

SAYINGS OF JESUS  
SCIENCE IN GOOD FAITH

Text on Sunday, August 8, 2010

*Luke 11: 52—12:7*

In the year 1737, in the city of Northampton, Massachusetts, the great divine Jonathan Edwards was delivering his sermon when the balcony of that very full church collapsed, charging all above on dozens of worshipers beneath in a riot of smashing wood and painful cries. To the astonishment of all, and especially the famous preacher, no one perished. He blogged about this soon afterward, concluding:

“No one can give an account, or conceive, by what means people’s lives and limbs should be thus preserved . . . It seems unreasonable to ascribe it to anything else but the care of Providence in disposing the motions of every piece of timber and the precise place of safety where every one should sit, and fall . . .”<sup>1</sup>

How times have changed! Certainly, it is not uncommon still to hear voices effusing thanks to God for sparing them from calamity, but for most moderns, the logical mess in that idea is too plain. If God swoops in to do special saving stunts, twisting the natural order, “disposing the motion of every timber” for his purposes, but leaves ordinary functions to the clockwork of his creation, then God is implicated in every disaster. God is picking and choosing just how hard to hurt and destroy those of his children he has some beef with. That theory, called special providence, is a moral and theological swamp where God himself seems to founder beneath the mud. Yet it’s where much of the mind of humankind has been disposed for thousands of years.

In the eighteenth century, a rift between science and religion was opening like an earthquake. Science-minded men like Thomas Paine, Ben Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson just abandoned church teachings. Some religionists reacted with like vehemence against science. Both camps regarded the other’s point of view as invalid. You could call them mutual rejecters. Edwards was an exemplar of a different approach. He did not disdain but even devoured the works of scientists like Isaac Newton. Stayed nevertheless in certainty that the Bible revealed the one truth, Edwards and his kind always only absorbed the witnesses of science inside the framework of the Bible. Call them absorbers. The last few generations of religious development in the West have embraced a third approach, adaptation. Adapters throw open the shutters to science. When assertions of the Bible fail to fit the results of scientific inquiry, adapters shift their interpretation of the Bible, allowing their understanding of God to move and adapt with news from the sciences.<sup>2</sup> Today, we live in a jumble of rejecters, absorbers, and adapters. Do you know which way you incline? I believe that God’s Word invites you to step faithfully into the practice of adapting your knowledge of God with everything you can learn by the key of knowledge.

Today we heard that Jesus cried “Woe! to you lawyers” for taking away the key of knowledge. What is that key, and how is it that lawyers grabbed it? Let’s take a little linguistic walk. In Latin, the word for knowledge is *scientia*, science. Scissors and science have the same root; it means “to separate.” You see the idea: to know something is to separate it from the mass of things, to see a figure against background. If an object blends in with its ground, it cannot be known in this sense. Science is the practice of setting things apart to see them as they are. To inquire into the nature of things implies also the exercise of authority within yourself to ask what *you* see, and to say what you see—in a word, to know yourself, to separate yourself from the masses. I have often said that good science and good faith share a practice: Both refuse to decide when to stop asking questions. Bad science and bad faith share

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in *An Examined Faith*, by James Gustafson, p. 2

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Gustafson for this schema.

the opposite practice. Both stop asking questions when it suits them. And then they take away the key of knowledge. That is, in the general crowd, they teach that the authorities know best, that you have no reason to worry and no authority to ask. “No more questions.”

Those on whom Jesus pronounces Woe! are not advocates and adversaries in court processes; they are those who use fear and base desires to shape what most people believe is really so about their world. Who are they now? Politicians, news media, military and financial powerhouses, movies and advertisers, and more than a few religious leaders. As we saw last week, Jesus did not think that people in crowds could learn anything of value. To the contrary: in crowds is how manipulators take away the key of knowledge. Ordinary religion’s love for bigness—Jesus turned away from. He would rather speak with a few. Are you with him? “Beware the yeast of the manipulators—that is, their hypocrisy,” he begins. And then he reaches for the vision he holds for any who have eyes to see and ears to hear.

Jesus expects you to receive and keep the key of knowledge. *Nothing hidden will remain covered. No secrets will fail to become known. Things known dimly by a few will be shared in the light and what only a few have whispered to one another will be proclaimed to the world.* This is the horizon of freedom without manipulation. It has consequences for politics, economics, science, psyche and spirit. Yet religion has tended to squash Jesus into the corner of private, personal faith. How different is his sunrise.

I am not suggesting that Jesus was asking his disciples to wake up to the questions of democracy and science as we have come to know them today. But I do propose that through its roots in Judaism and Greek wisdom, the Jesus tradition destines the cultures that try to hold it to open the mind in freedom, to accept the authority, the risks, and the power of free inquiry. I am suggesting that while ordinary church religion, along with all the lawyers of manipulation, resists the opening of the mind, the Spirit of Jesus Christ eternally requires that you take the key of knowledge, use it, and guard it. In a word, science is a practice in the heart of good faith.

I find it thrilling to explore discoveries from the stars, from quantum theory, from medicine and evolution. To delve into some now would take us far beyond the hour. We might better invite women and men of science to come tell us what they see. Still you might ask, *So what if time and space at the quantum level are not at all what they seem to us? What does it matter where we came from? We do not live at that level or in that time, but must make our lives and choices in the frame of ordinary space and time.*

Consider this. Before the telescopes and microscopes of the sciences were perfected, each tribe and culture and continent saw all truth through its own myths and philosophies, rejecting all others. Earth was assumed to be the center of the universe and man—not woman, not yet—its purpose. But looking through good glasses forced us to take a lower seat at the cosmic table. Now we see that the center is not our land, not our earth, not our solar system, not our galaxy, perhaps not even our universe. We stand at the center of nothing. And yet we are still standing. We who are bold to acknowledge no ideological foundation beneath our being, we are not crushed. As the sciences have made their reports, we have let go of mechanical ideas of God that we’re really all about us. We have been uncertain what would replace them, but nevertheless attentive and open. This is good faith. Not just “sort of,” but faith absolute—trust deeper than the depths of sea or space. To wonder and to keep with wondering. This is walking with Jesus.

And while scientists were peering at everything through this past century since Einstein’s discovery of the theories of relativity, have not many white people also begun to see themselves as they really are, masters of nothing and of no one, at the center of nothing, welcomed by a world of color—when and if the scales fall from our eyes? In this time, we men began to see women not as *our* women but as equals. More and more, men see the feminine in their shadow, and women see the masculine in theirs.

The voice of “the love that could not speak its name” has sounded in legislatures and federal courts and even in churches. Like the scientists, committed to the same principles, we have seen that there is not just one way in creation nor one time. Through this same century, our mute mother earth has suffered immeasurably from our insatiable self-interest, itself much accelerated by discoveries of science. Yes, using the key of knowledge wisely is not easy. Now earth makes herself heard. *Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, she says, and there is nothing secret that will not become known.* What is next? Will the rich see the poor?

Friends, a Christian must never tire from seeing how the gift of Jesus’ teaching may be manifesting itself in anew though not under the church’s roof. Jesus’ teaching was one thing only: crucifixion-resurrection; lose your life in love that you may have it; surrender, surrender that you may receive at God’s hand what you cannot conceive. See the fellowship between self-surrender and the practice of free inquiry embraced by science. Is there not a spiritual principle of surrender in genuinely asking a question to which you have no answer and opening oneself to receive new knowledge? Be confident that one God is at work in giving the key of knowledge, the spirit of inquiry and freedom, the uncovering of what has lain hidden, the sharing of power and creativity, the celebration of justice, and more. These are all signs of one truth, one action of the Divine. They are names of God in whom everything is one.

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