

SERMON: FORGIVING JESUS
Dr. June C. Goudey
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In the thick of Lent, Easter is on the horizon, resurrection is in the air, and Jesus is a newsmaker once again. Thanks to Glenn Beck, Fox TV's current provocateur, Christians of many persuasions are rising from the dead and speaking their mind.

A chance encounter with one of our members yesterday alerted me to a church sign posted in Wantagh New York by one of our sister UCC churches. It reads, "Sorry, Mr. Beck; Jesus preached social justice."

What's going on? According to one blogger, Beck has recently been practicing theology publicly without a license.

God-talk, which is what theology is at heart, is everyone's right; so in truth, one doesn't need a license to do theology. Still one needs to be accountable when your theology distorts reality.

According to an editorial in the Boston Globe today, "Fox News performer Glenn Beck set some kind of record for combining ignorance and chutzpah when he told viewers to run away from any church where the terms 'social justice' or 'economic justice' are spoken. These are 'code words,' Beck warned. He then held up a Nazi swastika and the Communist hammer and sickle, saying both represent the banner of social justice."

Beck is now being vilified for hating Jesus and hating poor people; in response he argues that he is merely speaking out about the separation of church and state. Here's part of a transcript in response to Jim Wallis's call to boycott Beck's show. The conversation is between Beck and a companion named Stu:

STU: The easiest way to boil down what you're talking about is: Don't let your church turn into a political arm.

GLENN: Yes!

STU: That's really controversial.

GLENN: Your church is there and that's why I said I don't care what church you go to. I don't care. As long as that church is telling you and helping you be a better person, be more honorable, be more honest, be more giving. But once that church starts to preach social and economic justice, especially through the structure of a giant government, well, now that's something totally different. Now, now you are talking about a church that is getting involved in government itself. We don't do that. We don't do that.

Apparently Beck was born, or born again, after the Bush/Cheney administration. The dialogue continues, with Stu saying,

STU: Yeah...and the easiest way to understand what you were talking about is if you were talking about the poor, your own church obviously, they pointed out there that they do care about caring for the poor.

So were you advising people to leave your own church? Were you advising your other parishioners to walk out of your church because you can't take it? Did you leave your church this week, Glenn?

GLENN: *No, I didn't.*

STU: *Why not?*

GLENN: *Because everyone, everyone can follow the dictates [of] spirit and worship any way that they want. The idea is separation of church and state ... it is not a political arm. Your churches are not political arms. Now, that doesn't mean you don't stand up for what you believe in, especially if it is an attack on what you believe. [End of dialogue]*

Ignorance and chutzpah indeed; Beck is clearly guilty of ignorance when he argues that Jesus's main concern was the politically and religiously elite Pharisees. Apparently Beck hasn't read the Sermon on the Mount. Boston Globe contributor Tom Oliphant revealed a similar ignorance when several years ago he accompanied Ted Kennedy to Mass during a campaign. Oliphant responded to Kennedy's campaign rhetoric by asking, "I know you take your religion seriously, but where did all this passion for the poor come from?" Kennedy reportedly looked at him "incredulously," and said, "Have you ever read the Bible??"

I agree with Ted's insights; the preaching of justice is a pervasive theme in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the Gospels. I am equally aware though that certain parts of the Bible can also skew our understanding of Jesus. Sorry, Mr. Beck...

A series of articles in the Star about what Presbyterians believe or don't believe about Jesus raises similar issues. In the first article, some Presbyterians admitted to believing that other faiths can be saved without Jesus.

The Presbyterian Church USA's statement of faith says God through Jesus Christ delivers followers "from death to life eternal." But according to a recent poll, one in three members of the nation's largest Presbyterian denomination seem to believe there's some wiggle room for non-Christians to get into heaven. "There seems to be some universalist streak in Presbyterianism, where some Presbyterians are open to the idea of other paths that folks in other faiths might be taking," said one of the poll's researchers.

Not so, argue responders representing, in their view, the "majority" of Presbyterians: "Few concepts are more inflammatory, misunderstood, and criticized today than the Christian belief that Jesus is the only way to God and salvation. Within a pluralistic culture, few ideas are more confusing and insulting. Small wonder then that a minority of Presbyterians (and for that matter, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Methodists, Catholics, etc.) are questioning and even rejecting the church's ancient teaching of the centrality, uniqueness and exclusivity of Jesus.

[Star article continues:] "But there is a reason the church has always held strongly to this teaching and why it must continue to do so. Jesus is, and always has been, the center of the Christian faith. His followers have held that he uniquely unveils to us both the heart and nature of God and what it means to be truly human."

As God enveloped in the bounds of human flesh, Jesus is the singularly unique and authoritative point where God steps out from behind the impenetrable veil of deity to reveal with unprecedented and unrivaled clarity who he is and what he desires.

[Star article continues:] “Thus, the Presbyterian Church affirms in the first words of its Constitution, ‘All power in heaven and earth is given to Jesus Christ by Almighty God, who raised Christ from the dead and set him above all rule and authority, all power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but in the one that is to come.’ This singular idea has been restated in thousands of languages, through millions of churches, by billions who believe it true, hope-filled, wondrous and inescapable.” [End of Star quote.]

Wow! If thousands of languages, millions of churches, and billions of believers ascribe to Jesus being the way, the truth, and the life, and thus the only way to come to God, what does that say about our place in the Christian Church?

There are numerous UCC churches that would find this way of thinking about Jesus totally persuasive and there are numerous progressive UCC churches that challenge this way of thinking on a daily basis.

Where do you put your roots down when it comes to Jesus? Do you even care who Jesus is? Does he influence your faith for the good?

Not surprisingly there are far too many Christians who have come to think of Jesus as *SOOOOOO* yesterday! They find Jesus irrelevant to their faith and thus irrelevant to their lives. But those who are challenging centuries of Christian dogma beg to differ. New Testament scholar Marcus Borg, who will speak at Chapman University in Orange County next weekend, sees Jesus as:

- A Jewish mystic and healer
- An enlightened wisdom teacher and
- A social prophet

Borg argues that as a Jewish social prophet, Jesus stands in the tradition of the great social prophets of ancient Israel who challenged social systems. Likewise in his book, *A New Kind of Christianity*, Brian McLaren argues that Jesus has been a victim of identity theft. McLaren sees Jesus working for social transformation through the realm of God and the work of non-violence. Referring to one of his most dedicated critics, without naming him, McLaren presents his critic’s skewed view of Jesus.

“In Revelation, Jesus is a prize fighter with a tattoo down his leg, a sword in His hand and the commitment to make someone bleed. That is the guy I can worship. I cannot worship the hippie, diaper, halo Christ because I cannot worship a guy I can beat up.”

McLaren then asks what would cause this articulate and highly committed Christian to portray Jesus as a prize-fighter, armed with a sword, intent on harming, killing, inflicting violence, drawing blood? His answer harks back to the Greco-Roman narrative of the heaven and hell dichotomy as well as a constitutional approach to the Bible, both of which McLaren rejects, as do I.

To see Jesus outside the six-line narrative, McLaren suggests we see Jesus as a three dimensional figure whose emphasis is on creation, liberation, and peace-making. I think McLaren is asking us to see Jesus as a forgiving figure who practiced forgiveness not violence, healing not blood-letting, peace-making not war. Mark’s gospel reminds us just how radical Jesus’ practice of forgiveness was in his time. And it still is.

I also think McLaren is challenging us to forgive Jesus.

I entitled this sermon “Forgiving Jesus” because I believe that many people still do what I did much of my life. I blamed Jesus for everything I thought was wrong with Christianity. I heard the phrase “Lord and Savior,” and walked away from the Jesus of the Gospels. But I had my facts wrong. I know now that what I rejected in Christianity was present because of the emperor Constantine - not Jesus.

The Greco-Roman narrative that McLaren condemns is the very narrative that killed Jesus for his political views and then resurrected him as a warrior-king, rather than the prince of peace; that downplayed his being a practitioner of loving kindness and presented him as Judge Jesus.

Forgiving Jesus is liberating work we are all called to do. When we begin to see the loving kindness of Jesus, we’ll see that Jesus indeed preached social justice in all areas of human life. And no matter who tells you otherwise, you’ll recognize that Jesus’ work is indeed God’s work, and God’s work - of caring for the poor, freeing the oppressed and addressing the social, economic and civic system-wide wrongs that rob us of vitality - must truly be our own.

So listen again to Psalm 32 in new words by Christine Robinson, and imagine again how you need to rethink forgiveness and rethink Jesus.

Blessed are those who have made peace with the past
with all they have done and left undone.
Blessed are those who have found the courage
to inventory their failings and missteps,
who know their weaknesses and vulnerabilities.
Blessed are those who have heard a word of forgiveness
from those they have hurt-and those who have felt the accepting love of God.

When I tried to soldier on,
to deny the past and always be perfect,
I hit a wall, I dried up like a dirt road in the summer’s heat.
I had to open my heart - to myself, to others, and to You.
I had to forgive others and take in their forgiveness of me.
I had to let go of being perfect so I could forgive myself.
I had to open it all to you and feel your peace. Amen.

