

The non-religious Jesus and you

*Sermon preached by the Rev. William McD. Tully, Rector,
at the eleven o'clock service, February 20, 2011: The Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany.
Based on 1 Corinthians 3:10-23; Matthew 5:38-48.*

A man in a hot air balloon realized he was lost. He reduced altitude and spotted a woman tending to the flowers in her garden. He descended a bit more and shouted, 'Excuse me, can you help me? I don't know where I am.'

The woman below replied, 'You're in a hot air balloon hovering approximately 30 feet above the ground. You're between 40 and 41 degrees north latitude and between 59 and 60 degrees west longitude.'

'You must be an Accountant,' said the balloonist.

'I am,' replied the woman, 'How did you know?'

'Well,' answered the balloonist, 'everything you told me is technically correct, but I have no idea what to make of your information, and the fact is, I'm still lost. Frankly, you've not been much help at all. If anything, you have delayed my journey.'

The woman below responded, 'You must be in Management.'

'I am,' replied the balloonist, 'but how did you know?'

'Well,' said the woman, 'you don't know where you are, or where you're going. You have risen to where you are due to a large quantity of hot air. You made a promise to be somewhere at a certain time, a promise you have no idea how to keep, and you expect people beneath you to solve your problems. The fact is you are in exactly the same position you were in before we met, but somehow it's now become my fault!'

I've always loved that story, but like other good stories it's slightly flawed, which you won't be surprised to know my wife discovered. As she said, "The man in this story actually *stopped to ask for directions.*"

But seriously folks, most of us do place a lot of value in information and directions. And reliable doses of both will get you pretty far in life. But if a good education loaded with information were the supreme value this most educated society on earth would be in a different place. And if following the rules were enough, all of us law-abiding people would be happier than we are. We believe the law is sacred, but the great lawyers can tell you that being on the right side of the law alone doesn't guarantee that all is well, or fair, for all parties concerned.

I think Jesus was on to these fundamental dilemmas. A good deal of the early energy in the Christian experiment in the first century was about the tension between law and grace. Or, the tension between knowledge and the fullness of life.

And in this long Epiphany season this year we have several extra weeks to look at the collection his core teachings known as the Sermon on the Mount—a collection of teachings which contain a few words, here and there, that all scholars of all bents believe go right back to the lips of Jesus. And I pay special attention to those.

That's because we have to bear in mind—as you know, and as you've heard from me often—that everything attributed to him does not belong in the core of his teaching. Some of those words are interesting, even useful information. It might even be life-saving information, and it can certainly reveal the liveliness of the arguments among the earliest Christians, but maybe not from the lips of Jesus.

As St. Paul observed, such insight is likely to appear un-doable in this life:

Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. (1 Cor. 3:18)

Becoming foolish, either openly to others or even privately to yourself, is not the course most of us set out to take. In fact, once you've navigated the usual adolescent testing and defying all authority, most of us settle for wanting to know the rules and will be reasonably happy with knowing what needs to be done to get a job, keep a job, get some friends, keep some friends, and otherwise live.

I believe that all religious or philosophical traditions—any belief system—will eventually get you to the question, "Then, how then shall we live?" Saying, *this is what I believe, this is what the nature of things is*, doesn't quite get you as far as most of us need to go. Sometimes the question becomes quite urgent.

And most people are impatient with creeds and long lists of doctrine. They ask, *OK, and now so what? Supposing I believe all that, how then shall I live. If I adopt that pattern of beliefs, that view of creation and life, what am I to do?*

And that's why this collection of teachings, called the Sermon on the Mount, is so valuable. It's a series of opposites or antitheses beginning with "you have heard it said . . . But now I say to you . . ." And over these weeks we've covered:

- (in the past) no murder, (now) no hatred (Matthew 5:21-26)
- (in the past) no adultery, (now) no lust (5:27-30)
- (in the past) no divorce without a certificate, (now) no marriage after divorce (5:31-32)
- (in the past) no false swearing, (now) no oaths at all (5:32-37)
- (in the past) an eye for eye, (now) turn the cheek, go the second mile (5:38-42)
- (in the past) love your neighbor, hate your enemy, (now) love your enemy (5:43-47)

These are all very compelling beginnings of the reflection we have to do on “how then shall we live.”

We know that many heard Jesus as simply the latest and, maybe even the most compelling teacher of Torah, or law—a Jew even more serious than his contemporaries. I think we need to recapture some sense of Jesus’ being rooted in his Jewishness. We should ourselves rediscover the ancient wisdom of the Jews in our own belief and practice. And note that in spite of some ugly words and actions along the way, the Church has never wholly denied that part of its origin.

But there’s another thing going on in that list, in that teaching that radicalized the wisdom of the day (“radicalized” meaning going down deep to the roots.)

If you look at all the summaries of Christianity, all the creeds, all the confessions and lists of beliefs, you will usually not find the two items that really stand out today. In fact if they were high on the list we wouldn’t argue about all the other stuff on the list. We’d argue where we really need to be.

With them it isn’t so much parsing the law and figuring out precisely how to do these impossible things:

- turning the other cheek in the face of an attack
- loving one’s enemies when they are truly your enemies.

It isn’t so much about doing. It’s about becoming the kind of person who could afford psychically, emotionally, and spiritually to actually live that way.

That was the breakthrough in the persona of Jesus: someone so utterly free that he was beyond religion. He practiced religion, he valued it. He urged others to do it. And *he got to the point where he didn’t need it.*

You and I are sitting here *because we need “religion.”* We need these props. We need these goads. We need to be brought up close to this material. We need to support one another in our questions and engagement of this teaching.

But the place we want to go, I believe, is the place that he went. Thoroughly reconciled to who we are. We need to become so mature, so secure in the deepest parts of our souls that we could afford to turn the other cheek. We could offer to somebody who’s out to get us, the best we have—and survive it. Or, love our enemies. And I mean not just the people we dislike, but the people who really have it in for us. To define yourself so well that you can afford to be in some relationship or even some distance from somebody who wishes you ill—that’s a place of real strength.

“Be ye perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Be sure you understand that these loaded words do not mean moral perfection. They’re a call to human completeness, to real maturity.

Get to that place where you aren’t so scared that you need to take refuge in the rules. Where you can afford to stand up with whatever you have to stand up with.

Again, this is not Jesus being anti-religious or advocating a pious life. Nor is it, by the way, a way of raising that dichotomy that everyone wants to raise today—“I’m spiritual but not religious.” No matter which side of that debate you pick, you are still challenged, I believe, by this person and these words. Challenged to grow, to mature—not to perfection in a narrow sense, but to completeness of personhood. Or, as psychologists say, a fully integrated personality.

I believe that Jesus was one of the rare people in the history of this planet who was so thoroughly and deeply integrated that the insights of his religion became a platform beyond which he could live. That he was secular and this worldly in the very best sense. Getting to know this Jesus is not a question of being “saved” as much as it is becoming fully human. That’s what he came for.

Any animal is capable of growing old. Growing up is the sole prerogative of human beings. Only a few that we know claim that they really want to do that. I’m here doing what I’m doing, saying what I’m saying, because I don’t think any of us can do this alone.

And I don’t think you can do it in your head. You need to know Jesus in your heart. You need to know the tradition of his words—the core of his teaching. You need first to resist him. “This doesn’t make sense. I can’t do that.” And then listen to him. And then do something foolish, as he did.

He did not float above this garden asking for directions. When he turned the other cheek, he reduced the threat of the powerful. When he loved the enemy, he became what he was—fully human.

What will it take for you or for me to make those moves? *Amen.*

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