

## AVOIDING CULT SPIRITUALITY

A Sermon by the Rev. Scotty McLennan, Dean for Religious Life  
Stanford Memorial Church, University Public Worship  
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"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth," says Jesus. "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother." Strong words from Jesus of Nazareth, the Prince of Peace. Not exactly a family values statement, it seems. It even sounds fanatical, as one biblical commentary has put it.<sup>1</sup> The stuff of cults, perhaps we could say. Imagine what we might think of a charismatic religious leader today who said, "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." There's a brochure we hand out here at Memorial Church about "Religious Life at Stanford." It has a page called "A Word of Warning," where the Deans for Religious Life state that "Maintaining and nurturing your spiritual life during college and graduate school is one of the best ways to keep perspective on your studies and to avoid the isolation that is too often a part of scholarly pursuits." We go on, however, to explain that "Unfortunately, not every religious group has your best interests

at heart." We then warn members of the Stanford community to avoid groups or religious leaders "who try to control your life or who claim to possess the truth exclusively." We warn against those who want to choose your friends for you: "Watch out for groups that encourage you to sever ties with close friends and family who are not members. They are manipulative and extremely dangerous."

Are we warning the Stanford community, then, against the Jesus of today's gospel reading? I have to admit that I find this biblical passage extremely provocative, if not also deeply disturbing. What in the world could Jesus mean when he says "I have not come to bring peace but a sword... One's foes will be members of one's own household?"

Is this not the same Jesus who was quoted five chapters earlier in the gospel of Matthew as having said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God?"<sup>2</sup> In that same Sermon on the Mount, he exhorted his followers to respond peacefully to personal violence by turning the other cheek.<sup>3</sup> He told everyone to love not only their neighbors, but also their enemies.<sup>4</sup> He said "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged "<sup>5</sup>

He declared, "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets."<sup>6</sup> In the chapter

before today's gospel lesson, Jesus is being criticized by others for his openness in having dinner with tax collectors and sinners.<sup>7</sup>

He's portrayed as having compassion for everyone in all the crowds as he moves around Israel.<sup>8</sup> How can this same Jesus claim not to bring peace, but a sword, and to set family members against one another?

I've come to believe that this is a classic case of taking words out of context, of not seeing the forest for the trees, of proof-texting, rather than taking the gospel message as a whole. Jesus indeed is rightly portrayed in the history of religion as the great proclaimer of love as the central spiritual response.

He is indeed the Prince of Peace. Scholar of comparative religion Huston Smith contextualizes Jesus this way: "Everything that came from his lips...focus[ed] human awareness on the two most important facts about life: God's overwhelming love of humanity, and the need for people to accept that love and let it flow through them to others."<sup>9</sup> Hence we get the Apostle Paul's great ode to Christian love in his first letter to the Corinthians: "Love is patient; love is kind...It does not insist on its own way. It bears all things...endures all things. Love never ends."<sup>10</sup>

Jesus also has been understood to fulfill the prophetic

claims of the Hebrew Bible, what Christians have called the Old Testament. As we heard in the reading from the prophet Zechariah this morning, "Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious he is, humble and riding on a donkey... and he shall command peace to the nations."<sup>11</sup>

So, if Jesus' primary message is one of peace and love for all of humanity, what are we to make of his words in the tenth chapter of the gospel of Matthew, where he specifically explains that he comes not to bring peace, but a sword, and to set children against parents within their own household? As one of the Biblical commentaries that I use interprets this passage, "Some of the most unexpected crises we face come from the opposition of others when we set out to do what we perceive to be the good, moral and right thing to do. Jesus himself knew how devastating such crises can be, and he warned his followers to be prepared to encounter them also."<sup>12</sup> That is, Jesus is warning his followers that their commitment to him can lead to their being persecuted, even from within their own families. The gospel writer Matthew, writing some fifty years after Jesus' death, knew this only too well, because many members of his local Christian community were locked in a painful fraternal struggle with fellow Jews, often reaching deeply into family structures.<sup>13</sup> So, "Irony and pathos

run deep. Jesus has come to bring God's peace, but the work of redemption inevitably brings division also."<sup>14</sup>

Now, what about that "Word of Warning" about dangerous religious practices in Stanford Religious Life brochure? How can one be spiritually engaged while still avoiding cult spirituality?

I think I can best explain that by describing the case of a Tufts student I knew during the 1990's when I was the University Chaplain there. I'll call her Barbara Smith, although that's not her real name, and I'll call the religious organization she was involved with the Church of Jesus United, although that's not its actual name either.<sup>15</sup> She was a sophomore when I first met her, and she handed me a one-page statement which explained that "The church's only book and creed is the Bible." It went on to describe beliefs and practices: "We search the Bible diligently for the truth, and submit to its authority. Christ taught that every person must believe, confess, repent, be baptized and live faithfully to his teachings. Through group Bible studies, one-on-one discipling, and retreats, we are able to meet each student's personal needs. Throughout the semester we also participate in social functions such as international dinners, movie nights, and sports activities."

I later came to learn what wasn't in that statement. The

charismatic founder had set up a rigid hierarchy of authority through elders and deacons down to the individual "disciplers" who acted as twenty-four-hour big brothers or big sisters and oversaw every activity of new members. In turn, each discipler had someone always looking over their shoulder, and that someone was also watched, all the way back up. The only mission of the church was to be a "multiplying ministry" -- recruiting as many people as possible to join the church. Even if someone was already a baptized Christian, he or she had to be re-baptized by the Church of Jesus United, because this church alone understood "the truth." All non-members were condemned to the eternal fires of hell.

Members were asked to restrict their involvement with their parents, other family members, and prior friends, if after a reasonable time they were unsuccessful in converting them. All waking hours were to be spent with other church members, primarily in proselytizing activities. In fact, the church was meant to be a total experience around the clock: eating, socializing and travelling together, studying together (although grades often suffered through lack of attention), attending church functions together, and saving souls for Jesus together. There were also strict rules about never criticizing the church or its leaders, reading only authorized literature about religion, and examining

only those Bible passages which were accompanied by church interpretation and instruction.

Five years after I first met her, Barbara showed up in my office as an alumna one day out of the blue. "I'm out!" she exclaimed.

"What do you mean?" I responded.

"The Church of Jesus United. I'm done with them."

I asked what had happened.

"I completely lost myself and was in a fog," she explained. "I thought I'd been born again, but in fact it was the death of my true self. I lost my freedom and autonomy. I basically stopped thinking for myself. All my doubts went up on the shelf. The leaders told me who and how to date, what to wear, and how to act. I became a really tough person, manipulating others into joining us and preventing them from being baptized in other churches. Things I wouldn't have thought were ethical before I joined. Well, I went ahead and did them. There's one message to the outside before you join, and then another one on the inside as you move up the ladder. We lie."

She continued: "Then one day all of those doubts up on the shelf came crashing down. I realized I had wasted years of my life. But then I had to struggle to get out. After I told my

discipleship partner, who was my roommate, that I'd decided for sure, and there was nothing she could do about it, I found the locks changed on our apartment when I returned at the end of the day. All my clothes and belongings were still inside. I was told I could have them back only if I agreed to one more talk, this time with church leaders. At that point I walked away from everything I owned."

Barbara went on to describe what has been the most difficult part of leaving: "You know, I've been really lonely. The church was my whole life, and people inside who I thought were personal friends dropped me like a lead balloon after I left -- they shunned me really. Was I stupid not to realize that this was all for the group and wasn't real friendship? I don't know who to trust anymore. I feel betrayed. It's really been devastating. I left all my old friends years ago, and I stopped relating to my parents after I joined the church. It's hard to repair all the damage and start again. I'm having trouble with Jesus right now too, although I think I'll get over it. Sometimes I can't help wondering whose side he's on; every so often I have these fears that I'm going to hell after all. It's like a double whammy: losing all my friends and going to hell. But I've found a normal church in the community now, where I'm trying to put it all back



together."

Now, I don't mean, by telling this story, to be heard to be warning anyone off conservative, "evangelical" Christian churches.

Half of the Protestant congregations in America today may fall into that category, and many of them are just as concerned about Christian cults and dangerous religious practices as I am as a liberal Christian. One large evangelical "para-church" organization, the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, which is active at Stanford, has created a national code of ethics on proselytizing to prevent abuses.

Here's some of what it says: "We respect the individual integrity, intellectual honesty, and academic freedom of other believers and skeptics." The code affirms "the inalienable right of every person to survey other options and to convert to or choose a different belief system." Disavowed is "the use of any coercive technique or manipulative appeals which bypass a person's critical faculties, play on psychological weaknesses or mask the true nature of Christian conversion." There will be "no false advertising" and "no overly emotional appeals which minimize reason and evidence." InterVarsity will always "reveal our own identity and purpose, our theological position and sources of information, and will not be intentionally misleading." Wanting

to relate to people of other religions, it will also "divest our witness of any stereotypes or fixed formulas which are barriers to true dialog."

So, in conclusion, I believe that today's gospel lesson from Matthew teaches that one's commitment to Christ can realistically bring criticism, sometimes even rising to persecution, from those who are near and dear. Yet, the warning signs of dangerous and manipulative religious practices still remain: deception, enforced separation from old friends and family, a total environment occupying all of one's time, rigid hierarchical control, and prohibition of doubt and intellectual inquiry. May each of us have rich spiritual lives that set us free to be fully ourselves. AMEN.

## NOTES

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1. The New Interpreter's Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), Vol. VIII, p. 763.
  2. Matthew 5:9.
  3. Matthew 5:39.
  4. Matthew 5:44.
  5. Matthew 7:1.
  6. Matthew 7:12.
  7. Matthew 9:10-11.
  8. Matthew 9:36.
  9. Huston Smith, The World's Religions (HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), pp. 326-327.
  10. I Corinthians 13:4,6,8.
  11. Zechariah 9:9,10.
  12. New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. IX, p. 267.
  13. Ibid., Vol. VIII, p. 261.; New Jerome Biblical Commentary (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1990), p. 652.
  14. New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. IX, p. 266.
  15. For a full account of this story, see Scotty McLennan, Finding Your Religion: When the Faith You Grew Up With Has Lost Its Meaning (HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), pp. 82-86.