

Saving Jesus, Again

As a former Christian Minister who led hundreds of Easter services over the years, these holydays continue to get me reflective. My wife (a Presbyterian Minister) was amused this weekend when I brought a bible to breakfast to read her a passage from First Peter about Jesus preaching to the dead in "prison" since the "days of Noah." I assume this is the origin of the strange idea of "purgatory." Over waffles and poached eggs we had a light conversation about the psychology of persecuted peoples and their need for stories that give meaning and hope. As we finished I made the comment, "You know, if people hadn't made these stories so literal and presented them from the beginning as **myths of meaning and hope**, we might all read them alongside Greek myths and other fables to enjoy and draw common ethics and lessons from them."

There are times I consider writing another book and I would title it, **Saving Jesus (from his followers): A Secular Chaplain's Gospel.** Or something like that.

Throughout my emergence from faith and release of Christian ordination, and through my books like *Life After Faith*, *My Address is a River* and *Jesus and John Muir*, I think I've made it fairly clear to anyone listening that I respect the man and the message. . .at least the "core" message as I see it. And of course, that's the point, isn't it? Everyone thinks they know this guy and claim to know the true intent and heart of his life and message.

This is why I think poor Jesus needs some salvation! He needs to be saved from those who have re-invented him and held him high and out of range of serious discussion for centuries. If someone turned me into a God, I'd want to be saved too, wouldn't you? Especially if the whole point of one's life, or at least the most important parts of one's life were completely missed or ignored or covered up, right?

Have you noticed (of course you have) that nearly every church on the planet is **marked by a cross?** Not an open-air classroom on a rugged hillside. Not a "healing" moment or touch of kindness. Not even an open tomb. A cross. The

main bloody symbol for a major religion that claims to represent the Life of One Man in history is the instrument that killed him. I cover this bizarre fact more in *Life After Faith* by highlighting the sad fact that this symbol has led to the destruction and decimation of whole forests (with the wildlife and human inhabitants). Killing, massacre really, to celebrate Life! When we're all crawling in sin I guess this is the best answer: a slaughter for love. And the Great Father slays his Gentle Son (unlike faithful Abraham) and they call it Good Friday. Quite horrible actually.

And what is the main "celebration" in the Christian Church? Of course, Communion, the Last Supper, the Eucharist. Constant and continual consuming of Bread and Wine, Body and Blood, over and over and over, world without end. Death is the central story. It can't be denied. Oh yes, many Christians are quick to argue, "NO, it's about Life! We eat His body and blood to Live! You miss the point!" Well, folks, I feel your pain, but I think it's you who miss the heart of it; I don't think you see what you're doing. Did Jesus spend his lifetime (or his three year teaching tour) focused on death, dying and eating a meal? Have you actually read the Sermon on the Mount? Isn't the whole intent to live a life of compassion here and now, to have a particular concern for those who are poor and outcast, particularly those outcast by the religious community? Let's be serious and real here. The Jesus who has been "raised"---raised on a cross, raised from the dead, raised into high heaven, raised to the "right hand of God"---needs to be lowered down to our level, our world, our lives. As my spiritual spouse said this morning, with tears in her eyes as she was reading the crucifixion story, "The gift of Christianity is this **Human Story.**" As her secular spouse, I get that, I see it too. Having seen many "crucifixions," the cruel and unjust suffering of many people, I understand. Any sensitive person would weep over the wounds.

This intensity of humanity and human experience is the reason **Jesus does not belong to Christians or the Church or Christianity.** This is why Gandhi loved him, and Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama honor him. This is why the Man of Nazareth is a powerful figure for those judged not good enough, for the non-

members, for the suffering of any faith and no faith. That **The Church became a Big Walled Members-Only Fortress for the Faithful** is the worst thing that could have happened to Jesus. Even thirty years ago in seminary some of us were seeing this. Jesus was not a Church kind of guy, nor was he a Christian or someone who could ever really be "owned" by anyone.

Yes, this is a Human story. It's not the story of God. As much as his "followers" want to argue that that **IS** the story and if you don't accept their version you are an infidel outsider unworthy of heaven, they are blowing hot air. As I read the story, this is exactly the mentality, the fear-based buttressed belief, that Jesus battled against much of his life. As many "progressive" or even mystic Christians have made clear, **Jesus was a classic heretic**, he was not a supporter of the Religious Elite but a radical revolutionary whose life was devoted to "raising up" those who were "downtrodden" in the dirt and dust under the foot of faith. He was a man of the dirt, living outside among the despised, touching the lepers, serving the sick. . .and, inciting "uprising," a rising up, an obvious threat to both religious and governmental authorities. Primarily peaceful to be sure, but at the same time, a few swords could be helpful. This kind of uprising was not flying up to some Heaven above, but a firm grounding down into True Humanity---something to live for, and die for. And he did.

In my years as a Chaplain I have seen the results of the Christian Jesus stomping around the world destroying lives and Life itself. Cutting down trees for crosses, churches and bibles; cutting down minds to make believers. "**Make-Believers.**" Make believe that Jesus is My God and not Your God; make believe that his message was all about Believing and having Correct Faith (orthodoxy) rather than compassion, justice and living a loving life; make believe his execution by the state supported by powerful religious leaders has no warning for those in our world today who mix Religion and Politics. Lots of make-believe going on here, and it's as dangerous now as it was then.

Now, don't get me wrong. There are huge numbers of Christians who are doing many good and honorable things. I'm married to one. As I've written elsewhere, I think they are good people who happen to be Christian. Their faith is important to them, but they live as they live primarily because they are, at heart, loving human beings. They could be Muslim or Jewish or Buddhist or Hindu. It doesn't matter. Their lives are a testimony to Good, not necessarily to God.

It seems to me we could see Jesus this way as well. Maybe he was drawn to serve others because of his birth in poverty, his absent father, his gentle mother or his years as a member of an oppressed minority. We simply don't know. No, he was not a Christian at all. In fact he was Jewish, but even more, merely Human. Like us, merely Human. He was a Secular Jesus who needs to be saved from his adoring, worshipping, praising, hero-happy crowds. He is not theirs, and they are not his. **Jesus the Human can still be a Hero for Non-Believers.** In fact, I might argue that he is just what many in the Atheist, Humanist, Freethinking, Secular community need.

We need to come together to Save Jesus. Here's why and here's how.

The Secular Jesus most likely called himself not the Son of God but the Son of Man. . .the Child of Humanity (a Mensch; "I'm one of You"). He taught that to be truly Human is fairly natural, to care about others and cooperate to help in any way, that poverty or sickness or powerlessness is not something shameful but an opportunity to live with dignity and teach others that wealth and power do not equal "blessing" but may actually be great obstacles to wisdom and health. **The Secular Jesus lived as an outsider who challenged pompous and powerful Religion and Clergy** with a simple message of basic humanness found in living the simple life while speaking the truth. Many say he never answered the question, What is Truth? Many more claim he answered with, "I am the Truth." But these all miss the point again: truth is lived, breathed, worked out in the day to day life of real people seeking solutions to the problems of our world. There can be no final

all-questions-answered kind of capitalized Truth for all occasions--too many variables. Thank Goodness for that.

How do Seculars "save" Jesus? By re-claiming and re-cycling his basic ethical teachings about humanity and true community. By resisting, as he did, those who try to convince us they are His People, that they and they alone know what he demands and that he demands obedience to some imagined supernatural being who whispers solely to them. We can honor and respect (and of course, criticize at times) the life and teachings of the historical teacher of Nazareth. We can, and should, question what he "really" said and join many biblical scholars who share our questions and concerns. Far from "watering down" any of his teachings and having no interest in "cherry-picking" whatever verses we choose, we can find comradeship within the communities of faith to discover how to live out the essential principles he inspired (alongside the parallel principles of Confucius and Buddha, Socrates and Marcus Aurelius, Moses and Muhammad). Jesus can still teach along with many others, yet, his world is not our world, so we move on and find new wisdom, new truth, new ways of creating community and building a healthier world. So, yes, **we leave Jesus behind** with the rest of the ancient teachers and, as Emerson encouraged, we cease to look over our shoulders at old truth and old gods. We ultimately let go of the old books and old worldviews and are better for it. There really isn't any "old" or obsolete wisdom. The wise, examined life is timeless.

In the meantime, during that process, we live in a world dominated by faith and those who think they are The Chosen and the True Followers. We have to speak up and act. And, I would say, it would do us well to become friends with Jesus, the Jesus of history, humanity and humanism, carrying forward his humility and sense of ethical imperative. **The supernatural Jesus has had his day. A more natural, earthy and down-to-earth common Jesus is what we need.** I can stand side by side with a "spiritual" person. I eat breakfast and share a bed with one. If that person is willing to work for a better world we can get somewhere and Jesus can join us, if he can keep up!

Let's save Jesus. I'm guessing our world very much needs that.

Chris Highland

Easter Weekend, 2014