

SAYINGS OF JESUS  
RELIGION'S BIG ERROR

Text on Sunday, August 1, 2010

*Luke 11: 24-41*

Let's face it, Jesus—you're no Joel Osteen. When crowds come to you, you don't say nice things. You don't send them home with warm thought muffins. You can't hold a candle to the likes of Billy Graham or Al Sharpton. You doesn't like crowds. You can't raise money. All you can raise from the rich is wrath. Here's Jesus on Twitter: *U clean the outside of the cup but inside u r full of greed & wickedness. U fools! Did not the 1 who made the outside make the inside also?* 138 characters! 12 followers.

Jesus just doesn't jump for big. Big numbers, big influence, big money do not light his fire. The only big thing Jesus accepts is risk. And he expects those who "hear my word" to do likewise. The return on investment he calls "great"—but it never shows up on a bottom line. From Jesus' point of view, religion's big error is the need to *be* big, and all that drives us to try to think and behave in conventional, acceptable ways. Our society dances this old number in an especially big way. In the current issue of *Christian Century* (7/27/2010), an article on megachurches outlines the decades-long trend toward ever bigger American churches. Almost 10% of Americans church-goers are found at one or another of the 1,350 megachurches.

Now, it might be satisfying (and self-serving) to defend our style of church against the excesses of megachurches, but we can learn more by probing for the problem inside the big error. There you will always find the assumption that religion simply works; that its map of divine domains is true like a subway map is true, and that its practices deliver the goods. These two assumptions undergird bigness not just in religion but in all human affairs. Consider any big enterprise—education, finance, social services— and you will find its priests claiming their beliefs are laws and their practices make profits. Big businesses develop these certainties in order to control uncertain factors and make money flow. When they fail to correct for errors in their beliefs and practices, painful consequences follow—for a time. But when the religious believe they have cornered *their* market and fail to correct for errors in belief and practice, the consequences for those self-certain believers are eternal. This is why Jesus hates *big* like lemmings headed for the cliff.

When the unclean spirit has left a person, he says, it yearns to come back in. Translation: When a bad behavior you want to control is banished, what is the most dangerous attitude you can take toward it? The over-confident one taught by religion, Jesus says, whose priest claims to have swept you clean and put your house in order with a spell that will ward off the wandering spirits. There's the big error—that official religious ritual really controls levers. In such believers, Jesus says, seven addictions will move in where one had dwelled and that man will be worse off than before. Jesus moves on.

"This is an evil generation," he tells the big crowd. You want a sign! That is, you want evidence that you're in control. I'll give you a sign. The people you most hate, people you say worship the wrong God in the wrong way— they will be standing on judgment day, condemning you for failing to heed your God. Can Joel Osteen say that? Jesus says that. He hates the big error.

A religious leader invites Jesus to his home for dinner and can hardly believe his eyes, that Jesus does not perform the rituals that symbolize the rule of spirit over flesh, of mind over matter. Jesus is profoundly annoyed by religion's big error, full of systems and machinery to separate sacred from secular, Creator from creation. *Give what is within you as alms and you will see that for you, everything is acceptable before God.* In fact, your eye is the lamp of your body, he says. If your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light; if not, not. In other words, you are responsible for the soundness of your way

of seeing and interpreting this world. If you always see an evil world coming at you, that's *your* eye seeing, your choice, your darkness. But you can be a light to the world.

Re-reading these passages reminded me of that dream of the Grand Inquisitor told by Ivan in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. The date is 1500-something and Jesus has returned to earth, faring no better than the first time. Through several pages, the Inquisitor defends his sentence.

"You thought too highly of men . . . Fifteen centuries have passed. Look upon them. Whom have you raised up to yourself? I swear, man is weaker and baser by nature than you believed him! Can they do what you did? By showing them so much respect, you ceased to feel for them, for you asked far too much—you who loved them more than yourself! Respecting them less, you would have asked less. That would have been more like love, for their burden would have been lighter . . . [But we, the Church] will tell them that every sin will be paid for, if it is done with our permission . . . The most painful secrets of their conscience they will bring to us, and we shall have an answer for all. And they will be glad to believe our answer, for it will save them from the great anxiety and terrible agony they endure in making a free decision for themselves . . . What I say to you will come to pass, and our dominion will be built up. Tomorrow you shall see that obedient flock who at a sign from me will hasten to heap up hot cinders about the pile on which I shall burn you for coming to hinder us. For if anyone has ever deserved our fires, it is you. Tomorrow I will burn you. I have spoken."

Of course this is a parody of religion's big error. Yet it cuts to the quick of Jesus' sayings. Ordinary religion, with its big errors, invites believers into a conspiracy to surrender freedom and responsibility for their thoughts and actions in exchange for a promise to suppress their worst fears with smooth talk and magic, provided, of course, that they forget that they chose to believe those big errors—in a word, forget that their eye is the lamp of the body. The Grand Inquisitor was surely right in this: Jesus thought highly of humans, showed us great respect, and asked so much of us.

We want—some more than others, of course—to be part of something big because life is ambiguous, and we take comfort in numbers. Did you ever pass up a restaurant because no other couple was dining in there just then? You hear people say, *A hundred million people can't be wrong*—knowing that's wrong. Of course they can. Religion falls under the sway of ego needs and money and power. What else is new?

The big errors we have been talking about all share in the assumption that religion should serve you; that you should "get your needs met" by your church, the bigger the better. Now, from the point of view of marketing to the American public, that approach is pragmatic, efficient, and probably financially sound. It just doesn't have anything to do with Jesus or his extraordinary regard for your person and your freedom. Jesus claims you have one need above all. It is this: to become a human being. To unfold, to develop, to transform from reactive necessity into human freedom. Getting your needs met may shunt you down a side rail. It's not the freedom train.

Jesus didn't hate his religion or any religion. And he didn't found Christianity, either. It's big now, like it or not, but Jesus stayed with small, not big, because small is always the size of one person who intends to serve, rather than be served; to meet, rather than to have needs met. Jesus asks you to be that one person. That one person not concerned whether people think you normal; that one person not sure—or worried—how it is in heaven, but very sure that you are free to take big risks so that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. What's a church for, then? To strengthen you in Christ—in the body of Christ—as you take the risk to become a human being, with your own experience of God, your own knowledge of freedom, and your own power to serve, with this whole community here to help you see what you see with your own eye, the lamp of your body.

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Brooklyn, New York