

Jesus Is for Losers

BY SHANE CLAIBORNE

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns, “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged.” Folks are hungry for a Christianity that mirrors Jesus, not the judgmentalism that has done more to repel than to woo people towards God’s grace.

A few months back as I was getting ready to speak to a group of folks, the pastor approached me beforehand to point out that a couple of gay men were sitting on the front row, holding hands. He felt the need to point it out. “Are you going to say something about that, about homosexuality?” he whispered. I laughed, and said, “I’m not sure what you have in mind. I could begin by saying I praise God that they felt welcome enough to come into this place, that I am glad they are here.” That is not what he had in mind.

I wondered to myself, following his logic, if he would then want me to ask everyone who had been divorced and remarried to stand up so we could give them a little firm rebuke. In fact, maybe we should just station folks at the doors of the church like bouncers in clubs—sort of a sin patrol. They could ask people as they enter the building: “Have you been prideful or greedy this week?” And we could bounce all the nasty sinners out of the service. We’d be left with much smaller crowds to deal with. In fact I would probably end up preaching to a small handful of proud saints, whom I could point my finger at, call them all liars, and tell them to leave as well. What in the world has become of us?

I can remember talking with a homeless guy in an alley downtown and he started sharing with me about God. He was familiar with the Bible, but kept talking about “those Christians” in the third person and at a distance. A little confused, I finally asked him for clarity, “Are you not a Christian?” “Oh no,” he said, “I am far too messed up.” I asked him what he thought a

Christian was, and he said, "Someone who's got their [you know what] together, and has things figured out." I confessed that I must not be a Christian either (and that I was not sure I had ever met one), and we laughed. We read together where Jesus tells the Pharisees (the ones who had things together): "It's not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous but the sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32, NIV).¹ My homeless friend nodded with a smile: "I like that verse."

A VIEW FROM THE COMPOST OF CHRISTENDOM

Some years back, a friend and I prepared a multimedia video clip for a worship service. Our goal was to capture people's impulsive response to the word "Christian," so we hit the streets with a video camera from the trendy arts district to the posh suburbs. We asked people to say the first word that comes to mind in response to each word we said and we'd go down a list to break the ice: "snow," "eagles" (it's Philly), "teenagers," and finally "Christian." When people heard the word "Christian," they stopped in their tracks. I will never forget their responses: "fake," "hypocrites," "church," "boring." One guy even said, "used-to-be-one" (sort of one word). I will also never forget what they did *not* say. Not one of the people we asked that day replied "love." No one said "grace."

We have a lot of work to do. A recent survey of young adults outside Christendom showed that the three most common perceptions of Christians are *anti-homosexual* (an image held by 91 percent of the folks surveyed), *judgmental* (87 percent), and *hypocritical* (85 percent).² How sad that the things for which Jesus

scolded the religious elites around him are the very labels now placed on Christians. We have a major image problem.

Growing up, I was always told, "Good people go to church." So I did — sometimes complaining, sometimes tired, but always smiling. Good people did go to church. And then I looked around and watched

the news, and found a Church full of sick people and a world that had some decent pagans. My studies taught me that the more frequent a person's church attendance, the more likely they were to be sexist, racist, anti-gay, pro-military, and committed to their local congregation.

No wonder people get confused. I heard one preacher say, "Jesus needs some good lawyers, because he's been terribly misrepresented." We live in

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an age that when people hear “Christian,” they are much more likely to think of people who hate gays than people who love outcasts, and that is a dangerous thing. Bumper stickers and buttons read “Jesus, save me from your followers.” Over and over I saw people rejecting God because of the mess they saw in the Church. As contemporary author and ragamuffin Brennan Manning says, “The greatest cause of atheism is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips, then walk out the door and deny him with their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable.”

The world watches closely as evangelical Christians point their fingers at homosexuals only to be exposed later for sexual immorality themselves. Will the recent scandals – like the one involving Ted Haggard, former head of the National Association of Evangelicals – lead us to more condemnation or to the humble beating of our chests (for we are people in need of community and grace) and the acknowledgement that all of us are better than the worst things we do? Can we see the ironic hypocrisy of our evangelicalism where the divorce rate has surpassed that of the larger society, while we continue to accuse homosexuals of destroying the family? God have mercy on us sinners.

But I am very hopeful. There seems to be a new kind of Christianity emerging – a Christianity that is closer to the poor and broken people forsaken in the abandoned shadows of the empire. Folks are hungry for a Christianity that mirrors Jesus, not the judgmentalism that has done more to repel than to woo people towards grace.

Whenever someone tells me they have rejected God, I say, “Tell me about the God you’ve rejected.” And as they describe a God of condemnation, of laws and lightning bolts, of frowning gray-haired people and boring meetings, I usually confess, “I, too, have rejected that God.”

I have met a lot of Christians who say, “If people knew all my struggles and weaknesses, they would never want to be a Christian.” I think just the opposite is true. If people really knew what idiots we are, in all our brokenness and vulnerability, they would know that they can give this thing a shot too. Christianity is for sick people. Rich Mullins used to say, “Whenever people say, ‘Christians are hypocrites,’ I say ‘Duh, every time we come together we are confessing that we are hypocrites, weaklings in need of God and each other.’” We know that we cannot do life alone, and the good news is that we do not have to; we are created for community.

Bono, the great theologian (and decent rock-star), said it like this: “The fact that the Scriptures are brim full of hustlers, murderers, cowards, adulterers, and mercenaries used to shock me. Now it is a source of great comfort.”³ Consider King David, who many Christians remember as “a man after God’s own heart.” Well, David breaks just about every one of the big Ten Commandments in two chapters of the Bible (and this occurs *after* he has answered God’s call): he covets, commits adultery, lies, and murders.

Yet he is still one of the losers whom God trusts and uses. Matthew's Gospel gives us a genealogy of Jesus that could compete with any of our family trees on the dysfunctionality-meter. One of my favorites is when Matthew gets to the part of the genealogy that involves David's infamous sex scandal with Bathsheba, he writes: "David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife" (Matthew 1:6b, NIV). Ha! He names other women in the lineage, but when he gets to Bathsheba, he makes sure that we all remember everything that went on there (David had Uriah killed). What a mess! So if that is the Son of God's lineage, none of us can be too bad off. No wonder people are always asking about Jesus, "Who is this? Isn't he the carpenter's kid from Nazareth?" (Matthew 13:55).

BEWARE THE YEAST OF THE PHARISEES

We may be drawn together by isolating ourselves from evildoers and sinners, creating for ourselves an identity of religious piety and moral purity. Or we may be drawn together by joining with the broken sinners and evildoers of our world who are crying out to God, groaning for grace. Both of these are magnetic and contagious.

Jesus tells a parable about two men praying in the Temple. The Pharisee boasts of his religious devotion and moral obedience, thanking God he is not like other sinners. The tax collector, on the other hand, stands at a distance and dares not even look up to heaven. He beats his chest and pleads, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." It is he, not the Pharisee, who goes home justified before God (Luke 18:9-14).

The "yeast of the Pharisees" (Matthew 16:6; Mark 8:15; Luke 12:1) is still infectious, and it attacks both "liberal" and "conservative" Christians alike. Conservatives stand up and thank God they are not like the homosexuals, the Muslims, and the liberals. Liberals stand up and thank God they are not like the war-makers, the yuppies, and the conservatives. The causes are different, but the self-righteousness the same.

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Jesus did not come simply to make bad people good. Jesus came to bring dead people to life. We can be morally "pure" but devoid of any life, joy, or celebration. I have seen this in myself and in many people I know. For some, purity means that they not touch anything "secular." For others, it means eating only "organic" food. But if our commitments are not born out of relationship, if they are not liberating for both oppressed and oppressor, and if

they are not marked by raw, passionate love, then we do little more than flaunt our own purity by showing everyone else how dirty they are. If there is anything I have learned from floating in circles of liberals and of conservatives it is this: you can have all the right answers and still be mean. And if you are mean, no one will want the truth that you have found.

The infection of Pharisaic self-righteousness can lead us to think it is

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our duty to rid the world of evildoers. But history shows that the more voraciously we try to root out evil by force, the more it escalates. The more passionately we love those who do violence, the more evil will diminish. This was true of the Christian martyrs, whose self-sacrificial love for their enemies con-

verted many to the Church. Christianity has spread most rapidly when believers have suffered persecution without retaliating. Today, as our 'Christian' nation claims to be rooting out evil with violence, it is no surprise that terrorist activity is escalating, and Muslims are less open to Christianity than they were a year ago. For every Muslim extremist killed, another is created.

"What do you think of that man?" the old guy asked in a raspy voice as I settled in next to him on the plane. He pointed to the face of Saddam Hussein on the front of his newspaper with a headline story of his looming execution. I gathered myself and prepared for what could turn out to be a rather chatty plane ride. I replied gently, "I think that man needs some love." The boisterous gentleman sat still; it was, perhaps, not exactly the response he predicted. Then he said pensively, "Hmmmm. I think you're right." In a forlorn tone, he whispered, "And it is hard to communicate love through a noose."

It is scandalous to think that we have a God who loves murderers and terrorists like Saul of Tarsus, Osama bin Laden, or Saddam Hussein—but that is the good news, isn't it? It's the old eye-for-an-eye thing that gives us pause. But the more I have studied the Hebrew Scriptures, the more I am convinced that this was just a boundary for people who lashed back. As the young Exodus people are trying to discover a new way of living outside the empire, God makes sure there are some boundaries—like if someone breaks your arm, you cannot go back and break their arm and their leg; if someone kills hundreds of your people, you cannot kill 160,000 of theirs.

We have learned the eye-for-an-eye thing all too well. A shock-and-awe bombing leads to a shock-and-awe beheading. A Pearl Harbor leads to a

Hiroshima. A murder leads to an execution. A rude look leads to a cold shoulder. "An eye for an eye" we have indeed heard before. But Jesus declares in his State of the Union/Sermon on the Mount address, "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,'" but there is another way (Matthew 5:38). No wonder Jesus wept over Jerusalem because the people did not know "the things that make for peace" (Luke 19:42).

Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., used to say, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth leaves the whole world blind" (and with dentures). John's Gospel tells the story of a group of people who drag forward an adulteress and are ready to stone her, as the law required (John 8:3-11). When they seek Jesus' support for this death penalty case, he responds, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." He might well have said, "You are all adulterers. If you have looked at someone lustfully, you have committed adultery in your heart." The people drop their stones and walk away with their heads bowed.

Today we want to kill the murderers, and Jesus says to us: "You are all murderers. If you have called your neighbor 'Raca,' or 'Fool,' you are guilty of murder in your heart" (cf. Matthew 5:21-22). Again the stones drop. We are all murderers and adulterers and terrorists. And we are all precious.

When we have new eyes, we can look into the faces of those we do not even like and we can see the One we love. We can see God's image in everyone we encounter. As Henri Nouwen puts it, "In the face of the oppressed I recognize my own face and in the hands of the oppressor I recognize my own hands. Their flesh is my flesh, their blood is my blood, their pain is my pain, their smile is my smile."⁴ We are made of the same dust. We cry the same tears. No one is beyond redemption and no one is beyond repute. And that is when we are free to imagine a revolution that sets both the oppressed and the oppressors free. The world is starving for grace. And grace is hard to communicate with a noose.⁵

In *I and Thou*, the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber contrasts how we can look *at* people simply as material objects (as merely an "it"), or we can look *into* them and enter the sacredness of their humanity such that they become a "Thou."⁶ Most of the time we look *at* people—good-looking women or men, beggars, pop stars, white folks, black folks, people with suits or dreadlocks. But over time, we can develop new eyes and look *into* people. Rather than looking at people like sex objects or work tools, they become sacred. We can enter the Holiest of Holies through their eyes. They can become a "Thou."

I have an old hippie friend who loves Jesus and smokes a lot of weed, and he is always trying to get under my skin and stir up a debate, especially when I have innocent young Christians visiting with me. (The problem is, he knows the Bible better than most of them.) One day, he said to me, "Jesus never talked to a prostitute." I immediately went on the offensive: "Oh, sure he did," and whipped out my sword of the Spirit and got ready to spar.

Then he just calmly looked me in the face and said, "Listen, Jesus never talked to a prostitute because he didn't see a prostitute. He just saw a child of God he was madly in love with." I lost the debate that night.

GOD USES ASSES

Rich Mullins used to say, alluding to the story in Numbers 22:22-40, "God spoke to Balaam through his ass, and God's been speaking through asses ever since." It follows that if God should choose to use us, we need not think too highly of ourselves. And we should never assume that God cannot use someone else, no matter how ornery or awkward they appear to be.

A buddy of mine who is a youth minister told me about a trip he took with a bunch of teenagers to one of those "mountaintop" spiritual retreats with lots of tears, confessions, and spiritual goose bumps. On the way up, the van had a flat tire — of the worst kind: it was in the rain, there were no tools, and the spare tire was flat. As all the kids stared out the window, his temper escalated and he lost it. My friend started yelling, cussing, and kicking the blessed thing. Finally, he was able to get the van going, climbed back in, and told everybody to shut-up and leave him alone for a bit. With a lot of embarrassment and a few snickers from the back of the van, they continued on to the retreat. It was the same as every year, with worship, preaching, and an altar call. But then something crazy happened. One of his toughest kids from the ghetto told him the week after they returned home that he had given his life to Jesus. My friend was stunned and asked him to explain how it happened, "Was it the messages, the altar call?" The young man said, "No it was on the way up when I saw you cussing at the van. I thought, 'If he can be a Christian, I can give this thing a shot too.'"

So many people are longing to be brought to life. They know all too well that they have done evil. They long to hear not only of a God who embraces evildoers but also of a Church that does the same.

History is filled with movements of people who cry out to God that they are unholy, who identify and confess their sins, who beat their chests before each other and God — from Europe's confessing church to the U.S. college revivals that began by humble acknowledgement of sins. One of the most powerful things the contemporary church could do is begin confessing our sins to the world, humbly get on our knees, and repent for the terrible things we have done in the name of God.

In his book *Blue Like Jazz*, my friend Don Miller tells the delightful story of how he and friends dressed like monks and set up confessional booths on their notoriously heathen campus. But the great irony was that they were confessing their sins as Christians and the sins of Christendom to anyone who was willing to listen and forgive.⁷ I think the world would be willing to listen to a Church on its knees, one that doesn't pretend to be perfect or have all the answers. A mystical, sacramental healing would begin within us and could extend into the wounds of our world.

TOWARD A GENTLER REVOLUTION

We have become so polarized in our society. Hatred and anger seem to dominate our talk, no matter which political or social or religious side we are on. Friends at the Camden House, a sister community to The Simple Way that is just across the river in Camden, New Jersey, did something beautiful. They each dressed in sackcloth, branded with one of the fruits of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—fruits that most revolutions are starving for. And then they walked into the middle of the strident Iraq War protests in Philadelphia, a witness of the Spirit to both the warmongers and Bush-bashers. That is the sort of thing that makes us laugh and nudges us all a little closer to God.⁸

One night a couple of my housemates snuck into my room carrying a life-size poster of President Bush hugging a little girl. They climbed up on my bunk and hung it on the ceiling, just a few feet above my bed. I came in late that night. My roommate was already asleep, so I crawled into bed in the dark, oblivious to it all. The next morning the first thing I saw when I awoke was George W. Bush staring me dead in the eye and nearly laying on top of me. Now that's funny. I have deliberately left the poster there so I see him every night when I go to bed and each morning when I get up. For some folks that would give them nightmares, for others it would help them to rest secure. For me it reminds me that President Bush is human, neither the anti-Christ nor the Savior, and that allows me to sleep well.

We need more prophets who laugh and dance. In our living room we have the quote often attributed to Emma Goldman: "If I can't dance then it is not my revolution." Whenever people talk about injustice, there is usually a looming cloud of guilt. Joy and celebration usually do not mark progressive social justice circles, or conservative Christian circles for that matter. That is one thing many conservatives and liberals have in common: they lack joy.

But the Jesus movement is a revolution that dances. Celebration is at the very core of the Kingdom. That celebration will make its way into the darkest corners of our world—the ghettos and refugee camps, the palaces and prisons. May the whispers of hope reach the ears of hope-hungry people in the shadows of our world.

NOTES

1 Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright© 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

2 David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity...and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 27.

3 Bono, "Introduction," *Selections from the Book of Psalms: Authorized King James Version*, Pocket Canons (New York: Grove Press, 1999).

4 Henri J. M. Nouwen, *With Open Hands*, 34th anniversary edition (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2006), 87-88.

5 My reflection on the execution of Saddam Hussein first appeared online in "Shane Claiborne: Communicating Through a Noose," *God's Politics: A Blog by Jim Wallis and Friends* (January 4, 2007), at blog.beliefnet.com/godspolitics/2007/01/shane-claiborne-communicating-through.html.

6 Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971). As one who immigrated to Palestine to advocate for Arab-Jewish cooperation, Buber knew all too well how easily we can objectify and demonize others.

7 Donald Miller tells the story in chapter 12, "Confession: Coming Out of the Closet," *Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc.), 113-128.

8 The women in several of the communities in Philadelphia organized a similar witness at a March for Women's Rights that had a polarizing counterdemonstration of pro-life activists. They went as bridge-builders to permeate the walls between the groups and talk with people on both sides.



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