

Come to Jesus

Some thoughts on the Ninth Anniversary of 9/11

*Sermon preached by the Rev. William McD. Tully, Rector,
at the Choral Requiem Eucharist at 11 am, Sunday, September 12, 2010.*

Based on Luke 15:1-10.

“Come to Jesus.”

That was the simple appeal of John Wesley’s revival meetings that tried to warm up a cold Christianity in 18th century England. That same appeal fired American small town tent revivals. Billy Graham took the idea global, with great effectiveness.

But now you hear “Come to Jesus” in new contexts, mostly secular. A parishioner told me that after an earlier market crash, it took a Come to Jesus meeting before his company’s board and executives decided they were overextended financially and needed to change.

The web’s Urban Dictionary definition: A time when a polite ultimatum is given, generally followed by a less than polite ultimatum, then a threat.

Drug and alcohol interventions are often referred to as Come to Jesus meetings.

A woman says, “My husband and I are going to have a “Come to Jesus” over this remodeling job that’s gotten out of hand.” A parent says he’s going to have a “Come to Jesus” with his kid about underage drinking and partying.

What we should be doing on this ninth anniversary of 9/11, is what we are in fact doing at this hour with this powerful musical Requiem—remembering the dead—solemnly, introspectively, passionately, and not with raised voices. We should also be redoubling our efforts at rebuilding the wounded physical place, and building a just society; and continue to adapt to a borderless world where there is no such thing as complete security.

Instead, our spirits and our civil discourse seem to have been hijacked by something as dangerous as a terrorist with an airplane: ignorance, including religious illiteracy, and plain intolerance.

Might this not be a time for a Come to Jesus?
Now stop right there. Even when “Come to

Jesus” has been domesticated and given a kind of wry, secular twist, there’s something lurking in the whole idea that is itself a kind of hijacking. It’s conflating the person and teaching of Jesus with a caricature of God, that tribal God who will make sure our side wins and judge us, everyone else and the world in the process. That’s not what I want to mean by “Come to Jesus.”

A few months ago, researching the biblical idea of the fear of God, I came across a site—and I hate to tell you this—called FearofGod.com. It’s a t-shirt merchandiser. Its home page proclaims: “WARNING: The Fear God line of shirts contains bold scriptural truths. You won’t be able to wear one of these shirts without telling someone about Jesus!” Then we’re told that the all time best-selling t-shirt is: “He Ain’t Comin’ Back to Preach,” with the prominent icon, “Fear God,” and with a graphic of the iconic Jesus, riding a steed, brandishing a sword over his head.

There’s another definition circulating in which “Come to Jesus” takes on its proper meaning: getting back to core values, coming clean, acknowledging our fears and admitting failures.

And for those of us here—and that includes any who are drawn here but are a little vague about who we are and what we stand for—Come to Jesus has, or should have, a radically different meaning.

What we mean is that Come to Jesus is an *invitation to come to the table*. Jesus altered the course of history, first of his own time and people, and then for all time, with the radically simple act of getting together with precisely the people that everyone said he shouldn’t get together with.

Look at today’s gospel lesson. I’m not a great user or believer in the word synchronicity, but how great that we’re given this reading from Luke’s gospel (15: 1-10) on this weekend of solemn remembrance and hope. It tells of Jesus’ passion

for inviting people to his table. It was a risky, destabilizing strategy, but he followed it for two reasons. One, he wanted to open the way for every person to have as direct a relationship with God as possible. And second, he wanted to break down human divisions, the divisions we fall into when we're afraid—of privilege, belief, tribe or class—wherever possible.

That got him in trouble, took him finally to the cross. But his table strategy also brought out some eloquent teaching, spiced with hyperbole, so that it still gets our attention:

A shepherd with 100 sheep loses one and leaves the 99 at risk until he finds the one lost.

A woman with ten coins loses one and turns on every light and sweeps everywhere until she finds it.

And then—here's the kicker—when the one sheep is found, and the one coin uncovered, the joy is so great you set the table, have a party and invite everyone.

If that's what Come to Jesus could mean again, then New York, America and the world should come to Jesus.

Not because he's the only way. He may the way for me, the way that changed my life. But he's not the way for everyone. Not because he threatens. Not because of the "fear of God." But because in Jesus there is a key to how people can become what God intended them to be, how we all can be freed from fear and sit at the common table, which is the universal promise to humankind.

The prophets, of course, were not also so positive. Jeremiah (4:12) in the 7th century B.C.E. reluctantly carried the Lord's words to Judah,

*my people are foolish,
they do not know me;
they are stupid children,
they have no understanding.*

I know that stupidity and ignorance are not the sole causes of our troubles, but if we mean to remember and honor our heroic dead, then we can at least resolve to stop repeating falsehoods and compounding our know-nothingisms.

Jesus' hospitality and generosity were built on a deep understanding and knowledge of human nature and human need, and yes, a compassionate

awareness of stupidity. He knew, and we should know, there are risks both to inclusion and division. But permanent division is terminally risky, confining and degrading to the human spirit. The way of openness and understanding *embraces* risk for the sake of something better, even, in human terms, something glorious.

Come to Jesus. Come to the table. Come find the lost, embrace the one you don't know. Learn about other religions. Come to know, to really know, the other. And then come back to the table and celebrate.

In Sam Freedman's On Religion column yesterday in The Times, there is the recollection that, in contrast to the media frenzy about the mosque that is neither a mosque nor at Ground Zero, there was a mosque—a room sponsored by the Port Authority, where Muslims could fulfill their obligation to pray five times daily.

"We weren't aliens," Mr. Abdus-Salaam, 60, said in a telephone interview from Florida, where he moved in retirement. "We had a foothold there. You'd walk into the elevator in the morning and say, 'Salaam aleikum,' to one construction worker and five more guys in suits would answer, 'Aleikum salaam.'" One of those men in suits could have been Zafar Sareshwala, a financial executive for the Parsoli Corporation, who went to the prayer room while on business trips from his London office. He was introduced to it, he recently recalled, by a Manhattan investment banker who happened to be Jewish.

That's the New York I know—not the New York of today's know-nothing media frenzy.

"It was so freeing and so calm," Mr. Sareshwala, 47, said in a phone conversation from Mumbai, where he is now based. "It had the feel of a real mosque. And the best part is that you are in the epicenter of capitalism—New York City, the World Trade Center—and you had this island of spiritualism. I don't think you could have that combination anywhere in the world."

You can have it here. Yes, here at St. Bart's. This is Wall St. North. Park Avenue now is a series of temples to capitalism. Then there is this place, St. Bart's, this sacred ground. We have worked hard over the years to make an open door. The power here is the combination of what we offer—Come to Jesus—a rich tradition that is non-coercive and attractive on its own merits, as opposed to the traditions of finance, necessary as they are to our welfare.

That's what we're here for. We mean to honor our dead. To create a community in which we understand and know one another, to belong at the

same table. We can do worse than renewing our commitment to Come to Jesus first. To know the Jesus who is the real Jesus at the table, not the one confused with a God of judgment only.

That's the inspiration that keeps us going. That's the challenge God sets before us. That's the way, with today's Requiem, to honor the dead with the traditions of the living.

Amen.

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