

ON JOINING A CHURCH: WHAT WOULD JESUS DO?

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Psalm 51:6-12; Matthew 24:1-2

If I say that Jesus had serious issues with the institutions and religious leaders of his own faith, I hope it will come as no surprise. Some of his most caustic criticisms are saved for the scribes and Pharisees and rabbis among his own people. He might well have had justification to rant against the Roman occupiers under whose rule he lived. One might understand a few barbs cast at Pilate or Caesar. But, no, his most critical remarks are reserved for the religious institutions and rulers of his time.

These tirades are characterized by a number of familiar phrases that stick in the mind. “Woe to you scribes and Pharisees,” he says, “For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside you are full of greed and self-indulgence. First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean.”¹

And again he says, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth.”²

Let me quickly say that both Christian and Jewish scholars have set the record straight on scribes and Pharisees in the First Century and the single brush with which Jesus painted them in the gospels. We must remember that Jesus was himself a Jew, criticizing what displeased him about his own faith. His was not an indictment of Judaism per se, nor of all scribes and Pharisees. His was the passionate critique of an insider who loved the God who lay at the heart of the rituals and observances of his faith. His criticisms of the rabbis and scholars and priests of Judaism were not born of his hatred of their shared faith, but his passion for it, for the purity and goodness and justice and holiness that was its foundation and the God who was and is the source of all those things.

I think that among whatever followers gathered about Jesus, part of what attracted them and startled them was the prophetic voice with which he spoke, calling the religious leaders of his day to a higher expression of the deepest truths they knew. It struck a chord among his own people wherever he traveled. In Galilee, in Samaria, in Judea and especially in Jerusalem where the most visible symbols of faith were located, in particular the Temple.

And there his downfall lay. If there was any criticism that fell most harshly on the ears of both his followers and his detractors it was his casual, almost disrespectful prediction of the destruction of the Temple, that Temple, which from Solomon’s days was the holiest place on earth. That place where once the Ark of the Covenant dwelt, behind the Holy of Holies, and the very presence of the Almighty One was known.

It was not Solomon’s temple by Jesus’ time. It was, in fact, a rebuilt temple³, eventually expanded with money dusted with Rome’s fingerprints, but a Temple nonetheless in the place where the Holy had been marked as present for as long as anyone could remember because of What was there... the Ark; and Who... the Presence of God.

For Jesus, holy as the temple may have been, it was a place which had become corrupted by human compromise and interference. You remember the day he went to the outer court of the temple and overthrew the tables of the money changers, the grain and pigeon sellers who provided the means for sacrifice, “You shall not make of God’s house an outdoor market,”⁴ he said, as the coins spilled on the tiles.

And perhaps most shocking, one day, after visiting the temple, and following a particularly intense tirade against the priests there, he pointed to the large stones that composed the outer walls of the temple, the stones that for Jews today mark the holiest of places on earth, the stones that form that Western Wall of the Temple where the prayers of the faithful are best heard and most passionately offered. He pointed to the stones and said, “You see all these, do you not? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

When charges were finally filed against Jesus at the time of his arrest, along with the claim that he was the king of the Jews, (the tacit charge of sedition, of most interest to the Romans) there was also the accusation that he had threatened to bring down the temple, which was a charge bordering on blasphemy, particularly offensive to the Jewish court which heard his case.

According to Mark’s gospel, as Jesus lay stretched out on the cross dying, the people who passed by shook their heads and said of him, “Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!”

So why this apparent iconoclasm, this wrecking ball approach to religion that Jesus seemed to exhibit? Was he anti-institutional, anti-clerical, anti-Temple, did he suffer from dyspepsia, or just have a mean disposition?

I’ve already betrayed my bias. I think Jesus wanted what we all want, a religion so true, so faithful, so passionate and good, so consistent to the core that its people live and practice it faithfully, and its leaders demonstrate that faith in their ability to let the light of divinity shine through the compassion of their humanity. In other words, he longed to see the justice and mercy and kindness of God expressed as visibly by God’s people as the law and judgment and rituals that embodied them.

How is it he answered his critics one Sabbath day when he broke the bread of Presence and shared it with his disciples, the bread that only the priests were permitted to eat? “The Sabbath was made for humankind,” he said, “and not humankind for the Sabbath.”

That intolerance for institutions and leaders of faith who fall short of the highest and deepest of what they profess is something that we ourselves have experienced.

I suspect that there is not a person here who has not at some time been either disillusioned or disappointed by the church and its leaders, its rituals and doctrines, its pronouncements and teachings.

Sometimes our disappointments are experienced at a personal level expressed simply. We came yearning for the holy, to touch the face of God even if we could not see it, and what happened? It was Stewardship Sunday and the preacher talked about money.

We came to pray, and could not find quiet. We came spiritually hungry, and went away famished.

All of us at some time have wanted something so deep and so important and so holy that words could not capture it, but who found, nonetheless, that coming to church did not provide it.

Sometimes our disappointments with the church are greater and more substantive than our personal wants and needs, more systemic in nature. It's hard to know which Christian community has botched it worst. Heaven knows the Roman Catholic Church has its problems with its clergy, and then there's the wealth of the Vatican in comparison to the poverty of the world, the teachings about birth control and abortion and now the new pope's comments about Muslims. And we Presbyterians smugly say, "Well at least we are not as bad as that."

But if Catholics have their problems, we Presbyterians are no less bedeviled. Every time our national church gets together it is a contentious affair. At our worst we argue over sex and ordination and sex and even though we don't say it out loud, we argue about women in the church, and women in the ministry. We fuss over divestment in Israel and who's to blame for the tensions in the Middle East and the plight of the Palestinians and Israelis. And did I mention that we argue about sex? Now the "it" contention in the national church is who gets the church's property when we divorce; when a congregation leaves the denomination? Does the congregation keep the property or the presbytery?

Is it any wonder that non-denominational congregations are growing by leaps and bounds, unencumbered by the troubles that bedevil the mainline churches?

The institutional church and its leaders have let us down at some point or another. You see it especially when we take refuge in our rules.

You want to get married in the church? You have to join it first. Your beloved pastor retires? She's not allowed to have contact with anyone in her former church for fear that the congregation won't love the new pastor as much.

You're not a member of the congregation? Sorry, you can't have your child baptized here. You'd like the pastor to celebrate communion with you at the nursing home? Well, he really needs to bring an elder with him or it isn't official. You want a wedding on the Saturday between Good Friday and Easter? Don't you know we're supposed to be mourning that day?

It makes me wonder whether Jesus would have wanted to be a member of a church with so many rules, we are so steeped in the procedures of religiosity that we border on practicing that righteousness that so troubled Jesus in the faith of his own community.

Don't get me wrong, it's not that there aren't good reasons for our orderliness; our carefully scripted and judiciously considered and democratic, ever so democratic doctrines and teachings. But there's a limit to orderliness. It only tells you what you can't do, and not what you can.

I wonder sometimes whether Jesus, if he came to a presbytery meeting some time might not tell everybody to grab their copy of the Presbyterian **Book of Order**, and bring it on up to the front where one of those huge tree chippers would be cranked up at full blast and everybody would have to throw their copy into the shredder where it would be blown up the chute into the back of a truck and be sent for recycling. And then he would say, “Now get out there and be the church!” But I get carried away.

Religion is nothing if it is not order and ritual, symbol and meaning. The very word itself, in the original Latin, *religio*, means *to tie together*. It is to take the mystery of God’s inexplicable being and try to find words to describe what cannot be described, to tie together the mystery of heaven with the substance of earth.

It is to find expression and make known in action the God who wishes to be known. And in the translation from heaven to earth, much is always lost. Our rituals, and midrash, our doctrines and creeds, our rules and requirements are always subject to the compromise of imperfection, of human error and misunderstanding. It is always with fear and trembling that we mediate the alchemy of communicating the infinite goodness and awesome wonder of God as they are expressed in the systems and symbols, the doctrines and rituals, the rules and regulations that are sometimes two parts human for every part divine.

Garry Wills in his book, **What Jesus Meant**, asks:

What is the kind of religion Jesus opposed? Any religion that is proud of its virtue, like the boastful Pharisee. Any that is self-righteous, quick to judge and condemn, ready to impose burdens rather than share or lift them. Any that exalts its own officers, proud of its trappings, building expensive monuments to itself. Any that neglects the poor and cultivates the rich, any that scorns outcasts and flatters the rulers of this world.⁵

I suppose one might ask whether any religion does not at some time fall into such excess. And the answer is *all religions do*. The synagogue, the temple, the church they are all finite expressions of something, the sum of which is better than its parts.

The church struggles always with its human nature. At its worst it falls into hypocrisy and legalism, selfishness and grandiosity. At its best it is only a pale reflection of the kingdom to which it bears witness.

There is no perfect church. Stop looking for that. No perfect embodiment of that place where God is all in all, and heaven reigns, not this side of heaven anyway. There is a quip that is going around which says, Jesus preached the coming of the kingdom, but it was the church that came.⁶

Would Jesus join a church today, imperfect as they all are? Would he even be a Christian? He was after all a Jew who I think it fair to say, may never have intended, wanted, or expected there to be what has become the Christian church. He was a reformer within Judaism. But given that the church is a fact, and history cannot be rewound, I would urge us to remember that no institution ever fully embodies all of the love and justice of the Holy One whom we worship. The church is the *imperfect* earthly expression of a *perfect* heavenly kingdom that has not yet dawned completely.

Should the church's imperfection keep us from becoming a part of a church, this church or any other? Well, if imperfection is holding you back, then you may never join a church, never be a part of a community of believers that can nurture, support and sustain, your faith.

The church may not be perfect, but it's not all bad, and I would say, it's mostly good. Mostly good indeed.

Barbara Brown Taylor describes who we are when we are at our best,

Together we [explore] the mysteries of holy baptism and communion along with the vast and varied books of the Bible. Together we [navigate] both the predictable passages of human life on earth and some of its most unusual cruelties... Together we even [manage] to overcome our preoccupation with our own needs long enough to tend to the needs of our neighbors, although never without the strong temptation to congratulate ourselves for our good works.

And I would add that together we practice the language and the life of heaven, attempting to treat one another here in such a way that the stranger is welcomed, and the newcomer is invited in; the hungry in spirit and the hungry in body are fed. Together we try to be a place where the sinner is forgiven and the weak are made strong, the poor are sustained and the fearful are encouraged, where the lame may dance, and the blind may see the great and gracious love of God which takes not eyes but spirit.

We seldom achieve it; all that. Such a place only exists consistently, in the kingdom of heaven, but it is the calling of the church to approximate it as best it can, here and there, as God may give us grace to do so. That is what it is to be the church, and sometimes it is so, here and there, in this place and that. And maybe even Jesus might want to be there when it happens, when the church bears the marks of the kingdom of God. And maybe that's when it does happen. When he is there. Maybe even here. And wouldn't you want to be a part of it when he is?

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¹ Matthew 23:25-26

² Matthew 23:27

³ The Second Temple was built in 516 BCE, and greatly expanded under Herod's rule. The Second Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE.

⁴ John 2:16

⁵ Garry Wills, **What Jesus Meant**. New York: Viking, 2006) 77.

⁶ Barbara Brown Taylor, **Leaving Church**. (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006) 220.