

“Jesus’ Contrast Community”  
Matthew 7:21-29/James 1:22-25/Matthew 21:28-32  
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I. Text.

Today we come to the conclusion of our summer sermon series on the Sermon on the Mount. I’ll be reading Matthew 7:21-29.

II. Introduction

I had lunch with a friend a few weeks ago. He likes to discuss the philosophy of religion, so our lunch was “peppered” with big ideas.

In the course of our lunch he told me about a discussion group he was asked to lead. He said that about 15-20 seniors gather once a week for a one hour discussion on various current topics. His job is to pick the topic, and moderate the discussion.

He went on to tell me that the previous discussion leader had advised him to not pick controversial topics, as it got people “too worked up.” And furthermore, he was told to never talk about religion and politics. Well, my friend said he thought that was ridiculous. He said, “Religion and politics is what I find most interesting, and what I think is most important to most people.....so that’s what we’re were going to talk about.” I asked, “How’s it going?” He said, “Great. The attendance has increased.” I asked, “Do people get too worked up?” He said, “No. Once in a while a few folks will get a little excited, but I just step in and cool things off. But the big deal is that people are thinking.....thinking about the world...thinking about what they believe.....and thinking how what we really believe is acted out in a smaller world.” I said, “It sounds interesting.” He smiled and said, “It is.....because it’s religion and politics.”

I want to follow my friend’s lead this morning, and discuss religion and politics. Or probably more exactly, discuss a little about politics, and more about religion. And hopefully, at the end share something interesting.....something that stimulates some thinking.....something that generates some conversation over lunch today, and maybe a change in life. And if we find ourselves “too worked up,” I can have my friend come in to “cool things off.”

“Separation of church and state”.....it’s a good thing. If organized religion gets too close to political power bad things happen; the church gets twisted into a pawn of the state, and/or political power gets baptized with religious devotion. Neither is good for the state or religion. But the truth is, the deep things we believe in, the core values we hold, get acted out in our public lives. Whatever and whoever we believe in shapes the choices in our lives. Organized religion should be separated from political power,

but what we believe in does get acted out in the public sphere; positions on abortion, ecology, health care, education, war. Dig deep enough under a position and you can find the belief.

As Jesus concludes the Sermon on the Mount he knows this. He has been teaching about a different way of life. He has been teaching about forgiveness, generosity, prayer, trusting God, and loving and praying for our enemies. And now as he comes to the end he pushes for action. He wants more than to share interesting ideas. He wants more than to be entertaining on a Sunday morning. He wants more than some brief, shallow religious happiness.....some escapism. He wants to change lives. He wants ideas to give root to beliefs, and the beliefs to grow and flower into a different way of life.....belief acted out in the public sphere.

And Jesus has something bigger in mind than the religious rigor of the Pharisees. And something bigger than the politics of the Sadducees. And something bigger than the Essenes' separation from the world. And something bigger than the political revolution of the zealots. And something bigger than the Roman Empire. And something bigger than the narrow agenda of the Republicans or Democrats, or communists, or socialists, or religious right, or OPEC, or multi-national corporations and international banking. Jesus has in mind.....the kingdom of God. And that is a way of life, a contrast community, different than any other.

### III. Brief Exegesis

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter into the kingdom of heaven, but rather the person who does the will of my Father in heaven.” (Matt. 7:21) Action counts. Life choices count. A way of life counts. And notice this way of life is not the big religious attention grabbers that seem to be the focus of many television preachers; prophesy, casting out demons, doing miracles and works of power. Rather it's a different way of life.....a contrast way of life; love that wants the best for others, a deep joy that celebrates simple things, hope grounded in the power and grace of God, generosity that leads to a simpler lifestyle, forgiveness instead of self-guilt and grudges toward others, healing for addictions, making the choices to get off the 24/7/365 rollercoaster and knowing peace. Paul is onto this same type of understanding in I Corinthians 13 when he says:

“And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love.....I am nothing.” (I Corinthians 13:2)

The kingdom of God is a contrast community. It is the reign of God that breaks into our world in glimpses now. It is the hope for the end of days, when there will be a

new heaven and a new earth, and the dead shall be raised, and death and sin will be no more. And some will miss it.....as some choose to live outside the kingdom now.

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount ends with a parable. It is about wise and foolish builders. It is told in a way to draw attention to the contrasts. It draws attention to two different ways of life, and their outcomes. First note both people build a house. We build a house. All people build a house. It is the building of our lives. And note that the storms, rains, wind and floods come to both houses. Storms come to our lives. Storms come to all lives. Life has seasons when it is unfair and chaotic. We get "blindsided." The wind blows. The rain falls. The river rises. We all know what it is to be "knee deep" in water. If not, you will.

But now the contrasts count. One person builds on a rock. It takes more work, and more determination, but she does it. "Why did you do that" I ask. "Because you just never know," she says. In contrast the other person builds on sand....down in a ravine to be exact. It's easy. Maybe there are lots of other people building down there too. "Why did you build down there" I ask. "Look at the sky," he says. "Nothing is going to happen."

But something does happen. Something always happens.....sooner or later. Storms work like that. There is wind, rain, and rising water. The house on the rock stands. And the house down in the ravine, it's gone. The desert flood washed it away. We watch the news on television and wonder, "Who would ever build down in that ravine? What a foolish choice. Didn't they know what was coming.....what comes when you don't expect it? Who would build down there?" "A fool," a sad voice says. "A fool who hears my words, and chooses not to do them."

The contrast has been made; "do Jesus' words, rock, stands, wise" and "don't do Jesus' words, sand, falls, foolish." We have to decide if we believe it...and we decide by how we live. The Sermon on the Mount shows the way. We decide if we want to live in the contrast community, or not; wise or foolish, rock or sand. And in the end, the final storm will come, and we will all stand before God, and know clearly that saying "Lord, Lord" has never been enough.

#### IV. Final Reflection

"Jesus didn't come to start another religion, including the Christian religion. The formation of the Christian religion is not surprising. It is no doubt necessary and in many ways good. And I know that God is a part of it. But the Christian religion is neither the ultimate goal of Jesus nor the ultimate goal of God. Rather the goal of Jesus is the kingdom of God, which is the dream of God, the wish and hope and desire of God for creation. Sometimes the Christian religion cooperates with that desire of God. Sometimes it doesn't, obstructing or even contradicting the coming of God's kingdom. But even then there is an opportunity to repent and cooperate with God's kingdom

again. And the same can be said of every other religion in the world.” (McLaren, A Generous Orthodoxy, p. 303) So writes Brian McLaren in his book A Generous Orthodoxy. “Amen,” I say....and I would sing it if I could.

The goal of Jesus is the great hope of God; “thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” It is the living out of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, and that is bigger than our church.....bigger than the PC (USA).....bigger than the United States.....and bigger than the Christian religion.

Following 9/11 we had the opportunity to ask why this terrible thing had happened, and how the world had changed. It was a time of fear, and a time of national pride. The response of our nation was the response of power and military might. There was the dangerous language of “crusade” (and there are still whispers of it now). I wonder how much different things might be if in addition to a military response, we discovered that much of the Muslim world is cut out of the emerging 21<sup>st</sup> century, impoverished, uneducated and without hope? How much difference might there be if followers of Jesus asked “why?” How much difference might there be if we spent a fraction of what we spent on guns and bombs on education, health care and justice? Such concerns would be part of Jesus’ contrast community.

And what might happen if world powers stopped fighting about global warming, and started getting serious about being better stewards of the earth; recycle, clean energy, simpler lifestyles, sharing, creating green zones and community gardens? Good stewardship and generosity....that sounds like Jesus’ contrast community to me.

I’m still thinking about a review of a book on “growing up gay in America” (review in Christian Century, June 2, 2009, pp. 28-30). The book tells the story of 40 gay and lesbian people, and their experiences in churches. One of the major conclusions is that the most psychologically and physically dangerous place to be in America if you are gay or lesbian is..... in the most religiously conservative churches and communities. That is shocking, and a sad comment on the moral failure of some Christians. A follower of Jesus may disagree with homosexual relationships, but it is never a justification for self-righteous hate and abuse. Such hateful behavior is outside Jesus’ contrast community.....”depart from me, I have never known you.” (Matt. 7:23)

And then there’s health care, abortion, public education.....I’ll save those for another day. But I will share a story. It’s a story about being a Christian in a world with many religions. It’s a story about a way forward in a world where increasingly our neighbors might be Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu or Jewish. It’s a story about living in the kingdom of God. The story is told by Diana Butler Bass in her book Broken We Kneel (retold here in A Generous Orthodoxy, McLaren, pp. 298-9).

“One day my daughter Emma saw a woman walking toward us covered in a veil and asked the inevitable, ‘What’s that, mommy?’

‘Emma,’ I answered, ‘that lady is a Muslim from a faraway place. And she dresses like that, and covers her head with a veil, because she loves God. That is how her people show they love God.’

My daughter considered these words. She stared at the woman who passed us. She pointed at the woman, then pointed at my hair, and further quizzed, ‘Mommy, do you love God?’

‘Yes, honey,’ I laughed. ‘I do. You and I are Christians. Christian ladies show love for God by going to church, eating bread and wine, serving the poor, and giving to those in need. We don’t wear veils, but we do love God.’

After this Emma took every opportunity to point to Muslim women during our shopping trips and tell me, ‘Mommy, look, she loves God.’ One day we were getting out of our driveway at the same time as our Pakistani neighbors. Emma saw the mother, beautifully veiled, and, pointing at her, shouted, ‘Look, mommy, she loves God!’

My neighbor was surprised. I told her what I had taught Emma about Muslim ladies loving God. While she held back tears, this near stranger hugged me, saying, ‘I wish that all Americans would teach their children so. The world would be better. The world would be better.’”

Such are actions and beliefs in Jesus’ contrast community; the kingdom of God.