

## "Like Son, Like Father"

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*At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." -- Matthew 11:25-27 (NRSV)*

It is at moments like this  
that make me wonder why,  
several months ago,  
I agreed to deliver the sermon this morning.

Anyone who knows me, knows  
that I don't possess  
the gift of public speaking.  
I do speak publicly as part of my job  
on the university faculty,  
but I still get "stage fright",  
especially on the first day of classes.  
And delivering a sermon is considerably more  
difficult.

One big reason for my discomfort  
in preparing and delivering a sermon,  
compared to my academic area of expertise  
(operations research or management science--  
basically,  
mathematical modeling and  
analysis of industrial systems),  
is that I can speak confidently  
with a certain level of authority  
in the classroom.  
Although many people *do* speak authoritatively  
on matters of faith,  
I'm uncomfortable with their pronouncements,  
and uncomfortable delivering my own.

Another reason for the difficulty  
of talking about matters of personal faith,  
sharing the most private aspects  
of our being-- our faith--  
is that it leaves us vulnerable  
to the judgment of others.  
Some of you may not only disagree  
with what I will say this morning,  
but may even judge some of it to be heretical.

Differences,  
diversity of opinion,  
expressing doubts--  
these *can* be good for the church, I think,  
if they can be discussed openly  
and not used to judge the character  
of those expressing *different* opinions,  
creating "walls" or barriers within the church.  
It is sad to see a church  
in which people are unable to express their doubts  
or differences of opinion  
because they fear that others  
will call the validity of their faith into question,  
that walls will be erected  
so that the fellowship which they value  
will be damaged.

So let me begin with the disclaimer  
that I don't claim to be speaking with authority.  
My purpose is not to convince you  
of the truth of what I might say.  
Rather, my purpose is to present some ideas  
which might stimulate you to examine your beliefs--  
to stimulate your thinking,  
so that whether you agree or disagree with these  
ideas,  
your faith may be enriched in the process.

I've titled this sermon "Like Son, Like Father"  
in order to make the point  
that our knowledge of God  
does not tell us what Jesus His Son is like--  
rather, it is our knowledge of Jesus,  
based not only on his life as recorded in the gospels,  
but also on the living presence of Christ  
which we can experience today...  
it is our knowledge of Jesus  
which tells us what God is like.

That's only one point that I want to make.  
A second is that being a Christian

is not about believing certain things about Jesus and God.

Rather, it is about our *relationship* with Jesus and God.

Thirdly

(and this follows from the second, I think)

I want to plead that as Christians, we must not try to put Truth into a box made of human language. The human mind and human language are inadequate to comprehend the mystery of God, so that any statement of "belief" cannot be Truth, but only a hint of the Truth.

It can only point in the direction of Truth, and always subject to being restated so as to give us another angle on the same Truth.

There, I've given away the plot...

If you wish you can now doze off and not miss the gist of what I'm about to say. I felt it necessary to enumerate these points at the beginning because, frankly, looking back over what I've written, it seems rather disorganized, with no clear delineation of these three points. (I learned in a preaching class long ago, that exactly three points are a basic requirement of a sermon.)

So, that said,

let me repeat my earlier disclaimer:

I don't claim to be speaking with authority.

My purpose is not to convince you of what I will say or to change your beliefs.

Rather, my purpose is to present some ideas which might stimulate you to examine your beliefs-- and to stimulate your thinking-- so that you may eventually gain some insight -- get a glimpse of the Truth from a different angle, perhaps.

Let me begin with what I do know with some authority:

some of my background.

I think that this will explain

how I arrived at many of the ideas

that I'll get to later --

in fact, it might even explain it better to you than it does to me!

I grew up on a farm in southern Illinois.

I now know that my Bricker ancestors

were probably Mennonite,

but I didn't even know the name "Mennonite" until I was an adult.

My family attended the Methodist Church.

I attended the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana,

with a major in mathematics and minor in physics.

Most of my undergraduate days

I had no interest in religion.

I considered myself to be Christian in some sense, but I was what I would now call a "practical atheist", that is, one who may profess to believe in God, but one who, for all practical purposes, lives as though God does not exist.

In my senior year,

I had become involved with *Intervarsity Christian Fellowship* (IVCF).

I was a "loner" in college,

but was attracted to the atmosphere of friendship which I saw in the IVCF members.

On the other hand,

their meetings raised a lot of questions, mostly theological,

which were unsettling to me--

the major one being the problem of why a God, *if* He exists,

allows such suffering and evil in his creation.

Other issues which troubled me included

the divinity of Jesus,

the concept of the substitutionary atonement,

the authority of the Bible, and

the historicity of the resurrection,

to name just a few.

I wrestled with these questions for several months,

and, during the winter break of my senior year,

attended "Urbana '64",

the missionary conference

which is held every three years by IVCF

on the University of Illinois campus.

I must have expected to find some answers there

to these questions which were troubling me,

but I don't recall them ever addressed

in any significant way.

What I did observe there was

that Jesus was a reality in so many lives,

and that this gave a strong sense of purpose

to many persons.

My graduation was looming only a semester away,

which must have pressured me

to give more thought to my future,

and I estimated my chances of making wrong choices,

of messing up my life without any clear goals or purpose,  
were very high indeed!

On New Year's Eve,  
the final meeting of the conference,  
in an audience of many thousands,  
I remember feeling disappointed  
by my failure to get answers to my questions,  
and frustrated by my lack of purpose.  
This wasn't getting me anywhere!  
I as much as said, to hell with these questions!  
During the midnight communion service,  
in the last few minutes of the conference,  
I had a profound experience of Christ  
and committed myself and my life to following Him.  
It's difficult to convey in words  
anything of what I experienced--  
it was a conviction that Jesus was present,  
not "outside" but within me,  
and that I was loved and accepted.  
Every thought became a prayer,  
because it occurred in His presence.  
That evening I had put Him in charge of my life  
and trusted Him to make the decisions--  
a naive idea, I was to learn later,  
as I still had to struggle over many decisions  
(but not alone, let me add!)

I felt convinced that,  
although my natural inclination is  
to hole up in a lab or at a computer  
and to avoid much human contact,  
I was intended for a career--  
or I should say a vocation (calling)--  
in college teaching.  
This change in thinking in itself I consider  
miraculous,  
because it was totally out of character for me.  
I hadn't given such a career a *first* thought,  
let alone a second thought,  
because of my big problem with shyness  
and my dread of dealing with people,  
especially groups of people!  
But it seemed to me  
that the college years provide a person  
with opportunities for reflection  
and inquiry into matters of faith.  
And, as in my own experience,  
a need to make some choices  
-- not only about a career  
but about values more generally,  
and that I had a calling  
to be a witness for Christ in a college setting.

(So, after several more degrees  
in math and engineering,  
some seminary education,  
a job with IBM,  
I finally accepted a teaching position  
here at the University of Iowa 24 years ago!)

Let me describe another aspect of my experience  
that New Year's Eve,  
so as to help you understand  
where I'll be coming from in my later discussion.  
When I made this commitment to Jesus,  
I set aside those questions  
which had been central in my thinking  
the previous several months  
(the problem of evil, the divinity of Jesus, the  
resurrection, the atonement, etc.)  
and committed myself to a *person*,  
not a set of doctrines.

"Believe and be saved", it is said.  
I had come to no conclusions about what to believe  
on these and other issues!  
I didn't even, as some Christians insist is  
necessary...  
I didn't even confess my sins,  
repent and ask for forgiveness.

There's a danger  
in expecting other persons' Christian experiences  
to match your own  
-- I certainly encountered a lot of that  
when I described my "conversion" experience.  
Some of my Christian friends with an evangelical  
bent,  
such as those at IVCF,  
questioned the authenticity of my experience  
because it didn't seem to fit their mold.  
Likewise, my more "mainstream" Christian friends  
viewed my experience with skepticism as well,  
considering it to be  
*merely* an emotional experience.

And it certainly was an emotional experience.  
And as those of you who know me can verify,  
I am *not* by nature an emotional person.  
But I could not discount it as "merely" emotional  
and therefore not a valid experience  
of the living presence of Jesus.  
It was what I would call  
a "self-validating" experience for me,  
but of course not self-validating to anyone outside of  
my skin!

Like the man

whose eyesight was restored by Jesus  
and who was later questioned  
by the authorities investigating Jesus,  
asking the man to draw some conclusions  
about who Jesus was.

Like that man,

I cannot draw any theological conclusions  
from the experience.

I can only affirm as he did,  
speaking (metaphorically in my case)

"One thing I do know:  
that though I was blind, now I see." (*John 9:25*)

So, even with the caveat  
that each individual's experience may be different  
and none "normative",  
perhaps I risk sounding authoritative  
when I suggest that being a Christian means  
making the decision to follow Jesus as a disciple,  
rather than affirming certain beliefs and doctrines  
about the divinity of Jesus,  
about the mechanism of the atonement,  
about the resurrection,  
to name just a few beliefs  
which some Christians consider  
to be of such "fundamental" importance  
as to serve as a litmus test for one's faith.

As I see it,  
Jesus in the gospels asked those whom he called,  
"Follow me".  
He called them to be his disciples,  
that is, his students,  
so that they might learn from him.  
He *didn't* insist on their first affirming belief  
in any creed or doctrine!  
It was only after they had lived with him,  
shared his sorrows and triumphs,  
listened to his sermons,  
that they came to realize something  
of who he is,  
and to believe,  
so that Peter could finally affirm  
that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ!  
I think that is the way that Jesus dealt with people  
both then and now...  
calling them to learn from Him,  
to get to know Him,  
not calling them to "belief".

So I am of the strong opinion  
that believing the "right things" is not a prerequisite  
for becoming a Christian.  
Nor, I think, is repentance a prerequisite.  
-- on the contrary,

in my experience,  
it's only after living daily with Jesus  
that we begin to realize how far we fall short  
of the way that Jesus wants us to live,  
and how much of which we *have* to repent of!

The problem with those who prepare creeds  
is that they assume  
that it is *possible* to use words to state an absolute  
truth,  
while I am convinced that God is so transcendent  
that he cannot be grasped by the human mind,  
and that it is presumptuous,  
even *blasphemous*,  
for us to pretend otherwise.  
Those who prepare creeds  
might speak of the mystery of God,  
but then they try to define that mystery  
as though it were possible,  
when we can only hint at its nature with metaphors.  
Human language is simply inadequate to contain  
God!

To say that Jesus is the "Son of God"  
is speaking metaphorically.  
It is using a concept about biology,  
about creatures,  
about human society,  
to say something about the relationship of Jesus  
to God, his Father (another metaphor!)  
If it were not a metaphor,  
how exactly is "Son of God" defined?  
What exactly does it mean?  
Paul tells us that all the followers of Jesus  
are "children of God".  
Jesus calls the sons of Zebedee,  
who were two of his disciples,  
"Sons of Thunder".  
Were they literally descendents of Thor,  
the "god" of thunder?  
or did they only share some characteristics,  
such as being loud and boisterous,  
or perhaps subject to losing their temper?  
The Bible often refers to  
the "hand of God",  
the "face of God",  
the "breath of God"  
(which is usually translated "spirit").  
All metaphors.  
But no less true because they *are* metaphors.

We believe in the divinity of Jesus,  
but what *exactly* do we mean by that?  
Several years ago I discovered a book  
entitled *Jesus Before Christianity*,

by Albert Nolan.  
Listen to Nolan's response to the question  
about the divinity of Jesus:

"To believe that Jesus is divine  
is to choose to make him  
and what he stands for  
your God....  
This approach... enables us  
to begin with an *open* concept of divinity  
and to avoid the perennial mistake  
of superimposing upon the life and personality of  
Jesus  
our preconceived ideas  
about what God is supposed to be like.

"By his words and [actions],  
Jesus himself changed the content of the word  
"God".  
If we do *not* allow him  
to change our image of God,  
we will *not* be able to say  
that he is our Lord and our God.  
To choose him as our God  
is to make him the source  
of our information about divinity  
and to refuse to superimpose upon him  
our own ideas of divinity.  
We cannot deduce anything about Jesus  
from what we think we know about God;  
we must now deduce everything about God  
from what we *do* know about Jesus....

"To say now suddenly that Jesus is divine  
does not change our understanding of Jesus;  
it changes our understanding of divinity.

"We have seen what Jesus was like.  
If we now wish to treat him as our God,  
we would have to conclude  
that our God does not want to be served by us,  
but wants to serve us;  
God does not want to be given  
the highest possible rank and status in our  
society,  
but wants to take the lowest place...  
and to be without any rank and status;  
God does not want to be feared and obeyed,  
but wants to be recognized  
in the sufferings of the poor and the weak...

"If this is *not* a true picture of God,  
then Jesus is not divine.  
If this *is* a true picture of God,  
then God is more truly human,

more thoroughly *humane* ,  
than any human being."

Nolan is saying  
that many Christians  
have preconceived notions about God  
and then use those preconceived notions  
to describe what Jesus is like.  
They assume that they know what God is like,  
and then make the mistake of concluding  
that Jesus was God walking on earth in the body of a  
man.

These Christians who knew what God is like  
then use this knowledge  
to imagine what God would be like  
as he walked the earth inside Jesus.  
As they say, "Like Father, like Son".  
Because God is  
--omniscient,  
--omnipotent,  
--"omni- (you fill in the blank)",  
therefore Jesus must be also.  
If Jesus is God, they say,  
then, being omniscient,  
he knew *everything*,  
even, I suppose, including  
the special theory of relativity,  
the structure and function of DNA, etc.  
Nolan is saying that we have this backwards  
-- that we should be saying,  
"Like Son, like Father"!  
From what we know of Jesus,  
we can extrapolate to say something about God.  
(And even so, as Paul says,  
we see "as in a glass, darkly",  
a pale reflection of God's Truth,  
not as "face-to-face".)

According to the gospel of Matthew  
which was read by [the worship leader],  
Jesus claimed that  
"no one knows the Father except the Son  
and anyone to whom  
the Son chooses to reveal Him."  
(*Matthew 11:27*)

Of course God was known  
for centuries by the people of Israel...  
God the Creator,  
God the Heavenly King, ....  
But it is Jesus who reveals to us the "*Father*".  
It is Jesus who taught us  
that God is our "*Abba*"  
(the informal word typically used by children  
who spoke Aramaic, the language of Jesus,

a word which is equivalent to our own "Daddy" or "Papa").

Marcus Borg has written a book titled *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, by which he means proceeding from a secondhand religion to a firsthand religion. It is a book which I highly recommend. (I was pleased to learn that my daughter at Bethel College was assigned this book as a text last year.)

Let me read a paragraph from this book:

"Finally, as I complete my story of how I met Jesus again, I want to mention briefly how these changes in my image of Jesus affected my vision of the Christian life. Until my late thirties, I saw the Christian life as being primarily about believing. Like many of us, as a child I had no problem with belief. But at the end of my childhood there began a period, lasting over twenty years, in which, like many, I struggled with doubt and disbelief. All through this period I continued to think that believing was what the Christian life was all about. Yet no matter how hard I tried, I was unable to "do" that, and I wondered how others could.

"Now I no longer see the Christian life as being primarily about believing. The experiences of my mid-thirties led me to realize that God *is* and that the central issue of the Christian life is not believing in God or believing in the Bible, or believing in the Christian tradition. Rather, the Christian life is about entering into a relationship with that to which the Christian tradition points, which may be spoken of as God, the risen living Christ, or the Spirit. And a Christian is one who lives out his or her relationship to God

within the framework of the Christian tradition." (*Meeting Jesus Again....*, p. 17)

In fact, in the same book, Borg argues that "believing in Jesus" does not at all mean "believing things about Jesus". The word in the original Greek of the New Testament which is translated "believe", in its Greek roots, means "to give one's heart to". In fact, even the English word "believe" has its roots in the German word "belieben", which differs from "to believe" in the English sense. Rather, it has the meaning "to *belove*", from which we get the more common word "beloved". That is, according to Borg, "to believe in Jesus" means "to make Jesus your beloved".

When Melinda and I first became acquainted with the Mennonites, which was in Evanston (Illinois) while I was a seminary student, we felt as though we had finally found a "home". Partly we were attracted by the pacifist position of the Mennonites. (These were the years of the late 60's and early 70's, during the Vietnam conflict!) I wasn't a very vocal activist against the war, but at seminary I become convinced that Jesus's way was the way of pacifism, and I felt affirmed by the Mennonites' firm commitment to pacifism. I also appreciated the Mennonites' emphasis on discipleship and community, and their respect for the Bible without, as do many evangelical churches, insisting on its inerrancy and ultimate authority.

I was also impressed by the discovery that the Mennonite Church has no theological litmus test for membership -- only a commitment to Jesus as Lord and to his church is insisted upon for baptism and membership, not (for example) an affirmation of the Apostle's Creed (which we seldom recite). Which is not to imply that Mennonites have fewer theological beliefs -- only that these beliefs may be quite diverse, and not used in order to define who is or is not an authentic Christian. I think it's fair to say that

Mennonites are less concerned about *orthodoxy* (that is, right beliefs) than about *orthopraxy* (right practice, i.e., obedience to the teachings of Jesus in life).

It has been my observation that many Christian students who arrive at the university are afraid to be challenged in their beliefs, and unwilling to engage in an intellectual inquiry. I think that this fear results from the mistaken notion (mistaken in my view) that the Christian must commit himself or herself to certain beliefs and truths, and that to abandon those beliefs would endanger his or her relationship to Jesus. These students read the Bible and in effect respond, "God said it, I believe it, that settles it!" This attitude, in turn, reinforces the attitude that non-Christians have about the place of Christianity in the university community. In their minds, the stereotypical Christian is closed-minded, not sincerely willing to dialogue about the meaning (or lack of meaning) of life, even pushing their beliefs onto others without really allowing themselves to listen to the other's ideas or questions. As a result, the non-Christian becomes closed-minded to the possibility of finding truth in Christianity. The search for truth is one of the highest endeavors of the university community, with the hope that the "truth will set us free", but few students, whether Christian or non-Christian, really engage in this endeavor with open minds.

Years ago, when I was a student and society less secular, students were very private about their faith or lack of it, thinking that if their non-beliefs were exposed they would be considered not-OK by others. Nowadays, perhaps, they are private about any interest they might have in faith because if exposed, they would be considered naive, unsophisticated, and anti-intellectual

by their fellow students and their instructors.

As stated by Carolyn Liebert in the recent issue of the newsletter of the university's Center for Teaching,

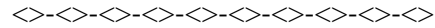
"... developmentally, most [undergraduate] students are passing from a phase where they believe their ideas are as valid as anyone else's into a phase where they recognize the importance of investigating wider evidence and accepting the possibility that many viewpoints are valid (and indeed that their own ideas may be wrong.)"

That strikes me as perhaps a bit too idealistic: I think that many, both believers and nonbelievers, never pass into that second phase, in which they are willing to investigate other evidence and accepting the possibility that many viewpoints might be valid, and that their own ideas may be wrong. I think that we Christians on campus need to strongly encourage the kind of dialogue in which persons can openly and honestly discuss religious questions and issues. And I hasten to add that I'm not referring only to the students, but to all of us in the university community! Too many of us are committed to our own ideas, and refuse to accept the possibility that other ideas are also valid, and that their own ideas may be wrong. We are too often convinced that we have been able to package truth in a box constructed with human language and feel threatened by suggestions that truth is too big to fit into any box.

As Robert Frost has said,

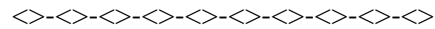
"Education is the ability to listen to almost anything without losing your temper or your self-confidence."

I hope that, as Christians, we can display those same characteristics... that we be willing to listen to almost everything without losing our temper or our self-confidence in our knowledge of Jesus.



**Prayer** (from the *Gelasian Sacramentary*, originating sometime during the 6th-8th centuries)

When I behold the problems of our world, O  
 Lord,  
 I pray not to be tempted to quick answers.  
 When every tongue declares a different truth,  
 When every people praises its own  
 righteousness,  
 Let me pause before I speak or praise or hope.  
 Let me look inward seeking to discover eternal  
 truths implanted by you,  
 Truths greater than those heard in the outer  
 multitude of voices and words.  
 Let me remember always that  
 To be loud is not to be right,  
 To be strange is not to be forbidden,  
 To be new is not to be frightful,  
 To be black is not to be ugly.  
 Thus let me find truths true to you,  
 That I may live with them, and you, and myself,  
 In peace. Amen



The following books were influential in the preparation of this sermon:

- *Jesus Before Christianity*, by Albert Nolan, Orbis Books, 1976.
- *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, by Marcus J. Borg, HarperCollins, 1994.
- *The God We Never Knew*, by Marcus J. Borg, HarperCollins, 1998.