

“Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?”

August 19, 2007

Jeremiah 23:23-29

Luke 12:49-56

Of all the Peanuts comic strips Chey and I have enjoyed over the years, the one we seem to retell and remind one another about the most has Charlie Brown and Linus, lying in the grass and looking at the sky. As I remember it, in the first panel Linus is the one who says how much he loves looking at the clouds, because you can see so many different things in them, and Charlie Brown says he loves looking, too. In the next panel, Linus is pointing at a cloud and is describing in great detail the parts and characteristics of Michelangelo’s work in the Sistine Chapel that he sees in the clouds. In the third panel, Linus turns to Charlie Brown and asks him what *he* sees. In the fourth and final panel, we see the two of them, still lying in the grass, and Charlie Brown, looking very Charlie Brown-ish, says, “Well, I *was* going to say I see duckies and horsies.”

That particular creation of Charles Schulz became a companion to me throughout my first year in divinity school, especially in relation to two theology classes. The first class, which was my first ever course in theology, was composed almost entirely of Harvard and Yale doctoral students who had been studying theology for the last three or seven or even ten years. As they spoke with an unfamiliar vocabulary that seemed designed to be confusing and obscure, I found myself muttering, “Duckies and horsies, duckies and horsies. They’re talking Michelangelo, and all I can talk about is duckies and horsies.” The second class, in the second semester, began with the instructor asking all of us to name our favorite theologians. I listened as we went around the room and my fellow students named their favorites, several of whom I had never heard of. Then, when it was my turn, I think I said I didn’t have a favorite theologian (this was an introductory course, after all!). When our 50 minutes were up that day, I remember leaving the classroom feeling downright ignorant and thinking, “Duckies and horsies. I’m *still* at the duckie and horsie level!”

But then, at some point that year, I had had enough of the convoluted, complex, esoteric language of academic theology, and I remember exclaiming to my own minister, in frustration and anger, “If your God is so complicated that you have to show me a flow chart to explain it, I’m not interested!”

I’ve calmed down a bit since that outburst and I’ve even developed some appreciation for complexity in theology, but, to tell you the truth, I remain quite fond of the simplicity of duckies and horsies. Even when someone’s theology is theoretically sound and intellectually astute, if it requires a flow chart (literally or metaphorically), it still leaves me a little cold. If the folks needing an encounter with God – and that’s *all* of us – if we can’t understand a theologian’s work ... if it doesn’t convey an *understandable* blessing to the hurt and hungry, if it doesn’t issue an *understandable* challenge to the rich and powerful, if it doesn’t give an *understandable* word of guidance to the lost and confused ... I still have my doubts that it has much, if anything, to do with God.

So it should come as no surprise that one of the things I most want to know about different religions is their core message, their duckies and horsies, so to speak. Leave the confusing details, the obscure twists and turns, the perversions and distortions for later

study. I want to know about each religion's *heart*. I want to know about the unique gift, the particular orientation, that each one brings to the world.

I have much, much more to learn – always will – but, so far, I've come to know something about the heart of several different religious traditions. I've been told that at the heart of Buddhism is loving-kindness and compassion. At the heart of Islam, reverence and obedience. At the heart of Native American traditions, the sacredness of all creation – animal, vegetable, and mineral. At the heart of Judaism, everlasting covenant and justice.

And at the heart of Christianity? What's at its core that keeps calling people into the Christian tradition? For many of us, here and across the globe, the answer is love ... the transformative power of love.

Why do so many of us think it's love? Well, in most of the New Testament writings, it's a pretty consistent theme (and, remember, it's quite prominent in what Christians call the Old Testament, too). In the gospels, when Jesus is asked, "Teacher, what is the greatest commandment?" he answers, "Love God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind," and he says, "a second is like it: love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus teaches his disciples to love our enemies and love one another. Paul writes that nothing can separate us from the love of God, and John writes, simply, that God *is* love.

Love. Throw in justice, peace, and grace, add a good dose of forgiveness and healing, and you've got what this church and this denomination proclaim as the Christian message. *But ...* but then readings like this morning's come along, and, instead of hearing about love and peace, we hear that Jesus and the word of the Lord are breathing fire, wielding a hammer, breaking apart rocks and families, and condemning others as liars and hypocrites. At the moment when we were probably expecting the loving Prince of Peace, we get a Jesus who says, "I came not to bring peace but division."

What's a Christian to do? If God is love and if Jesus is God's love incarnate, how can any of us reconcile the loving Jesus, the good shepherd, the compassionate guide and teacher ... with this morning's Jesus of division and condemnation? If we believe that the heart of the Christian message, the heart of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is love's power to conquer hate, fear, and even death itself, what do we do with the inconvenient, embarrassing Jesus who appears periodically in the gospels, the Jesus who is angry and warning people of eternal fire and punishment?

Well, if we want to follow in the footsteps of Thomas Jefferson, we could simply take the Bible in one hand and a pair of scissors in the other, and then starting cutting out everything we don't like, everything we disagree with, and everything we don't understand. We could do that, but, if we did, we'd end up with a gospel that confirms our prejudices, that reinforces our limited vision, and that fails utterly to challenge either our complacency or our despair.

Of course, we don't need actual scissors to try to domesticate Jesus and to strip God's love of its radically transformative power. All we need to do is ignore those inconvenient passages, just dismiss them as the written relics of the supposedly backward people and culture from which the New Testament arose. To avoid the challenge of the Gospel, all we need to do is reassure ourselves that we know far more and understand things far better than those people way back then did.

But, sometimes, instead of that kind of arrogance, there's a whisper and a persistent stirring in our hearts, a calling that tells us that our lives and our world are not the testaments to God's beauty and grace that they are meant to be. Sometimes we have a clear sense that what we need is the non-domesticated, radical Jesus who turned people's lives upside down 2000 years ago and who was such a threat to the status quo that he had to be executed.

If we want to trust that mysterious, calling whisper ... if we realize we need a love that can be both gentle and tough ... "all" we have to do is to get in there and grapple with those seemingly different "Jesuses" who appear in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. "All" we have to do is be willing to realize that God's love – incarnate in Jesus and at work in the world – is, in that well-worn phrase, intent on comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable. And "all" we have to do is realize that sometimes we're among the afflicted, in need of the comfort of tender love, and sometimes we're among the comfortable, in need of a tough love that questions our comfort in a world filled with affliction.

The radical, edgy Jesus who resists all attempts to be excised from the Gospel does, indeed, seek to afflict the comfortable. There's an unmistakable pattern to his outbursts and what the early disciples called his "hard sayings." He is harsh, just as the prophets of ancient Israel were harsh, in his condemnation of the rich who hoard their treasure, being generous toward themselves, but not generous toward God and their neighbors. He is harsh in his judgment of those who do not feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, and care for the sick and the imprisoned. He is blunt in his denunciation of those who claim that the outcast and the powerless are somehow outside the blessing of God's love and grace.

This radical, edgy Jesus loves his disciples and gives his life for us and for the world, but he is also impatient – and, I think, heartbroken – when for the tenth or hundredth or thousandth time, he has to remind us that the most important thing in human life is to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind and to love our neighbor, whoever and wherever she is, as ourselves. He is impatient and frustrated when his disciples live our lives as though people's value is determined by the location of a national border or by whether they live in Boston or Bagdad, New York or Fallujah.

This radical, edgy Jesus has a message and a way of life so disruptive to the usual ordering of human life – where the rich live in power and luxury and the poor live without adequate food, water, and shelter – that he does bring division, because he calls us to choose where and with whom we'll stand and choose what path we will take. He brings division because he calls us to follow him in loving and serving those whom he called the least of his brothers and sisters, even if our families, our friends, our country, or our own fears tell us not to.

So ... who and what do we see when we ask the "real Jesus" to stand up? Is he a sweet and gentle savior? Is he a radical, angry prophet? Is he reassuring or upsetting? Comforting or challenging? Neither? Both?

To be able to see and encounter this "real Jesus," we have to be willing to move a bit beyond the simplicity of duckies and horsies. As the love of God incarnate in human form, Jesus is more tender and forgiving *and* more challenging and unsettling than we can ever fully grasp – except, perhaps, in deepest prayer. The holy love that flows in and through Jesus sees us in all our beauty *and* our brokenness. It sees our potential *and* our

failures to be vehicles of God's healing, forgiving grace. This holy love in which we are held accepts our weaknesses and wounds. But it also calls us to grow in courage and health, so that we become the people God calls us to be. Or, to use the words of Anne Lamott, the God we encounter in and through Jesus loves us just as we are ... and loves us far too much to let us stay that way.

And so, my beloved friends, we are loved as we are, and we are also called to move closer to justice, mercy, and grace in all that we do. Let us welcome the comfort and the challenge of the real Jesus, the Jesus who is both tender and edgy, now and forever.

Amen.

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