

Jesus and His Teaching

Stephen Van Kuiken
Rincon Congregation Church
Tucson, Arizona
February 21, 2010

1. By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who have found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus.
—*The Eight Points of Progressive Christianity*

Jesus taught only one thing: presence. —Stephen Mitchell

Readings: Deuteronomy 30:11-15
Matthew 6:9-15

An old rabbi once asked his pupils how they could tell when the night had ended and the day had begun. “Could it be,” asked one of the student, “when you see an animal in the distance and can tell whether it’s a sheep or a dog?”

“No,” answered the rabbi.

Another asked, “Is it when you can look at a tree in the distance and tell whether it’s a fig tree or a peach tree?”

“No,” answered the rabbi.

“Then when is it?” the pupils demanded.

“It is when you can look on the face of any man or woman and see that it is your brother or sister. Because if you cannot see this, it is still night.”

Today, we continue with a sermon series, “What is Progressive Christianity,” and my hope is that since we call ourselves “a progressive Christian community,” this can help us articulate what we mean. So to help us in this discussion, I want to talk about this first point of the “Eight Points of Christianity” that is from The Center for Progressive Christianity:

By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who have found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus.

Now I want you to notice that this understanding of Jesus is quite different from the Dominant Model or what one can call “creedal Christianity.”

A friend, Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, who is a professor of Justice and Peace Studies at St. Thomas in St. Paul, MN, wrote a book called, *Jesus Against Christianity: Reclaiming the Missing Jesus*. In it he says that in the Dominant Model of Christianity, Jesus is missing. And what he means is that the actual life and teachings of Jesus is conspicuously absent and assumes only a minor importance, if any.

What seems evident is that the creeds talk about Jesus’ birth and death, but nothing in between! It is a Christianity that states Jesus “was conceived by the

Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary,” and then it skips immediately to “suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried.” What happened to his life? Isn’t that important? Some have called this the *creed with the empty center*.

A few years ago Elaine Pagels, a professor at Princeton, wrote a great book called *Beyond Belief*. She talked about how diverse early Christianity was and how from the 2nd to the 4th centuries this diversity was squashed, and a single dominant view emerged.

The earliest gospel, Mark, written about 40 years after Jesus died, emphasizes Jesus as the human messiah, literally “anointed one,” the man designated as the future king of Israel. Since Mark writes in Greek, he translates the Hebrew term “messiah” as “Christos,” which later becomes, in English, “Jesus the Christ.” And so when Mark used the terms “messiah” and even “son of God” his Jewish audience understood it to mean a human king, anointed to do God’s will.

Now, this picture of Jesus is quite different from John, the last of the gospels and furthest away from Jesus, chronologically, written 70 years after he died. Pagels makes the point that John’s gospel differs from Matthew, Luke and Mark significantly:

for John suggests that Jesus is not merely God’s human servant but God himself revealed in human form... thus [John] tells how the disciple Thomas finally recognized Jesus when he encountered him risen from the dead and exclaimed “My Lord and my God!” In one of the earliest commentaries on John (c. 240 C.E.), Origen makes a point of saying that, while the other gospels describe Jesus as human, “none of them clearly spoke of his divinity, as John does.” (p. 37)

Pagels points out that this shift in emphasis continued in the process of deciding which writings were going to be included in the Bible, a process that took two hundred years. And so what happened was that the emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in 312, and he then exerted control, placing Athanasius and his followers into a position of power in the church, for example. And this group decided in favor of John’s gospel and rejected other writings, such as the Gospel of Thomas, that had divergent views.

In addition to deciding the official canon, the bishops also formulated the Nicene Creed. This creed emphasized the supernatural conception, birth, death and resurrection, but not the actual life and teachings of Jesus, himself. This creed was endorsed by Constantine and became the official doctrine that all Christians had to accept in order to participate in the only church recognized by the emperor. According to Pagels, Constantine outlawed divergent views which may have included about half of the Christians in the empire at the time:

the emperor ordered all “heretics and schismatics” to stop meeting, even in private houses, and to surrender their churches and whatever property they owned to the catholic church. (p. 174)

And so the Constantinian or Creedal Christianity became firmly established, one that emphasized Jesus as a Divine Sacrifice—the miraculous birth, death and resurrection—but not his actual life and teachings.

Now a progressive church, it seems to me, does not necessarily reject Creedal Christianity. But perhaps what a progressive church does is make room for other kinds of Christians as well. Maybe a progressive Christianity encompasses the
 Traditional and non-traditional,
 Orthodox and un-orthodox,
 Trinitarian and Unitarian,
 Those who find Jesus’ death as saving and those who find Jesus’ life and message as saving,
 Those who use the terms “savior” and “son of God” literally, and those who use them metaphorically.

What was it about Jesus that attracted those early followers? And didn’t they experience a conversion? *Before* Jesus died? Weren’t *they* healed? Made whole? Saved? And if experiencing the life and teachings of Jesus was enough for them, can’t it also be enough for others?

As Marcus Borg said, “Jesus shows us the heart of God.” Perhaps this can be our common ground.

Jesus was a Jewish rabbi or teacher. He came out of this great teaching tradition, and to me, he was the greatest teacher I’ve ever known. This wasn’t true because he had the greatest techniques or because he never had any pupils that failed. God only knows how many people have heard but who have not learned the lessons of Jesus. No, Jesus was the premier teacher because of the quality and the level of truth in his words. He had a way of bringing daylight to those who have lived all their lives in the darkness of night. His teaching lives on, even though he is not around in the flesh. His words still have a transforming, shimmering quality of enlightenment.

But Jesus was a Jewish rabbi, and he taught like a Jewish rabbi. A student asked, “Rabbi, why do you always answer my question with a question?” The rabbi responded, “What’s wrong with asking questions?” The method of the rabbi was to encourage *dialogue* and *independent thinking*.

There is an old saying: “When two rabbis argue, there will be three opinions.” Arthur Green, president of a rabbinical college, once noted a bumper sticker popular with Christian fundamentalists: “God said it, I believe it, that settles it.” Rabbi Green said his tradition could accept the slogan if it were modified: “God

said it, I believe it, now let's discuss it." Scriptural texts are revered in Judaism, but students are encouraged to explore *multiple meanings* through dialogue.

If someone were to ask you in an elevator or parking lot, "What does Jesus teach?" what would you say? What is the essence or the core of his gospel? That is a good question to ask, not only because it may happen someday, but also because this can be a good spiritual practice.

As a teacher or rabbi, through who he was and what he did, in his very person, Jesus reflected God. I am reminded of that passage in Philippians: "Jesus... did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but *emptied* himself... and became obedient unto death."

What emerges in the Gospels is Jesus as a man who had emptied himself of desires, doctrines and rules, and who had been filled with the vivid reality of the Unnamable Mystery. In Jesus we find a kind of purity of his heart, and we are drawn to it. Jesus and his teaching offer us the same kind of purity of heart.

What do I mean? Well Stephen Mitchell wrote some good words:

If we compare God to sunlight, we can say that the heart is like a window. Cravings, aversions, fixed judgments, concepts, beliefs—all forms of selfishness or self-protection—are, when we cling to them, like dirt on the windowpane. The thicker the dirt, the more opaque the window. When there is no dirt, the window is by its own nature perfectly transparent, and the light can stream through it without hindrance. (p. 14, The Gospel According to Jesus)

We too, are to empty ourselves. The ancient writer Heraclitus wrote, "The way down and the way up are one in the same." Someone else put it like this: "When we get to the bottom of our lost-ness, we can begin to find ourselves."

Jesus, as our teacher, lived this way. He was *transparent*. Jesus teaches just by existing; people can feel the light of God shine through him. We say that Jesus incarnates and reflects the radiance of God. We find a deep sense of peace in his presence, and we detect a harmony in his life with the intentions of God. Jesus teaches and demonstrates that all that is needed is to live out a purity of heart. There is no longer a dependence upon external rules or laws. He followed a stream within his own tradition that said that God's wisdom is within and simply awaiting discovery.

For this teaching which I give you today is not hidden from you, and is not far away. It is not in heaven, for you to say, "Who will go up to heaven and bring it down for us, so that we can hear it and do it?" Nor is it beyond the sea, for you to say, "Who will cross the sea and bring it back for us, so

that we can hear and do it?" But the teaching is very near to you: it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it. (Duet. 30:11-15)

I'm reminded of what Augustine said when someone once asked him what the most important rule for Christians were to follow "so that we can hear it and do it." He said simply, "to love God and do what you will." Jesus teaches us to allow our hearts to become pure, to empty ourselves and to let go of all other intentions, to be transparent.

This attitude is reflected in the Jesus Prayer that helps us focus our hearts: "hallowed be *thy* name, *thy* kingdom come, *thy* will be done..."

In Stephen Mitchell's book, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, he writes,

What is the gospel according to Jesus? Simply this: that the love we all long for in our innermost heart is already present, beyond longing... Jesus taught one thing only: presence. Ultimate reality, the luminous, compassionate intelligence of the universe, is not somewhere else, in some heaven light-years away... It is always right here, right now. That is what the Bible means when it says that God's true name is I am.

I suspect that Mitchell has a point here. Religion often has had the tendency to push the presence of God either into the past or into the future. But Jesus was one who taught us by his own life about living in the presence of God, in the continual presence of love and acceptance. Jesus had the experience of entering the Kingdom of God and asks his followers to enter into it also. The name of God is not "I was" or "I will be," but "I am"—present tense.

Jesus, himself, was asked to give one of those elevator summaries of the law and his teachings: "What is the greatest commandment?" His response: "Love God with all your heart, soul and mind." (Matthew 22:36ff) In other words, live in the Presence; love the Presence with your whole being.

When Jesus talked about the Kingdom or Realm of God, he was talking about a *state of being*. He was talking about a kind of peace that we can enter in our present world. "Thy kingdom come *on earth* as in heaven." The kingdom is a *way of living at ease* among the joys and sorrows of the world.

Jesus taught by word and example that we can enter into the Eternal kingdom of God which is a *present reality*. We don't need to earn it. It is already ours. Jesus spoke of people "entering" it. He said that children were already inside it, and told on particularly ardent scribe that he, the scribe, was "not far from" it. "If only we stop looking forward and backward, he said, we will be able to devote ourselves to seeking the kingdom of God, which is right beneath our feet, right under our noses; and when we find it, food, clothing, and other necessities are given to us as well, as they are to the birds and the lilies."

Other ways of describing entering the kingdom of God are “rebirth” or “awakening.” And Jesus taught that we find the grace-bestowing presence of God in the “here and now.” But it is hard to live in the here and now. Most of us lose this state of being, says Mitchell,

as we grow up and become self-conscious, but it doesn't disappear forever; it always is there to be reclaimed, though we have to search hard in order to find it. The rich especially have a hard time reentering this stated of being; they are so possessed by their possessions, so entrenched in their social power, that it is almost impossible for them to let go. But if we need reminding, we can always sit at the feet of our young children. They, because they haven't yet developed a firm sense of past and future, accept the infinite abundance of the present with all their hearts, in complete trust.

Jesus' trust in God was as natural as breathing. He reflected God's deep love for everything—

for the sick and despised, the morally admirable and the morally repugnant,
for weeds as well as flowers, lions as well as lambs.

God's compassion embraces all people. There are no pre-conditions for it. When we are ready to receive it, it is there. And the more we live in its presence, the more effortlessly it flows through us. Jesus lived it and taught it.

Paul Tillich once wrote,

For many people the Golden Rule is considered as the real content of Christianity... But we know that this is not the answer of the New Testament. The great commandment as Jesus repeats it... infinitely transcends the Golden Rule.

Jesus goes way beyond “do to others what you would like to be done to you.” He said, “You have heard it said, ‘love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies... For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?” (Matthew 5:43ff) Jesus demonstrated a way of loving *without expecting anything in return*. For Jesus, the Golden Rule was too shallow, and instead he talked about a place where love flows unconditionally.

Living in this place—in the Presence—led Jesus to deeds of compassion, to stand up for justice, to speak truth to power, to challenge systems of violence, to identify with the oppressed, to speak the prophetic word. For this he was labeled a heretic, a rebel and a revolutionary. And in his actions, his life and his teachings, Jesus changes the night to daylight and provides us a pathway toward Life.