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**Here is Jonathan's sermon with a few edits, including a grateful reference to the "de colores" song from Sunday morning.**

### **A Criminally Honest Peasant**

In the Name of our Mother, in the name of our brother Jesus, and in the energy of their spirit, greetings! I am standing here this morning to take my turn in our congregation's series of responses to the question, "But who do you say that I am?"

I believe that Jesus' mother taught him life-saving resilience in the face of public shame. He grew up with his paternity in doubt in a community where that was devastating. Mary taught him to practice the presence of God so successfully that he eventually came to experience God as his papa. From his earliest social awareness he knew what it was like to be considered marginal by those who considered themselves moral. Jesus was known and loved by God regardless of how others regarded him. I believe it was this real connection to his creator, a connection that was not routed through any approval or shaming from God's own people, that was at the core of his soul. And I believe that my hope of salvation from more toxic forms of human community or individuality is to adopt a faith like his. I believe in the power of Jesus' spirit to enable people-creatures and other creations to experience the Real Presence of the Creative Spirit herself.

One of the most important things Jesus is to me is a preacher of mercy rather than sacrifice. Leviticus 19:2 called God's people to be holy in the way that God is holy. Jesus claimed to be living that out every day. But in what way is God holy? What makes God God? Jesus had a profound inner connection with a loving creator whose love was not conditioned by whether people deserved it or not. This connection, this soul-deep conviction of love is what empowered Jesus to redefine holiness -- godliness itself -- as compassion rather than as purity. While shame and fear are the foundation and ground floor of God-awareness for so many religiously serious people, the keepers of the Jesus traditions never represent Jesus as believing that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (as is asserted in Proverbs).

Jesus so radically redefined Godliness, by means of his fellowship with sinners and outcasts, that his contemporaries considered him a threat to holiness. But Jesus went even further than that. He extended Leviticus 19:18 to forbid vengeance against national enemies, not just against neighbors. This made Jesus a traitor in the eyes of the morally motivated freedom fighters around him. His compassion was

not just for lepers but for tax collectors and for the children of Roman centurions. Who do I say that Jesus is? Well, some of his actions may have been analogous to flag burnings in our day. He is remembered as cursing a fig tree in the same week that he said the temple had become a den of nationalist freedom fighters instead of a house of prayer for all nations. In Jeremiah 7, Jeremiah scolded those who viewed the temple as a guarantee of God's sponsorship of violent nationalism and Jeremiah 8:13 pictures a fruitless fig tree whose leaves wither. If indeed he followed up the curse with a reference to the temple mount being thrown into the sea through the power of prayer, Jesus could logically have expected an imminent betrayal by any devout disciple for whom God's sovereignty and national sovereignty were one and the same.

I hear Jesus as a teacher of the oppressed. There is a real connection between his parables and preachings and his crucifixion between two other men who were tortured and sacrificed for the health of the Roman Economy. He unmasked the pretensions of the oppressor classes who masqueraded as protectors of the common people and he taught the peasants to survive by living in community in the midst of a deadly privatization of natural resources (Endnote 1). Jesus was an honest resident of Palestine who saw what he saw and said what he saw. His vocalized contrasts between the sovereignty of God and the collaboration of Herodians and other "realists" made him a target of the forces of "law and order." Anyone moral enough to be "tough on crime" could see why anti-Herod zealots would likely be among his disciples. I think Jesus was intelligent enough to have been able to make a living as a colonial bureaucrat or a plantation house chaplain somewhere, but he kept living as a peasant instead and refused to make the kind of living that predator humans consider to be "respectable." Jesus was the kind of criminally honest peasant who sees "gentlemen" making a killing and hears them saying that they are only making a living. Jesus lived and spoke as though no human lives are disposable. As though no slave, no terminally ill person, no Pharisee, no centurion, no zealot, and no child should be viewed as disposable for the sake of a "higher purpose." His vision and community organizing were politically serious and thus could not be tolerated. (Endnote 2)

If Jesus were merely a cynic or a social critic, he could have been tolerated and we would never have heard of him. But along with his political seriousness, he was as religiously serious as anyone around. I believe that Jesus was a Galilean shaman, an accomplished practitioner of indigenous spirituality. He was initiated by a desert dwelling cousin known as John Baptizer, a man who dressed like Elijah and had learned how to live off the land, specifically, wilderness land. I believe that Jesus lived as a native child of God, of Mary, and of mother Earth. He was a "native." His initiation by John included being birthed out of the watery womb of the earth and was immediately followed by a forty day vision quest in the wilderness. It was there that his vocational identity was added to his childhood identity during a life-changing experience

alone in the wild wrestling with spirits, some of them beastly. An experience that is common to religious leaders of indigenous communities around the globe.

I was educated in the context of a modern rationality which was formed during the expansion of European empires who were nostalgic for Roman forms of slave-and-plantation-based international economy. My education taught me to label any forms of knowledge that I couldn't recognize as useful for subjugating the earth and its "native" tribes as "irrationality." The limited form of instrumental reason (Endnote 3) taught in my schools was labeled "science." In premodern times, "science" had been a synonym for knowledge. Knowledge of all kinds. But that changed by the time of the European invasion of the Americas. Knowledges of intimacy with the earth, the kind of native knowledge that Jesus had, were not seen as merely useless by Puritans and Jesuits and Mennonites. They were seen as demonic. For many centuries now, Western Christians have been scientifically engineering the destruction of earth-friendly knowledge and of its practitioners, seeing any humans who feel at home on the planet as a threat to proper rationality and religion. The piety of songs like "This world is not my home" has long fueled and sentimentalized the holocaustic "manifest destiny" of Christian predators.

So, you see, my educated worldview trains me to think of all reality, including divine reality, as scientific. And if I can't explain it scientifically, it isn't allowed to happen. My master race mentality (unchosen and unconscious in my case) asserts that there is only one reality and that a very mathematical-brained God and I share that reality together comfortably, along with Newton's other disciples. There is no room in the world I live in for the kind of life that Jesus' Palestinian disciples watched him live. Do you see why modern "historical Jesus studies" are so important but so inadequate?

Jesus' contemporaries watched him live out a career appropriate to his identity as a spirit-possessed healer until his life was cut short by Western forces intent on establishing a new world order in the middle east.

Jesus' contemporaries experienced him as having the kind of access to the mind of God appropriate to a spirit-possessed prophet. When, in the text that frames this sermon series (Luke 9:18-20), Jesus asked who people thought he was, many assumed he was benignly possessed by an ancestral spirit, much as Elisha had been granted to receive the spirit of Elijah. In their cultural world, in the sense of reality that they shared with Jesus, it would have been natural to suppose that perhaps his cousin John had passed Elijah's spirit on to Jesus (Endnote 4). The gospels recount the appearance of Moses and Elijah with Jesus on a mountain. My worldview, and most "historical Jesus" scholars I read, require this experience to be one of two things: either a pure myth, made up decades later, or a miracle that violated

reality by violating “science.” (Endnote 5) My ability to know what’s going on in communities different from mine is similarly handicapped when it comes to the treasured memory of Jesus practicing other arts such as locating fish where industrious fisherman had missed them all night or carrying out psychosomatic healings that don’t map easily onto modern medical models. I don’t have a formula that can tell me when Jesus really did something that doesn’t happen in the portion of reality my scientific lenses allow me to see today and when he did something that I would have understood if I were there, but would have described more “scientifically” than his disciples did. They were not dishonest witnesses. They used the word pictures most adequate to how they saw things.

I think that if Jesus were here today, he would recognize the same needs for healing and exorcism that were present under the savage heel of the Roman “growth economy.” One Native American Evangelical Christian recently adapted the story of Jesus healing the demoniac in Mark chapter five by picturing a possessed woman on an Indian Reservation this way:

“Jesus! What are you doing here?” screamed a voice from within the woman, “You’re the last person I’d expect to see here!” This statement was followed with maniacal laughter. Looking deeply within the woman’s eyes, Jesus asked, “What is your name?” “My name?” asked the voice. “What is my name? My name is . . . Cavalry . . . Infantry . . . Military Mega-Complex. My name is Trading-Company . . . Border – Town Liquor Store . . . Multi-National Corporation. My name is proselytizing Missionary . . . Religious Order . . . Denominational Mission Board. . . . . We are many. We are organized. We are in control. Our intentions are always and only for the very best.” “Get out of her,” Jesus said . . . With one last shriek, the evil spirits left the woman . . . . . “Jesus,” she said, “may I go with you?” I want to become a Christian.” With a weary smile and a shake of his head, Jesus replied, “No child; this is not my intent for you. Stay here, with your own people, and tell them what the creator has done.” (Endnote 6)

Contrast that sermon word picture with the experience of another Native American Christian who attempted to worship God by using native dance in a church service. The white pastor’s wife offered to “cast an Indian spirit out of him.” (Endnote 7)

In the 1980’s a Californian pastor with the group Gospel Outreach, said of a U.S.-backed dictator’s army in Guatemala, “The Army doesn’t massacre the Indians. It massacres demons, and Indians are demon possessed; they are communists.” That was the same dictator Pat Robertson interviewed on his 700 Club TV show and to whom he promised to send aid and missionaries. Evangelicals cooperated with President Reagan to have large church-funded aid shipments to Guatemalan refugee camps coincide

exactly with his renewal of military aid to the Guatemalan army that was terrorizing criminally honest peasants. (Endnote 8)

Today, Jesus is panting for air and dying of thirst at our southern border. His pain is visible in the faces of children running for their lives from the U.S.-made Herods of Latin America. We worship a victim of state terror who died the kind of death designed, not for citizens of the Roman Republic, but for its slaves and for anyone who protested against the mistreatment of the lower classes.

What is it about our Christianity that prevents us from recognizing Jesus under our own barbed wire heels today? Well, have a closer look at Luke 23:41 in the passage we read this morning. One of my teachers, Shelly Matthews, asks, “Who in the ancient world would agree with Luke that the criminals hanging next to Jesus deserve to die; that their deeds, unlike the deeds of Jesus, merit crucifixion? From what vantage point does a storyteller – and in this case an evangelist – put into the mouth of a victim of crucifixion, while he hangs from the cross, the affirmation that his torture owes to a meritorious judicial process (Endnote 9)?”

Luke apparently wanted to render his gospel, and its sequel, the book of Acts, safe for consumption by a literate elite. I am certainly not in a position to judge his work. I am here to examine myself. Why have I all my life identified myself only with the man on the middle cross, as though the slaves or peasants next to him were somehow deserving of a lynching that cultured Romans would never administer to anyone who was “somebody,” let alone to anyone who in today’s world could pass as “white?” Why is my heart hard enough to sentimentally agree with the head of the torture squad, the centurion in verse 47, that the “criminal justice” system acted criminally that day *only in the case of Jesus*? Why do my tears for one blind my eyes to the horror of the others? How is it that my most sincere obeisance to Jesus can have the effect of framing his lynched neighbors as disposable precisely by hailing him as indispensable? My teacher points out that “Scholarship on ancient crucifixion comes largely from scholars trained *not* to reflect on their social location as beneficiaries of empire, settler colonialism and racial privilege (Endnote 10).”

What if I need as much forgiveness for my forms of Christian piety as for my acknowledged vices and mistakes? What if I am living on the mountain that a Jesus-inspired prayer would pick up and cast into the sea? I am not a dysfunctional member of my society and its imperial economy. I cannot devise a way of making a living to provide for my family that does not benefit from uncountable bloodsheds past and present. When I remember Jesus, I remember him as a friend of undeserving enemies, as a friend even to me and to my people. (Endnote 11)

Jesus asked to be remembered in the breaking of bread and the sharing of wine. These rituals mean many things to many people, and I understand why some of my Christian friends need to fast from partaking in Eucharist for a time in order to recover from the internal oppressions it has too often reinforced for them. These rituals also mean many things to me. They are meaning-full. Quite full. Not definable. But, on this particular morning, they primarily serve as my reminders that I am the kind of person who feeds on the health and flesh of others I have never met. I would rather not think about it. In terms of bourgeois spirituality hobbies, communion seems rather “uncool” and unproductive. It doesn’t usually “do anything for me,” as they say. But I need it. The body and blood of Christ reminds me that God is more reliably present as my victim than as my Marvel Comic Book hero or Biblical Lion King. It reminds me that to see Jesus now I should be on the lookout for whose body is being broken now; whose water pollution is being *rational*-ized and ignored now; which peasants’ olive trees are being bulldozed now by my empire’s client states.

My understanding of communion reminds me that the God Jesus trusted is living and dying and rising again all around me and that if want to see the true God I need to study my inherited blind spots and that if I want to hear God I need to amplify the brave protests of anyone whose pain is the price of my way of life.

#### **Endnotes:**

- 1 For detailed treatment of how far Jesus’ dangerous parables were from being pious “earthly stories with heavenly meanings,” see William R Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed*.
- 2 In chapter 5 of *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder*, Richard A. Horsley describes at length how Jesus “pressed a program of social revolution to reestablish just egalitarian and mutually supportive social-economic relations in the village communities that constituted the basic form of the people’s life [pg105].” Perhaps the most prominent recent recovery of this portion of Jesus’ ministry was the formation of Roman Catholic “base communities” in Latin America in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Members of these communities of resistance and resilience enabled Archbishop Romero’s conversion to the God of the Poor in El Salvador. I was personally moved to hear a small group of Community Mennonite congregants sing “de colores” during the service in which I delivered this sermon. For me, that song provides one of the most powerful moments in the movie “Romero.”

3 “Instrumental Reason” is a term used to describe the modern elevation of technical knowledge, knowledge as a power tool, above all other forms of knowledge, such as those produced by meditation, worship, or communion with (rather than dominion over) creation.

4 page 94-95 of Stevan L. Davies, *Jesus the Healer: Possession, Trance, and the Origins of Christianity*

5 Pieter F. Craffert’s *The Life of a Galilean Shaman: Jesus of Nazareth in Anthropological-Historical Perspective* is a book-length guide to diagnosing and recovering from the liberal versus fundamentalist theories of myth versus miracle, both of which are equally modern and frequently equidistant from the worldview of Jesus and the New Testament writers.

6 page 58 in Andrea Smith, “Decolonizing Salvation,” pages 44-66 in *Can White People Be Saved? Triangulating Race, Theology, and Mission*, edited by Sechrest, Ramirez-Johnson, and Yong.

7 *ibid*, page 49.

8 Sara Diamond, *Roads to Dominion: Right-wing Movements and Political Power in the United States*, page 238.

9 Soon to be published as a chapter in a festschrift for Judith Perkins. Shelly Matthews, *The Lynching Tree and the Cross: James Cone, Historical Narrative, and the Ideology of Just Crucifixion (Luke 23:41)*

10 *ibid*.

11 When Karl Barth visited the U.S. as a bit of an academic hero in the mid twentieth century, he told U.S.ers that they should be listening to William Stringfellow. William was a gay white Protestant theologian and lawyer who did pro bono work on behalf of the human rights of the Black communities of New York city who are alternately neglected and persecuted. Of his books, my favorite title of his is *My People Is The Enemy*.