

(CHRISTIAN) IDENTITY CRISIS: DON'T FORGET AND DON'T CONFUSE

A SERMON PREACHED AT SAINT JOHN'S PARISH, OCTOBER 23, 2005
THE REV. JOHN WM. BENNISON, REL.D

For context, the texts appointed for Pentecost XXIII, Year A,
Proper 25:

First Lesson

You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans. If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them. If you take your neighbor's cloak in pawn, you shall restore it before the sun goes down; for it may be your neighbor's only clothing to use as cover; in what else shall that person sleep? And if your neighbor cries out to me, I will listen, for I am compassionate. Exodus 22:21-27

The Gospel

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet"?' If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions. Matthew 22:34-46

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Preface

"Have you noticed," the blessed Germaine posed the question the other day as she opened our stack of daily mail, "how lately there seem to be more cover stories in the weekly news magazines on religious subjects than ever before?" Whether it's true or not, it certainly seems so to be the case.

From overtly religious topics such as papal funerals and elections, to "provocative new" biblical scholarship, to runaway fictional best-sellers of ecclesiastical intrigue or the future apocalypse, to the traditional holiday observances, the secular media seems to have had a spiritual reawakening of some sort. Even many of the hot-button social topics are driven, in part, by religious factions to the left and the right; while investigative stories on a political candidate or Supreme Court nominee are laced with speculations concerning their religious beliefs, church affiliation, and how they might thus be influenced or inclined to act.

Yet for all this religious fervor in our land, and the kind pervasive and often shrill rhetoric it has promulgated, I am increasingly baffled to understand how much of what passes for the face of modern Christianity in America bares much resemblance to the biblical tradition we have inherited, hold dear as sacred, and would claim to observe and honor in our lives.

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Particularly in the last year – in case you hadn't noticed – much of my preaching has been framed in the context of some basic underlying questions. What does the Bible say? That is, what does the Word of God really say, at the heart of it all, when all is said and done? That is, despite all its own seeming self-contradictions, what is still revealed as God's deepest intention? That is, what words most authentically reflect the love of God and mind of Christ? And specifically for you and me, what would Jesus say and do? What would Christ have those who profess to follow him say and do?

Despite the din and clamor of a world convulsed as much by religious fervor as it is by terror in another guise, we might do well to consider just how far we have strayed from some of those sacred texts we cherish, how different things have become, and if there aren't some basic things we've either forgotten, become confused about, or both.

Forgetfulness and Confusion

"Some days you're the windshield, some days you're the bug." These are the words of Capt. Phillip Ash, who commands Company K in the Third Battalion, Seventh Marines, which patrols the streets of Ramadi, Iraq. "Some days you're the windshield," the officer says, "and some days you're the bug."

That kind of confusion over our dual identity may be a pithy, rather graphic, but succinct way to describe the predicament in which our nation's military – and we as a nation and people – increasingly find ourselves these days. For instance, we cling to our good intentions to advance "liberty, freedom & democracy abroad" with a global war on terror as we strive to protect and defend the citizens of Iraq. And all the while, an endless stream of insurgent recruits arise out of that same citizenry to make us the bug on that would-be shield.

It is anticipated our military may suffer its 2,000th casualty today in an endeavor regarded by some of us as tragic folly and a sacrilege. Regardless of this arbitrary milestone, I'm unsure what greater significance to attach to this number; why it is any more significant than 1,999 American dead, or the vigil for peace we held earlier this year to remember the first one thousand troops killed. It's yet to be seen how we

will observe 3,000, or 5,000 American dead in the years to come; or when we might reckon with the estimated ten Iraqis killed for every American, in this conflict that was all but predicted this last week by the Secretary of State to last for years and years.

It is true, relatively speaking, that two thousands lost souls pale in comparison to the countless enemy combatants and loss of civilian casualties. And from the standpoint of the toll of sheer human suffering, one could look at the estimated 80,000 who perished in the earthquake and its aftermath two weeks ago in other distant, faraway lands so far removed from your neighborhood and mine. While natural disasters, of course, differ from deliberate acts of human violence, the comparison may only be relevant in regard to the sheer scale of grief; and our willingness to help, hinder, or remain ambivalent, overwhelmed, dazed or numb.

And all this, for our part, in a nation and people who overwhelmingly regard ourselves as not only religious, but predominantly Christian (85% according to one poll). All this in a nation with high ideals and tremendous power and influence to flex, who regard the Holy Bible to be a sacred text as important to us as the U.S. Constitution.

One social commentator recently remarked: "And therein lies the paradox. America is simultaneously the most professedly Christian of the developed nations, and the least Christian in its behavior. ... America is a place ... saturated in Christian identity. But is it Christian?"* (See footnote) That might sound harsh and judgmental, but is it true?

Well, on the one hand, one might observe we quarrel over the right to erect monuments the Ten Commandments on public government property, while a recent survey found only 40% of Americans can name more than four out of the ten. I don't know if the one about not killing was among those instructive guidelines the majority of us forgot. It's true, of course, different parts of the collective texts we call the Bible, seem to both condone and condemn acts of aggression, violence and retaliation against one's neighbors.

Thus, a Colorado jury in a capital case recently invoked a text of sacred scripture from the Old Testament book of *Leviticus* when it handed down a death sentence on a convicted murderer. In the vast lists of law codes in the Torah is found what is more universally referred to as *lex talionis*, the law of equal retaliation, an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. Of particular note is the fact that this jury used this religious text, and not the one in the New Testament gospel with the words attributed to Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the Christ, the personal savior of Christian believers: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well." (Mt. 5:38-40)

Well -- you may say -- sometimes we're the windshield, sometimes the bug. But really, who *are* we? Perhaps our identity crisis, in part, stems from two things: We forget. And we confuse.

But really, who are we? Perhaps our identity crisis, in part, stems from two things: We forget. And we confuse.

First, we forget. In the first lesson we read from the Book of Exodus the commandment handed down from on high is "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien ... or abuse any widow or orphan ..." Why? The Lord reminds us, "for you were resident aliens yourselves." Once, long ago, it was in the land of Egypt, the text reminds us. Nowadays we might remind ourselves, we are still resident aliens, with widows and orphans (the biblical icons of the outcast, marginalized nobodies) again as our neighbors.

In his convention address yesterday, Bishop Swing observed, "Before Katrina, and Rita, there were 'red states' and 'blue states' in the gulf coast; now there are only 'devastates.'" And displaced resident aliens are, in fact, encamped in make-shift shelters all across our land. And they are our neighbors. We are they.

And, if that is so, are we not then also refugee outcasts amidst the rubble in the mountainous regions of Kashmir? Or the citizens on the streets of Ramadi, whose daily trek to the store for food is a mad dash through a deadly gauntlet? Those huddled masses, the scripture lesson reminds us, are the neighbors we are to love as if we were they. And further, the lesson from Exodus goes on, if we have borrowed their "cloak" (consider inserting their *silks*, or their *rice*, or their *oil*) we ought to return it -- in kind, with something equivalent -- "before the sun goes down."

You may ask, where in the world do I come up with this stuff? It's in the Bible! But perhaps we've just forgotten. Perhaps we've also become confused, like those who encounter Jesus in today's gospel text.

This passage starts out as a little Bible quiz between the rabbi Jesus and those who clung to the authority of their sacred texts; though they seemed to have forgotten or become confused by its intended meaning.

"Teacher, which commandment is greatest?" the Pharisees ask Jesus with a question a child could have answered from his memorization of the Torah. The summary of the law, upon which everything else depends, echoes the reminder given in those prior verses from *Exodus*: Love God with everything you've got, and love your neighbor as you would yourself.

Had they themselves forgotten the answer to their most basic question? Most likely not. More important, had they themselves forgotten what it really, fully meant? For Christians, the answer lies at the heart of the gospel message; and in the words and deeds, life and death of Jesus.

So Jesus turns tables and poses a trick question; only to the extent it entraps his would-be opponents in their own confusion. He asks a simple question, to which they recite a rote answer. But, he then asks, if a literal reading of the scripture decrees the Messiah shall descend from the house and lineage of king David, why do those same scriptures have David call *him* his Lord? Their lack of imagination dumbfounds them; as if the lens through which we try to glimpse a divine reality greater than our human comprehension -- that is, the familiar human, familial relationship -- is really meant to define and limit the power and presence of God.

After a test of wits that day, Matthew tells us, "No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions." And, that's a shame. Had they continued to engage Jesus further, perhaps they might have recalled something they seem to have forgotten; and it might have cleared up some confusion.

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As in Jesus' day, it is a bit ironic that zealous believers today often seem to fall prey themselves to the two-fold dangers of forgetting what God has revealed to us in scripture, and what is meant for us to understand.

If that sounds at all presumptuous, I can only confess I have spent a fair number of years now, studying and striving to discern the good news of the gospel, and what I've come to believe are the most authentic words and ways of Jesus. And I cannot, for the life of me, understand how we either forget or confuse the possibility and promise that comes with the faithful assertion God actually means what God says; and so does Jesus.

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Or, have we forgotten our Lord's suffering death at the hands of violent men, while religious expedients incited the people to cry, "Crucify him?"

Have we forgotten the empty tomb as God's utter refutation of just such an alternative to the central message of the good news?

Have we forgotten the Lord's resurrection has loosed us, once and for all, from the bonds of the kind of misbegotten confusion and wooden thinking that not only masquerades as *Christian*, but quite literally terrorizes this world?

Amen. *jb+*

* The quote is by Bill McKibben, scholar-in-residence at Middlebury College, in an article in *Harper's*, entitled, "The Christian Paradox: How a faithful nation gets Jesus wrong"