

How Far South Are We Going?

[Text -Luke 3:15-22]

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Over the holidays, my friend John Webb and I drove to Orlando Florida for a week of fun in the sun. It was a really pleasant drive down, with good weather, moderate traffic, and interesting conversation along the way. The deeper we drove into the so-called "Bible Belt", however, the more challenging the conversation became. Every 10 miles or so, there was a billboard or the side of a barn with an in-your-face *religious* message. And John, with a devilish desire to prod the preacher in me, took to reading each sign out-loud.

"Have You Been Saved?" John impishly asked; I ignored him.

A few minutes later, *"Jesus is coming soon! Are you ready?"* Nope, I'm not biting.

Finally, after about 40 minutes of trying to bait me, John read this sign: *"Where are you going? Heaven or Hell?"* I said, "Listen, John, let's just make it to Orlando, and then we'll figure out the rest of our trip!

Throughout the South, and throughout the world, there are a number of Christians who seem convinced that Jesus is coming soon...*and* that he is *really* ticked-off! Whenever I'm confronted with this kind of "angry Jesus" theology, I wonder "Why?" Not, "Why is Jesus supposedly so angry" but rather, "Why do people think that a negative, heavy-handed portrayal of a judgmental Jesus will positively affect the life - or the faith - of a person driving down Life's highway?

It seems to me, that what may *actually* irritate the Compassionate Christ, is when his imminent Reign of Peace is misrepresented as an impending reign of terror.

When his gracious welcome is distorted into a judgmental rejection. When his warm and inclusive embrace is replaced by an angry and unforgiving stranglehold. During our time in Orlando, I had a few conversations about these kinds of religious concerns with John, and with some of the local residents we met. [It seems that even when you're on vacation, if someone learns that you're a *pastor* - who is *gay*, and is serving a congregation that for *decades* has been open and affirming of LGBTQ people - theological conversation tends to happen!]

One thing these conversations revealed, is that many people who live, or who were raised, in the "Bible Belt" are also extremely frustrated when they see the Bible being used to belt people into submission! Many of them *want* to connect with a community of faith - it's an inherent part of their upbringing; yet they can't respect a church that doesn't respect them - or science, or the marvelous diversity of humankind. They would love to be part of a compassionate, down-to-earth community where their strengths *and* weaknesses, faith *and* doubts - their whole lives - are genuinely welcomed and accepted. In other words, they would gladly connect with a Christian Church which strives to follow the way of Jesus Christ.

Beginning with his Baptism - the launching point of his public ministry - and continuing throughout that entire ministry, Jesus displays a genuine desire to connect with the entire spectrum of humanity. This is something that's sometimes lost in today's spiritualized, sanitized images of Jesus; but it's a quality which isn't lost on his enemies, or his closest friends. Jesus' detractors often try to discredit him as being a carousing and corrupt reveler who runs with the wrong crowd - one who enjoys the physical pleasures of Life way too much. And at times, even his own followers try to keep him from those people or situations that might prove distasteful, embarrassing, or too "earthy". Yet Jesus chooses to embrace the fullness of Life as he encounters it. He demonstrates a deep desire to touch and taste and experience all that Life offers, including those less-than-pure people, places and situations!

I think that the essential focus and substance of Jesus' ministry is encapsulated in his Baptismal Experience. As he stands there wet, and vulnerable; feeling perhaps a little gritty from the sand of the Jordan River - Jesus is prepared to get-down to the nitty-gritty of his mission. In that singular moment of *epiphany*, he realizes the common humanity - and *Divinity* - of every person. And Jesus is primed and ready to take-on the task of graciously showing others that they, like him, are also beloved children of the Holy One! By lifting-up people who are constantly being put-down by an oppressive religious structure and an in-your-face negativity, Jesus begins to set people free. He knows, that as long as people feel that they must somehow earn Divine acceptance and love, they'll never be able to freely love God, or to fully love one another. Because as long as "religion" promotes the idea that Divine Grace is in short supply - available only to a select group of super-righteous individuals - then people will basically watch-out for themselves, Because if we believe that we must somehow compete for Divine favor, then we'll always be pointing at others as being wrong or inferior or less worthy than ourselves. However, when we begin to *trust* in the overflowing abundance of Divine Compassion and Grace, then we will be set free to live as genuine children of our One Heavenly Parent!

By standing in the water of holy Baptism, by humbly kneeling to wash the dirt from his disciples' feet, by struggling and sweating under the weight of a wooden cross, Jesus demonstrates his willingness to get wet and dirty, vulnerable and bloodied. He is content to take-on the entire scope of the Human experience: pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow, living and dying.

Jesus' goal isn't to establish a new religion; its to re-establish an honest and open, living and loving relationship between the Sacred Source of Life and the entire Human Family. He shows us that the way to righteousness - to living rightly - comes by fully embracing our humanity, and by accepting and cherishing all the people around us. For when we do this, we re-discover the Divine Spirit which connects us all! Jesus Christ fully expresses his tremendous love for God, by passionately loving and caring for the people around him. I believe this is what you and I are called to do as well. It's certainly better than trying to scare the hell out of people as they travel down Life's highway