

Jesus Said *What?*

Some years ago I developed a Bible study with the provocative title, “Seven Things I Wish Jesus Hadn’t Said.” Some of these sayings are difficult, some are disturbing, some are counter-intuitive. I have used this material several times since then (including in at least a couple of sermons), and the general theme of the discussion always comes down to this: *He didn’t really mean it the way it sounds.*

Please do assume that I am talking about intellectually sloppy students who simply want to tame the voice of Jesus into saying words that are gentle, meek, and milk. On the contrary, I have led this discussion with college students, church members, and fellow clergy – and the general drift is always the same.

The reason the drift is the same is that there are very good reasons – scholarly sound, theologically robust, and intellectually honest reasons – why we do often conclude that Jesus didn’t really mean something the way it sounds to us today. There are, to begin with, some technical linguistic problems in translating words from Biblical Hebrew (for the Old Testament) and Biblical Greek (for the New Testament) that are not easily resolved. There are, for example, some words in the Greek New Testament that are not found in other Greek texts of the same period – which means we cannot really be sure exactly how they were used at the time – particularly matters of nuance, emphasis, and even humor. Then there is the wide gulf between the culture of first century Palestine and twenty-first Century North America. What exactly, for example, did it mean for Joseph and Mary to be “betrothed”? Another problem is that the words of Jesus are often lifted out of the context in which they appear and treated as theological propositions – which they almost certainly were not. And finally, we know that much of the Bible circulated in oral form for a long time before it was written down, and we can expect that some of the texts were strongly influenced by those repeated tellings in many settings.

All of which is to say that it would not be unreasonable to come to today’s text with the expectation that *He didn’t really mean it the way it sounds.*

Listen again: “*Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; ...*” [Luke 12:51-52] Where is the Prince of Peace? Where are the “family values”? He must not have meant it the way it sounds.

Well, I think he did. And I think he meant it in at least two different ways.

In the first place, I think he meant it as a prediction of what was going to happen, not a prescription or an instruction for it to happen. Jesus had a prophetic eye for what was going on around him, and he knew the dangers that would face people who chose to follow him. He was, after all, challenging both the military rule of Rome and the religious leaders of the Temple. He was profoundly disturbing the kind of governmental

peace that depends upon military power. He was profoundly disturbing the kind of popular peace that requires the participation of corrupt religious leaders.

He profoundly disturbed the peace. And so he knew, I believe, that persons who chose to follow him in disturbing the peace would bring conflict to their families. Parents and children would disagree about the prudence of following a religious leader who challenged so many aspects of their common life. Indeed, the question of family division over conversion to Christianity would be a dilemma for the first century church.

In our time, we Americans are insulated from the most violent of these divisions, but they are well documented in the history of Christianity, and – alas – still evident in many places. Even here, as many of you have experienced, choices about religious affiliation can be major causes of family conflict and division.

The second way in which I think Jesus is serious about his words is more evident in the version of this text that is found in the Gospel of Matthew. There, Jesus adds this to his prediction of family upheaval: *“Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow up is not worthy of me.”* [Matthew 10:37-38] (A similar text is found in Luke 14:26-27)

Jesus is serious, I believe, in challenging the power and primacy of the extended family. In the first century Middle East, the family was not just the basic social unit, it was also the basic economic unit and the basic political unit. Those who were – for whatever reason – outside of a family group were in peril for their wellbeing and sometimes for their very survival. Not surprisingly, there was a high level of loyalty to families and households.

Jesus, however, called his followers to a different and higher loyalty: loyalty to God, and to God’s demands for mercy, healing, compassion, and justice. Moreover, he called his followers to be willing to give up everything for their faith. We know that the early members of the church heard this call, if for no other reason that their sacrifices are reported to us in the book of Acts and in several of the New Testament epistles, including our reading today from the book of Hebrews.

The call to give our ultimate loyalty to God is not an easy one to follow; our loyalty to our own family, and more broadly to our own “kind,” is a powerful alternative – no less in the twenty-first century than in the first. The ties of affection and economic necessity may have shifted some from their culture to ours, but they are still strong and not easily put aside.

At the same time, we continue to hear the call to accept all of God’s people as part of our own household. The words of Jesus, *“That they may all be one”* are part of the monogram of the United Church of Christ, and we take seriously our vocation as a church that welcomes everyone: *“No matter who you are, or where you are on life’s journey, you’re welcome here.”*

Most of the time we can pretty much ignore the tension between these two central values: our call to be loyal to God and concerned about all of God’s people, on the one

hand; and our commitment to be loyal to our own family (broadly defined) in particular. That is, we feel as though we can care for our loved ones without compromising our loyalty to God, and we can be loyal to God without compromising our care for our loved ones. We're so grateful not to have to compromise either of these that we ignore the fact that sometimes we do.

Consider the matter of health insurance for American Children. Each of us wants to have good coverage for our kids; we highly value jobs that have health care benefits. But the sad fact is that as many as 9 million children in our country do not have health care insurance, and therefore do not have easy access to good health care services. If our highest loyalty is to our own families, we will be concerned about getting coverage for our kids, period. If our highest loyalty is to all of God's people, then we will be concerned about getting coverage for all children – even though doing that will have a price tag. The cost of being loyal to our calling as Christians is, in this particular example, actually a financial cost. If the program is extended, the money will have to be raised, and in some way or another, all of us will “foot the bill.”

This question is not hypothetical. Both the US Senate and House have recently passed bills that will re-authorize a program called SCHIP (State Children's Health Insurance Plan), that provides coverage to uninsured children. The Senate version increases the program to 35 billion dollars, the House to 50 billion. The White House believes this increase is too large, and President Bush has threatened to veto any amount larger than the Senate authorized, or any plan that would “extend nationalization of health care.”

One of the most moving speakers I heard at the General Synod of the United Church of Christ earlier this summer was Marian Wright Edelman, who founded the Children's Defense Fund. She argued with great passion for the re-authorization of SCHIP – and asked a question that continues to haunt me: “If we do not provide enough money to insure all children, who will decide which children get health care and which ones do not?”

Listen with me to other questions behind Edelman's: “Aren't all of the children our children?” When we promise to “love, support, and care” for the children who are baptized here, do we really mean it? When we sing “red and yellow, black and white, they are equal in God's sight ...” are we willing to follow through on that belief?

These words of Jesus are hard words to hear, and harder still to live with. We would be so relieved if *He didn't really mean it the way it sounds*. This time, I think he really meant it.

Prayer for August 19, 2007

Almighty and everlasting God, creator of all things seen and unseen, hear now our silent prayers, as we open our hearts to you in the sacred quietness.

God of faith and hope, we bring before you our prayers for those we have named this morning – we especially remember ... Bring to each of them the gifts of mercy and grace that are most needed, according to your wisdom and love.

God of our hearts and minds, this morning we offer our prayers for those circumstances in our lives that we cannot usually bring ourselves to say aloud. Help us to name before you and one another the disappointments, shames, sorrows, and shortcomings that eat away at our faith and our wellbeing.

We pray for our relationships that are conflicted, dispirited, and unfulfilling.

We pray for those who are troubled about their sexuality, and about their intimate relationships.

We pray for ourselves and our loved ones who live with mental illness.

We pray for ourselves and our loved ones who live with chronic health conditions.

We pray for everyone who has been betrayed, cheated, or defrauded.

We pray this morning for those who live with addictions and alcoholism.

We pray for those who have lost their employment, or who are employed at work that is demeaning, dangerous, or disheartening.

We pray for those in financial difficulties, whether of their own making or the result of unexpected events.

And we pray for the secrets of our hearts that we can speak only to you.

All of these things we pray in the name of the one who listens with loving attention to all of our sorrows, and who bears them with us, even Jesus the Christ, and we pray together now in the words that he taught us ...

This is a revision of the prayers for May 1, 2005, July 17, 2005, and February 5, 2006, and April 9, 2006, August 13, 2006, and May 20, 2007.