

A Voice of Authority
Matthew 5:38-48
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Today, I am attempting to describe as well as I can, Jesus, the man. I hope to answer questions that I have posed to myself. The first is, what was it about the carpenter from Nazareth that caused fishermen and a tax collector to drop whatever they were doing to follow Jesus? What was it about him that grated on the sensibilities of Pharisees and scribes? And what was it that caused his own family and kin to disown him, while thousands of others walked miles to hear his parables and to respond to his warmth and occasional humor?

It begins in Galilee, the homeland of Jesus. Because of its proximity to Syria and across the Sea of Galilee to the Roman cities of the Decapolis, Galilean Jews were more exposed to Hellenism than the Jerusalemites who lived in the shadow of the temple. The religious practices of Galilean Jews were suspected by temple authorities to be laced with pagan influence or at least not observed with vigor. And, Galileans had a history of armed insurrection, going back to the separation of the kingdom into Israel and Judea following the death of Solomon. To a sophisticate from Jerusalem, Galileans were backwoods yokels and looked down upon by the temple religious purists.

Jerusalem was, as it is today, the heart of Judaism. The magnificent Temple drew thousands on pilgrimages from all over the diaspora. The people of Jerusalem, those priestly families, those merchants, those wealthy leaders of the Sanhedrin were the educated sophisticates with those long held prejudices against Galileans. No city in Galilee could measure up to Jerusalem. No Galilean was as educated or as pure as any Jerusalemite. To cap it all off, the accent of Galilee was grating to the sensitive ears of Jerusalemites. Like being from Boston, I guess.

But Galilee was not isolated. News did get to the north. Word of a mighty prophet came all the way from Judea to Nazareth. This prophet named John baptized people in the Jordan River and sent them on their way freed from sin and challenged to live a transformed life. A carpenter from Nazareth named Jesus heard of John and decided to take some time off to see what his message was all about.

Jesus handed over his tools to his brothers, said good bye to his family and began to walk the 75 miles between Nazareth and the Jerusalem area of the Jordan River. Perhaps he felt some compelling need to go or, like many people still today, sought a deeper sense of spirituality. The Gospels tell us nothing about that journey. The story does not really begin until Jesus of Nazareth walked into Mark's first chapter and was baptized by John. At that transformative moment, Jesus knew that he would never be able to return to his carpentry shop in Nazareth. He knew that, like Isaiah or Elijah or John, he was singled out by God for some purpose yet to be made known. Then, filled with that overwhelming sense of God's presence in his life, Jesus went into the wilderness to commune with that divine presence and to accept and prepare for his new life.

We do not know how long he was with John, but when John was arrested, Jesus returned to Galilee, prepared to announce the Good News of God's Kingdom. And his first stop was at the town of Capernaum, a small town on the banks of the Sea of Galilee. He walked along the shoreline, saw a boat with a family of fishermen cleaning up after a day on the lake. Did he know Peter and Andrew? Had they also been among those baptized by John? It doesn't really matter, does it? Jesus called to Peter and Andrew and they came immediately. Another boat contained James and John. Again Jesus called. Again there was an immediate response.

We who straddle two centuries have witnessed such charisma for good and for evil. Adolph Hitler mesmerized Germany with his charisma and arrogance. 6 million Jews were turned into ash. Europe was torn apart by war and millions of men, women and children paid the price for his charisma. Yet other great voices were heard. Mahatma Gandhi who studied the words of Jesus led a non-violent revolution to free India. The eloquent passion of Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr., reflects the words and works of Jesus by which he lived his life. Following Jesus, he woke America to the hard reality of racism in both north and south. We still quote his Dream speech and measure how much further we need to go. Mother

Teresa quietly set about serving the poorest and sickest of God's children, giving them dignity and hope. Kings, presidents and simple volunteers flocked to her side as she gave the world a view of compassion that she learned from the Gospels.

"Come, follow me." Without any miracle, Jesus invited his first disciples into his company; he also transformed the lives of millions of people throughout all the centuries since those words were first uttered, until this day.

Jesus made his home in Capernaum, probably living with Peter, Andrew and their family. On a trip to Israel-Palestine, when some of us visited Capernaum, I saw the remains of a synagogue that had been in use in the 2nd century. That edifice had been built on the foundation of an older synagogue from before the first century, AD. It was in that place, on that original foundation that Jesus taught compassion intertwined with justice. And, it was in that synagogue that Jesus had his first encounters with the Scribes and Pharisees. Yes, there were miracles, but there was much more than that.

Jesus lived in a time of great disparity; religious and economic. His constant message was that the Kingdom of God was at hand. In that kingdom there was room for all people: rich and poor, men, women and children, sinners and saints. Because of the belief that a sin committed by a family member would be carried for generations, before any healing, Jesus often told the person that his or her sins were forgiven. He said this to assure the individual that any fault of the individual or of parents or grandparents was forgiven. No one need suffer isolation or familial guilt. God's love extended to all and the burden of pain or guilt was removed, leaving the individual liberated from the past.

The purity rules were stringent. A person with any kind of skin condition, whether or not it was leprosy, was declared unclean and banished from the community. Anyone who touched that individual was also declared unclean. When a leper sought healing, Jesus immediately reached out and touched the person. In doing so, he not only extended compassion but also inclusion within the community to the affected individual. When a Synagogue President begged Jesus to come and heal his daughter, Jesus went with him into the place of death and touched the young girl. Under the law, a person was declared unclean in the presence of death; further, a man, not a relative was prohibited from touching a woman. His warmth and care had no barriers.

Jesus cut right through all those impediments to inclusive community by his compassion for the isolated victims of disease and exclusionary legalism. And, by the way, our Christian history is not unsullied. We have had a hard time absorbing his message. In the late middle ages, through the 17th Century, women and men who believed something different than the accepted theology of an area were persecuted, banned or executed. Until relatively recently, divorced persons were barred from church activities and, in the case of Roman Catholics, no longer allowed to take Communion. It is only now that the Gay community is welcomed into full fellowship in some denominations, thank God, one of those is the UCC.

Jesus was not content with talking inclusion. He walked the talk. He invited a hated tax collector into discipleship. He ate meals with tax collectors, sinners and scribes and Pharisees. He gladly invited Mary to sit with the male disciples as he taught and invited Martha to join them. He had a conversation alone with a Samaritan woman and even his disciples were shocked by his action. In an age when children were expendable, Jesus took them seriously, blessing them and calling attention to their dignity and worth in the Kingdom, saying, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." (Mark 9:37) The Good News was that there were no barriers to the kingdom: the marginalized, Samaritans, the sinners, the wealthy, the poor, women and children, Pharisees and Scribes were all invited into citizenship.

Sure, people came streaming across Galilee to see miracles of healing or to be healed themselves, but they came also because Jesus took them seriously, accorded them respect and through his parables, made them think. Luke's Beatitudes speak to the marginalized people who followed Jesus; Blessed are you who are poor, for yours in the Kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. (Luke 6:20-21)

No one had ever spoken to them with such assurance. No one had ever felt such deep compassion for them. No one had ever promised them laughter.

Jesus truly loved all the assorted characters who were part of his life. He invited them all to dinner parties, joked with them, made them feel good about themselves, and through table fellowship, taught them to love and respect one another. He also knew that with each grumble or objection to his words coming from Pharisees and Scribes, he was making enemies. Already prejudiced against Galileans, those in authority saw in Jesus a person of great danger. He was, according to their rigid observance of the Law, himself a sinner who was encouraging the crowds to be less observant. They did not accept the argument that care for the sick or dying superceded the law. They saw in the ever increasing crowds a danger to the peace. Rome did not tolerate dissent. They knew that the crowds surrounding Jesus were not dissidents but the very presence of those crowds fanned their hatred and fear. They saw in Jesus a personification of their worst nightmare; total subjugation by Rome and the loss of religious freedom.

Jesus the man was a person of incredible courage. He knew that he had to go to Jerusalem and he knew what he would find there. As Passover drew near, he and his followers took the road that led to celebration on Palm Sunday, sitting on a hillside, weeping over Jerusalem, throwing the money changers and merchants out of the sacred precincts of the Temple, sharing a meal, seeking quiet prayer in the Garden, arrest at the hands of a trusted disciple, the melting away into the night of all his other disciples, the denial by Peter and the kangaroo court who sent him to Pilate. In all of those separate stabs of loss, he kept his dignity, even to death on a cross.

And who among all his followers were the companions of his final hours: the women. Those who had been raised to dignity by Jesus did not flinch at his excruciating pain. They stood with him until the end and then prepared his body for the tomb. So Jesus the man died in agony yet surrounded by love. And the story continues. Amen.