Jesus’ message was a message of liberation, of true freedom from all that binds – beginning with religious certainty. Open your eyes to Jesus the social and theological liberal, and

² Our “War on Terror” rages in Iraq, with American forces facing the forces of a predominantly Muslim world, a world which too many view as equivalent to the “infidels” which some Muslim extremist have named all Americans.

read through the gospels and see how many times Jesus reverses the expected outcome. Sodom becomes more blessed than Capernaum... a Syrophonician woman teaches Israel... a Samaritan (of all people) becomes the example of Godly presence in the world... in a Gentile Centurion Jesus finds greater faith than in all of Israel... It is there, over and over and over – those who think they are “in” are really “out.” And that the “in crowd” claim are lost, become the examples of Jesus’ teaching, of the grace and mercy and unconditional love of God.

The imminent Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann has said of the church:

The central task of ministry is the formation of a community with an alternate, liberated imagination that has the courage and freedom to act in a different vision and a different perception of reality.³

Where will we find an alternate, liberated imagination, in a world of fear and conservatism? (I’m not talking political conservatism, but literal conservatism: trying to “conserve” or hold on to that which is known and safe...) Who will be our source of courage and freedom? Where is the church painting a different perception of reality?

All of that comes in Jesus – but Jesus the rebel. Jesus the shock jock. Jesus the iconoclast, who hung out with wrong people – who turned out to be just more people that God loves. Just like us.

To see Jesus for who he really was is to see an outsider, an outlaw. And as long as we are married to his cause only by the orthodoxy of the Church’s standard, so-called “right thinking,” we will never get the message. His calling is to make us his family. Blood kin. For everyone knows that blood is thicker than water. Family stays together. Even outlaws.

May it be so!

Martin Bell

³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Hopeful Imagination*, p.99.