

DO WE STILL WANT TO BELONG?

It seems glaringly, blaringly obvious to me that for a Christian to pray effectively – for a Christian to try to live the Christian Life with any kind of faithfulness – they must have a fairly clear picture in their minds about what Jesus was like as a person. Of course, I do not mean a picture of precision or absolute certainty. One of the realities of our temporal world is that we never have absolute clarity or certainty about anything. If we did, no progress or growth or improvement would be possible for us; it would all be frozen.

But if Jesus is so vague and hazy to us that we have no idea what He was like or what He thought about or cared about, then being followers is not a real option. The only thing worse would be to picture Him as so “Divine” that there can be no relationship between the way *He* lived and the way *we* live.

I did attempt last Sunday to set before you the astounding connection between Jesus’ life and death and mission among us, and the way in which He illumines the importance and value of each individual in the eyes of God. Becoming “selfless” is the epitomal opposite of everything Jesus stands for. If God loves you and you have no self left to receive love, that is a tragic end to everything Christianity is about. Eternal Life for people who have no souls is a barren prospect indeed.

But we can never say everything at once. Individuals who have no possibility of deep and meaningful relationships with other individuals would also be a dead-end street. So how do we become true individuals who are not controlled or coerced by others, yet who still have the possibility of deep connections with other true and awakened individuals? Another way of asking that same question is to ask: How do we get into the Kingdom of God?

Sometimes we need to remind ourselves that God’s Kingdom is not just coming; it is also already here. So, do we still want to belong? Yes, of course. But to what? I think that question becomes more problematic the longer we are alive here in this realm. When I was a youth, I came to Fullerton High School from a tiny elementary school (Lowell) on the very outskirts of Fullerton district. It took the bus a full hour to drive to Fullerton after picking me up. Most other students

came to high school from larger elementary schools in Fullerton or La Habra. So they came with groups already formed and with pecking orders already well established. I came with one friend. Did I want to belong? Of course. We both did. However high our individuality, we are also communal creatures. But belonging is not always easy. Slowly it came clear to me that to belong, I would have to change – or at least hide – some values and principles that were very important to me. The price was too high. I wanted to belong, but I did not want to belong *that* much! That reality has been playing itself out in various ways ever since I can remember. Is it not so for you?

How do we find a church or a group of friends or a school or a company or a neighborhood where we can belong? The hunger to belong is bigger than we often admit. The disappointment is huge when we discover that a group we thought we could really belong to is not okay with us. Sometimes we call it divorce. Sometimes we change jobs or schools or churches. I have run into a number of people who hop in and out of churches every time they discover that they have had the misfortune to get into one that is not perfect. There is no smugness in that comment; I would not last very long in most churches either. Not only that, I am often blamed because the church is not perfect. I am even accused of causing the dissention that divides so many Christian groups in our time – as if it would all go away and everything would be fine if it were not for me. Ah, such power.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul claims to have realized the true purpose of the coming of Jesus. It is the secret purpose of God, now coming out in the open. I quote Paul directly: “*namely, that the entire universe, everything in heaven and on earth, might be brought into a unity in Christ.*” (Ephesians 1:10)

He writes that approximately thirty years after his conversion. For the past twenty years, Paul has been many places and had many adventures. He has helped to plant the Christian church all over Turkey, Greece, and even in Rome. But the church is still only little pockets of believers scattered here and there in a vast pagan empire. Paul is fully aware that even the Christians do not agree with each other in many places and about many things. He is not himself above or beyond the squabbles, but he is often at their center. Paul, like Jesus, is very unforgiving about being forgiving. And to challenge the grace and mercy of the Holy Spirit – even in the name of Torah – is to declare all-out war with Paul.

Yet Paul is proclaiming that unity is the true purpose of God – unity is where we are heading; unity is *why* Jesus came and *what* He came to accomplish with us and in us. And not simply homogenization, but a true unity in Christ. Paul must be stark, raving mad ... unless he sees a spiritual reality – a spiritual dimension – beyond the physical realm we live in. Yet Paul’s credentials for believing what he says he believes are pretty impeccable. Even as he writes this letter, he is in prison in Rome, awaiting trial for his very life.

Paul is “at home” in many of the little churches that he or his friends have started. In such places he is welcome, appreciated, even honored. But that is not true in Jerusalem. More and more “leaders” from the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem are visiting Christian communities that Paul started, and they are challenging Paul’s right to even call himself an apostle. They are convinced that Paul is leading people astray by putting too much emphasis on grace and prayer and a relationship with the Holy Spirit, and not placing enough emphasis on outer behavior and obedience to Torah.

What unity? How can Paul be thinking that unity is the goal toward which the Christian church is moving? And now, so many generations later, we seem to be further away from unity than we ever were before. Do we still want to belong? To what? I remain hopeful that more and more people will want to belong to this church, but do we represent an earthly version of the spiritual Kingdom Jesus was inviting us into? We have our moments. But a moment, by definition, is momentary.

So we also still have strife and pockets of people who are trying harder to undo us than to build us up. Does that surprise us? Where do we think we are? Even Corona del Mar is no Garden of Eden. And our little church is not causing all of the problems in Orange County. We are reflecting some of them, to be sure. But many of us are finding a fellowship of intentional Christians here who help us to stay on track with our spiritual journey; who help us not to feel so alone in our quest; who go on caring about us even when we make mistakes, if we are willing to admit them.

There are no perfect churches. There are no perfect mates. There are no perfect children. There are no perfect parents. When I was young, I thought my parents should be and could be perfect if they really wanted to be. I literally had no concept of what they had been through or the struggles and the stress of the lives they were

trying to live, even as I was a little boy needing their support and love. Like many a half-formed Pinocchio, I concluded for a while that I was the source of the problems. If I left, everything would be fine for them. So I began to plan and strategize my exit. It is one of the oldest con games in Satan's arsenal: if we just leave – run from our problems – everything will be fine.

Did I want to belong to my family? Well, not for a little while. It had become too painful. I had come to see myself as a total misfit. I just wanted out. But then, in a surprising, frightening confrontation, I discovered that my father loved me. He was never very good at saying it or admitting it, but suddenly it was undeniable. And that changed everything. He was still austere, and none of the chores, expectations, or demands changed any. But it was different. I knew something was true behind the scenes that I had not known before. Suddenly what had seemed intolerable and impossible was only a minor problem. I wanted to belong to my family again, and eventually I was told that I had started acting like it far more than I ever had before.

A few years later I went through this same kind of experience with another Father, who was even tougher but also more loving than my earthly Father. So now I want to belong to His family also.

But this does not seem to be as easy or automatic for me as it seems to be for some of the people around me. I keep getting caught in contradictions that some people can apparently ignore, or at least take in stride, easier than I do. I do not want to belong to this world anymore. A foolish phrase, perhaps, but very real for me. This world has principles and goals and purposes that seem very far away from what I think the Kingdom of God is asking of us – and more to the point, inviting us into. I get mired in the ways of this world over and over: how to survive; how to win; how to be successful; how to climb to higher levels of security and privilege. I am never free from the context and the structures of this world any more than anyone else is. But in comparison to the Kingdom that Jesus teaches us about and reveals to us, this world is very far away from what I live for and care about. Sometimes it seems pleasant enough and appealing enough for a while. But I have seen the mask torn away too many times and in too many ways to be fooled by the pretense or the propaganda any longer.

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We live in a world that kills the Son of God. It is not just a metaphor, and it is not just an accident. The principles and ambitions and purposes of this world *kill* the Son of God. Why would I want to be well-adjusted or acceptable or successful in a world that kills the Son of God? Or to be more specific: that kills Jesus, whom I have come to love more than anything else in this world? If I *belong* here, there is no greater insult. I no longer want to belong in this world. God help me to not belong in any of the games or goals of this world. Especially I do not want to belong to any of the “we are so generous and good-hearted and loving” clubs of this world. Under the surface, they are always sure that they do not need a Savior and they do not need to be born of the Spirit. They are already so good, it’s the eighth wonder of the world. To receive “help” from them is one of the deepest put-downs in life. And once in their clutches, few ever escape.

Anyway, in my case, more and more I want to belong to God’s Kingdom. Less and less do I want to belong to any of the kingdoms of this world.

So what did you think of the Scripture readings? Strange choices perhaps. The first passage shows Jesus in a weird conversation with Pharisees and Sadducees. Yes, they are sent on purpose to discredit Jesus. Jesus is only a simple carpenter, so they know He will be no match for their experience or training or expertise. If they can get Jesus to declare opposition to Roman taxes in front of witnesses, they can haul Him before Roman officials as an insurrectionist who is spreading dissent among the people. He will be imprisoned, or worse. On the other hand, if He openly approves of Roman taxes, that will be the end of His popularity with the people.

Two thousand years later, some people still do not realize that Jesus never answered the question. In comparison to God, what do we owe to Caesar? Often more than we admit. In this case, Roman taxes were paying for good roads, new irrigation systems, highways and sea lanes free from brigands and pirates beyond what the world had ever experienced before. There are tangible benefits in the kingdoms of this world. Despite what I have said, I know that. We are often grateful, or should be. That does not mean I want to end up *worshipping* Caesar, and the Roman world was demanding that more and more. The evil side of this world’s kingdoms is seldom the front end, and it is seldom out in the open. A good trap does not spring until the victim is well inside. And so, however enigmatic, Jesus’ response leaves us with thoughts about our obligations to God.

The Sadducees are even better representatives of “this world.” They are nominally religious, but they do not believe any of the crap about spiritual dimensions or eternal life or angels. So they set their question in the context of how ridiculous it is to believe the teachings or superstitions of the religious establishment around them. They are, in their minds, the only clear-thinking realists around.

Actually, their question – which sounds complicated at first – is much easier for Jesus to answer than the one from the Pharisees, who, whatever their errors, are truly religious. But the Sadducees will not consider any dimensions beyond what they see in the physical realm, and so Jesus simply bypasses their blind assumptions. He says, in effect, “If you ever thought about God or God’s power or the realities of the spiritual realms beyond where we are here, you would know that *you* are the ones being ridiculous.”

The second Scripture reading invites us in on a private conversation between Jesus and Pilate. The context is serious and horrible, but never mind that for the moment. What is represented here? Jesus is all alone. All His friends and supporters have disappeared, faded into the woodwork. He does not belong anywhere in this world, and so He is completely vulnerable – at least to the naked eye. Pilate, on the other hand, is the official Governor of Jerusalem and Judea. He has full authority and the support of all the soldiers in the territory – and if pressed, he is backed by Caesar and the entire weight of the Roman Empire. The contrast between Jesus and Pilate, as they stand there talking to each other, could not be more complete.

Clearly the conversation, if we can even call it that, is a total misfire between Pilate and Jesus. They trade words, but there is no communication. Pilate cannot understand the calm demeanor of Jesus. He never understands it; it simply intrigues him. But Jesus tells us what Pilate cannot hear: “*My kingdom does not belong to this world.*” Jesus appears to be alone and not to belong anywhere. But in truth He belongs to far more than Pilate has ever imagined or experienced. And one thing I can never remember well enough or get clear enough: Jesus belongs so completely to *God’s Kingdom because* He does not belong at all to the kingdoms of this world. And God’s Kingdom is vast and powerful and meaningful and beautiful in ways so far beyond the Roman Empire that, in truth, it is Pilate who stands there all alone. Jesus is fine and will be fine. It is Pilate whose kingdom will crumble and leave him bereft. How about yours? Do you trust it to stand?

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Anyway, after last Sunday's sermon about individuality, I wanted to mention that the stronger we are as individuals, the more we need and want each other. It is hard to find places where we can belong in this world, but the hunger for community is deep and lasting. Do any of us dream of going to Heaven all alone? What good is a Kingdom of love if there is nobody to love, and nobody to love *us*? So we still gather and we long to belong – to our Lord, and to each other.

And so while we are not perfect and our Christian friends are not perfect, it can be very good indeed. We are always and ever a fellowship of sinners. It is best, I think, if we do not try to pretend or playact any of it. But I remain incredibly grateful for all who are willing to be on this Christian Journey with me and with each other.

Most of you have heard me say it before, but it is time to say it again: Every time – not just sometimes, but *every* time – we get a spiritual breakthrough, God sends special angels into our lives to help us with the new steps we are being asked to take. (And by the way, nobody ever gets a spiritual breakthrough without being asked to take new steps.) But I wanted to talk about the angels – the special friends – that God sends to help us whenever we get a breakthrough or a new assignment. It is important to learn to expect this, to watch for it, to cooperate with the people who are sent to help us.

Nobody told me about this when I was young. At first I thought it was my imagination. Then I thought it was a coincidence. But it is a spiritual *rule* of the Kingdom: Every time we get a spiritual breakthrough, God sends special angels to help us with the new steps we are being asked to take. Just to illustrate: After I agreed to go into the Ministry, God sent Walter Pray, a high school speech teacher, into my life. For no reason I can fathom to this day – and for no pay – Walter Pray spent hours after school for most of three years teaching me how to talk, so that my speech defects would not show up so much; teaching me how to speak; teaching me how to get past my fears. He was never able to teach me how to get *rid* of my fears; he taught me how to get past them so I could go on without letting them control me.

When I look back over the long string of angels who have come to help me, I am still amazed. (Walter Pray, Bunny Howell, Otto Knudsen, Frank Weiskel, Lee Whiston, Winn Hall, Channing Washburn, Rachel Antell, Ed and Dorothy Montgomery, Gordon Reynolds, Joey Moschetti, and the list goes on.) Each time one of them showed up in my life, it seemed to me that they were busy people, gifted people, people far

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more important in their own lives than I would ever be in mine. Yet they each spent time and energy – often lavishly – in order to help me on my way. There is never enough gratitude for our angels. Nor do they ever seem to require it. It is a mystery of the Spirit Realm. May we all learn to trust it. Jesus' army is bigger than we think. When we try to walk in His WAY, we get more help than we expected.

The more we die to our own lives – the more we die our way into New Life in Christ Jesus – the more love and meaning and purpose come into our lives. That does not seem logical to me. I cannot imagine how or why it would work this way. So I do not mention it as something we can figure out. I merely mention it as the truth.