

The forgotten gospel of Jesus



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

Nearly every morning I spend time — probably too much time — scanning news sites. We hear a lot of complaining about “The Media” — that big evil giant — unsure of what or who we can trust. Scrolling and sifting through current events, reports, analyses, opinions and “breaking” news, I sometimes come away wondering if I learned much of anything. I know I have picked up some

knowledge, but if I can remember enough to pass it along, it’s usually in bits and pieces. I can’t vouch for the accuracy of how true or new the information really is. I doubt I’m alone in this, and no doubt I do some filtering of what I read, see and hear from papers to podcasts. When it comes to religion, do we practice the same sort of search for truth and trustworthiness?

The religions of the world each want us to believe their message, their own “good news.” That makes sense; otherwise, what would a religion even mean? A faith practice is supposed to benefit each believer, their community and the whole world. Some say the central teaching of every religion is essentially

the same, while others emphasize the differences. At best, this can be educational, a commitment to comparative religion, at worst, competitive — not so educational.

My main concern here is to ask one question: What was the “good news” brought and taught by Jesus of Nazareth? For most Christians, that may seem obvious, but is it? Many would answer: “Salvation.” Others might say: “Faith” or “Eternal Life” or simply “Love.” There are certainly verses to suggest these things. We often hear believers claim the Bible itself is the good news. Usually these folks are referring primarily to the Four Gospels. “Read the Gospels, they are the gospel.” Those

who identify as “evangelical” are really saying they believe and live by “the gospel.” But what does this really mean? What if the “good news” we so often hear isn’t really what it was meant to be? Would Jesus himself recognize the “good news” preached today?

It may be a good thing to take a look at what Jesus said about why he came and what he was doing in First Century Palestine. We could call that “The Gospel of Jesus.” I’m only calling attention to a few statements Jesus’ made, one in a synagogue, the other out on the streets with his followers.

The first is in Luke chapter 4. This is

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the first and last time we hear of him speaking in a religious assembly. He quotes from the Prophet Isaiah chapter 61: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and freedom to the prisoners." If he read this simply as an ancient text, his Jewish congregation would be pleased. But he made it very personal and present: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled

in your hearing." An audacious claim. Interact with poor people, patch the wounded, light a torch of liberty. Were all these merely "spiritual," or risky, radical acts among human beings? For 2,000 years some have claimed Jesus' words, quoted from Isaiah, should be interpreted spiritually. They say it's all about personal salvation; the poor and brokenhearted, enslaved and imprisoned — this simply means they need to accept Christ and become Christians, though the preaching and binding, proclaiming and releasing practiced by Jesus had nothing to do with that. This "Gospel of Jesus" was not believing-oriented but action-centered, this worldly, with real-world results.

The second part of this "Gospel of Jesus" may be found in Matthew chapter 25. Jesus describes a future day of judgment when believers and nonbelievers will be separated for paradise or punishment. Those who enter the kingdom have been active: "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me...Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." What about those who were so focused on faith, reading the "Gospel of Jesus" not prac-

tically but spiritually? They passed right by the most needy, neglecting even their Lord. "Whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me."

It seems we have a choice here: a spiritualized Gospel of Judgment or a humanized Gospel of Jesus. A compassionate or a cruel Christianity. What are we hearing and seeing around us today?

Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His books and blogs are presented on "Friendly Freethinker" (www.chighland.com).