

Christ in Crisis: What About Jesus?

Mark 6:43-49 (NRSV) “No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; ⁴⁴for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. ⁴⁵The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks. ⁴⁶“Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I tell you? ⁴⁷I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them. ⁴⁸That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built. ⁴⁹But the one who hears and does not act is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house.”

One of our Disciples many mottos and sayings is, “We have no creed but Christ.” It’s not that we are opposed to creeds; indeed, we use them—the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Chalcedonian Creed... We use them as ways to teach certain elements of the faith. But they’re not always used that way.

I identify with what James Glass called “W.A.S.P. Negative Self-Identity,” which, as I recall, goes something like this: when we were growing up, we never really knew who we were; but we knew who we were not, and that gave us the feeling that we knew who we were.” For example:

- the first thing we knew we were not was: we knew we were not black. That’s how we knew we were white, and we told stories about them so everybody would know who they were, and that we were not like that.
- The next thing we learned we were not Jewish; that’s how we knew we were Christians, and we told stories about them, so everybody would know who they were, and that we were not like that.
- We knew we were Protestant because we weren’t Catholic; and we told stories about them so everybody would know who they were, and we were not like that.
- We knew we were boys because we weren’t girls, and we told stories about them. You see, we had stories about everybody! ...everybody but us. And who were we? Just... folks...

Early credal statements in the New Testament offer insight into the church’s struggle with self-identity: “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God” (Peter’s good confession in Matthew 16). Paul uses what he calls “trustworthy sayings”, like this one in Romans 10: “...if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” Positive assertions about faith and self-identity.

But the New Testament also has credal statements intended to weed out heresies. You begin to see this even in the early Epistles, and by the time of John’s gospel, many NT writings are directed against heresies: Gnosticism; Docetism, and that group from Jerusalem Paul called the “Butchers:” Jewish Christians who held

that Gentiles must be circumcised before they could be considered "Christian."

Late in the second century, the Apostles Creed emerged, likely in opposition to the Marcion heresy. Early in the fourth century, the Nicæan Creed confronted the Arian heresy... While all the creeds contained affirmations, they were used less in teaching and more in excluding.

That exclusionary focus remains a primary focus in the church, reinforced by notable leaders like Augustine and John Calvin. In the 19th century, emerging Protestant bodies rejected creeds because they were Catholic. They adopted, "doctrines," instead—same thing, but each sect developed its own, basically to exclude all who did not consent, usually to some specific article of faith. Like creeds, doctrines become "tests of faith." Their purpose: control who's in/who's out.

We disciples don't reject creeds as resources for teaching; we reject them as tests of faith; tests of fellowship. We have no creed but Christ. Affirm your trust in Jesus as your example and your savior... you're in.

Creeds and doctrines tend to become ends in themselves, and all too often distract Christians from Jesus as the center of faith. They focus on what we believe, rather than on the one who calls us to follow him. For the Christian, it is in Jesus, and in him alone, that we find our identity.

But we also live in a secular world that builds its identity on sound bites, our political parties hang their identity, not on principles and values, but upon the demonization of other parties, and our legislative process ignores the merit of proposed legislation and votes every issue along party lines.

Paraphrasing Katharine Rhodes Henderson, President, Auburn Seminary: "We are in a time (some) are calling a *Great Turning*—a time of (uncertainty) and promise. (Others) are calling it an axial age, a pivotal time of disruption and transition, ... a time of reckoning in which democratic and institutional norms, even our understandings of what it means to be human and who gets to be human are turned upside down. [And, of course we're all experiencing a measure of PTSD from COVID.]

"If you're feeling slightly unmoored, there's good reason. It's a compelling time when much is at stake, including democracy itself. But as author Adrienne Maree Brown puts it: 'things are not getting worse, they are being uncovered.'"

"We cannot escape a reckoning with the rise of White Christian nationalism in this country as an ethno-religious-political movement. The insurrection on January 6 was a complex brew of authoritarianism and nationalism, toxic Christianity, violent masculinity, symbolized by American flags, Christian flags, Bible quotes and weapons. Participants in this insurrection believed they were waging a Holy War that justified the use of any means necessary. Holding onto power through the Big Lie about the outcome of the election continues to animate the lives of many who

call themselves "Christian" around the country. . ."¹

Now, you have every right to agree or to disagree, and there's plenty of animosity to go around. That animosity—that divisiveness—is the substance of these times of upheaval and transition.

And rather than acting as yeast for our culture's character and values, the emerging church is shaped **by** that culture. Rather than prophetically speaking truth to power, the emerging church sells out to whatever power bloc will champion its idolatrous creeds and doctrines. And the demonic marriage of church and state is consummated.

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

In this series of sermons, I'll make no attempt directly to change or influence or even address anyone's partisan politics. What I will address, and hopefully influence, is the faith we hold—looking to recenter that faith on Jesus: his teachings, his example of sacrificial love, and his prophetic passion for justice.

In his book, *Christ in Crisis: Why We Need to Reclaim Jesus*, Jim Wallis shares his own struggles with these turbulent days. Astonishing and alarming political events occur on a near daily basis, and he is flooded with calls and emails from friends and pastors—people from around the country and even international Christian leaders, asking about the lack of a serious Christian response. (pp. 5-6)

He some time off to study the Scriptures, starting with the Acts of the Apostles—those stories of amazing things the Apostles were doing in the power of the Holy Spirit. And he found a pattern: everything the disciples did and said was *in the name of Jesus* (p. 8). They were in sync with and felt deeply connected to Jesus's passions, teachings, and presence. And the hard truth Wallis discerned, as a diagnosis for Christian impotence, is this: "We have become disconnected from Jesus. We are not standing and acting in his name, with his values, action, and inspiration, (and I would add, instead, we too often attempt to push Jesus into the molds of our already existing political biases and religious doctrines.) Having lost our connection to him, our actions and words lack the power evident in the early church... When we fail to be the 'yeast' a culture needs, we should not be surprised when individualism, selfishness, power, and wealth predominate over any commitment to wash each other's feet." (pp. 10-11)

The question, then, is how we know whether we are connected to Jesus. Wallis' book, and this series of sermons, reflect his study of Scripture. He found eight distinctive teachings of Jesus by which we can measure ourselves and test whether we are connected to Jesus and operating in his name. These questions are not

¹ Quoted in Notes from the Field – in an email letter from Auburn Seminary, 8.24.2021

meant to imply there's only one Christian position on any topic before us—political or otherwise. They are meant to make sure we are aligned with Jesus before we determine how best to incarnate his values in the world today.

Christians have disagreed politically throughout our history, but if we start with Jesus as the measure for testing what motivates our politics, the promise is that all the elements of our lives will come together in increasing levels of unity. At the heart of this venture is the maxim: don't go right, don't go left; go deep.

I close with these probing questions from Jim Wallis: Are we standing with Jesus? Are we listening to what he said—watching what he did? Are we following that? That will be the continuing drumbeat throughout these sermons: Are we wanting, needing, longing to reconnect with Jesus in a time of crisis like this? (pp. 11-12)

It is said that democracy thrives on vigorous debate; but debate has order and structure and rules of engagement. What used to be vigorous debate has deteriorated into juvenile name-calling—essentially a verbal street brawl.

We have no content in our national conversation, because we've lost sight of who we are and what we stand for. The words of our revered (and sometimes worshiped) Pledge of Allegiance become less and less descriptive of reality. We are NOT one nation. We are NOT indivisible, even with the 1954 addition of the phrase, "under God." Like the creeds of the church, our pledge has become, not a path to unity, but a standard of exclusion, not a means to an end, but an end in itself, and in our distraction, we focus on the symbol rather than the realities of liberty and justice for all to which that symbol points.