

June 18, 2006

Individuality of Jesus

Matthew 9:10-13

In Jesus' day the Jewish people were divided into two well defined classes. There were the conservatives, or orthodox, who kept the law down to the last detail. By law I am not just referring to the Ten Commandments but to all of the dos and don'ts contained in the first five books of the Bible plus the oral traditions and interpretations laid down by the scribes.

The other group was those who did not choose to keep the petty regulations of the Law. These were known as the *"people of the land."*

As a part of their religious belief the orthodox Jews looked on the people of the land as unclean. To do business with them, to give anything to them or receive anything from them, to entertain them or to be entertained by them was forbidden under the Law.

Matthew 9:10-13

- 10 **While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples.**
- 11 **When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"**
- 12 **On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.**
- 13 ***But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but the sinners.*"**

As we react to the words voiced by Matthew we need to remember that we are looking at the life of Jesus to see what he did, how he conducted himself, not what he said.

Here we see Jesus, a man who went around teaching, preaching and healing in the name of God, partying with the unclean in defiance of the Law. The religious right was appalled.

What we see here, the concern or attitude, was not

cleared up by the resurrection or the spread of Christianity. As Dr. Barkley points out, after these two thousand odd years of seeing what Christ can do to and for a people:

1. There are those of us more concerned with our own holiness than with the helping of another.

2. There are those of us more concerned with criticism than encouragement.

3. There are those of us who practice a goodness based on condemnation rather than forgiveness and sympathy.

4. There are those of us who practice a religion which consists of outward orthodoxy rather than practical help.

A few years ago Rev. Richard Davis preached a sermon entitled, "*Tears for a Princess, Cheers for a Prince.*" This sermon was preached a couple of Sundays after that week where Princess Diana died in a car

accident in Paris and Mother Theresa died a natural death.

Here we had two very different classes of people and a death followed by two different public reactions. The difference accented by their last words.

Diana, a mother, a very attractive and popular young noble woman, was reported to have died with these words on her lips, *“Get away from me, leave me alone!”*

In a moments consciousness just before she passed on Mother Theresa’s last words were, *“I love you Jesus, I love you Jesus.”* One died with a plea and one with a prayer.

Surveys show that in England only about 10 percent of the people attend worship service with any kind of regularity. The reports were that in that country there was a massive outpouring of grief in response to Diana’s death. The park by Kensington Palace was reported to be three feet deep in flowers; candles burned around makeshift shrines, there were icons to Diana in most

every shop window.

The mass of people seemed to have latched on to Diana as if she were some sort of a goddess. Grief had turned into deification. What we see in reaction to Diana's death is evidence of our love for those of fame, wealth and power. As Rev. Davis puts it, *"We are enslaved to worldliness, prisoners of the secular. Hero worship can only take place in a people who have never met the only true hero worth worshipping. Jesus is the only idol any person should ever have."*

Diana was revered because of her death; mother Theresa was revered because of her life.

Rev. Davis concludes, *"Imagine what the world would be like if we could discover in every other person the beauty and grace we saw in Diana and then treated each other accordingly."*

Jesus promises us the life more abundant. Is that what he is showing us as he enjoyed the company of the

people of the land?

Our news media brings us daily report of deaths brought about by one group of religious extremists or the other. A world divided. Is it ever to end? That must have been one of the questions plaguing John of Revelation. John looked into the heavens and proclaimed, *“Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them and be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”*

We have ears but we do not hear. To be frank with ourselves we turn away because we don't want to hear. Thousands of years after Moses taught us to pray, *“Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God is one.”* We divide humanity into the insiders and the outsiders. Those solid, stable people like ourselves have a god and those of a different religious belief, or a different economic or social

standing, or different race all have their own gods. The political satire contained in the story of Jonah and the whale illustrates our exclusiveness.

Northeast of Israel was “*an exceedingly great city, ‘Nineveh’.*” Nineveh was home to a people noted for their cruelty. These people were arch enemies of Israel.

One day God comes to Jonah and says, “*Go to Nineveh and preach.*” Jonah didn’t want to go to Nineveh. Not that he was afraid of what might happen to him but he was afraid that his preaching might work. The Ninevehites might repent and God would forgive them and they would stand equal to the orthodox Jews in God’s sight. Before God the “**them**” crowd would become the “**us**” crowd.

We know the story. Jonah jumps in a boat headed for Timbuktu. He is washed overboard, swallowed by a whale, and ultimately vomited up on the very shore from which he had started.

Following this treatment Jonah had no choice but to follow God's will even though he reluctantly did so. He got to the edge of town and preached a one-sentence sermon, "*Forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.*" That was it.

Astonishingly it worked. The people of Nineveh, including the royal family on down, were turned upside down. The right hand became the left and the left hand became the right. Jonah's one sentence revival brought a city-state to its knees.

While Jesus was out preaching, teaching and healing, one of the scribes or Pharisees asked him for a sign. Jesus responded, "*... but no sign shall be given you except the sign of the prophet Jonah ... the men of Nineveh will arise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah and behold, something greater than Jonah is here ...*"

Poor old Jonah. When he saw what was happening to the people of Nineveh he was depressed. *“This is why I went to Tarshish. I knew you were a God who was merciful, forgiving, a lover of losers like the Ninevehites.”*

We like the Jews of Jesus’ day carve up our world in competing groups then along comes this message from Jesus in action to remind us that our God is one.

I think we could read into this snapshot of Jesus in action a number of basic and vital truths for the living of our life.

1. We see here it is not the group, or the nationality, or the class, or the race that matters; it is the individual. Throughout the Gospels we are reminded that the individual is the thing of supreme value in the sight of God.

2. Our fellowman is God’s representative to us. God gives a human being only one human life. If we so

conduct our lives that we diminish the value of the other person's life we have demeaned something that all of eternity cannot recreate. We can only sin against God by sinning against our fellowman.

3. It is not what a person believes in theory but what he does in practice that matters.

4. As we see Jesus sitting at the table with sinners we are reminded that the smallest act toward the most insignificant people is a supreme indication of the man that he is.

5. We see Jesus sitting at the table with these people of the land and we see how natural it was for him to do so. From this we can read that the greater good is the unconscious good, the good that just naturally wells up from the human heart.

The bottom line as I see it is that the real test of one's religion is how he treats his fellow man. From the passage in Matthew that we have just read Jesus is

showing us how.

Pastor's Message

Some querulous pedant who had probably swallowed a few books on composition, complained with irritation to D. L. Moody that he made so many mistakes in grammar. Moody incisively replied, "I am using such grammar as I know in the service of God. What are you doing with yours?"

How many people miss the supreme blessings of living by keeping their eyes and ears supersensitive to imperfections. These are among the most personally miserable of mankind. Family life is often disrupted because one partner to the marriage bond is constantly aware of some defect in the other to the point of disregarding a host of excellencies. Many can never experience the joys of friendship from the fact that they concentrate on the frailties of those with whom they are associated. Many can never be happy in a social or organizational group because they see and hear too much that is less than the ideal.

The alternative to this unhappy attitude is the cultivation of the spirit indicated by the word charity. Charity includes an appreciation of the best combined with a forbearance with the imperfect. The good and the ill is inextricably mixed in every human being, and the universe as a whole as it appears to us. Christianity and common sense unite to lead us to look for the best and not let the presence of the imperfect cause us to "throw out the baby with the bath."

PRAYER

Eternal God, give me ever a disposition to appreciate the best, and let me not be so grieved by imperfection, frailty and error that I shall miss all. Amen.