

## *It's Not Jesus but a Squirrel*

I began last week by stating that being here can be hazardous. If you are open to the content I want to offer, it can change your world view and when our world changes, so does everything else.

Being a pastor in a church is also hazardous - especially if one, in the conducting of worship services, is foolish enough to make a “children’s sermon” part of such services. Over the years I have toyed with the idea of putting together the multitude of true horror stories I have collected about children’s sermons gone awry and pastoral “open mike” gaffs.

In the worship services conducted here at St. Paul’s, and even now in this moment, a wireless mike is worn that carries the speaker’s voice to not only the amplification system so everybody in the room can hear but but also now to the console that goes with the live stream that goes out to anyone who wants to tune in. Gaffs are now recorded and preserved for all to return to for amusement and ridicule.

I will tell you three children’s sermon stories. These are, and I would swear this in a court of law, absolutely true stories.

I’m assuming you know what a children’s sermon is. If not: a children’s sermon is when the minister who is going to step into this mine field invites the children present in a worship

service to come to the front of the sanctuary and, usually, sit with him or her on the steps leading up into the chancel. When all the players for this drama are in place the minister usually tells a sweet little story to the urchins. Then, they either go elsewhere for the remainder of the service or return to their seats. If the minister has completely taken leave of her or his senses, she/he offers the children an opportunity to respond in one way or another to what is said.

In case you have not already picked up on it, I think children's sermon are among the worst things anything anybody ever thought of.

A friend of mine once invited the children forward. The pastor usually tries to relate the children's sermon to what the rest of the service, especially the sermon, is about for that Sunday. This Sunday it was about prayer and the need to remember and care for people who might be sick or otherwise in need of prayer. After getting the children all settled in and around him, my friend said a bit about prayer and how we need to be aware of and concerned about people who might be in need of prayer. He said, "For example, perhaps someone is in the hospital about to have surgery. We would want to pray for such a person. Do any of you know of anyone in the hospital about to have surgery?" One little girl's hand shot up, "I do!" The pastor was perplexed. He thought he knew his flock and what was going on with them. "Who?" he asked. "My mommy," came the reply. This really threw my friend. He had no idea this

precious little girl's mother was about to undergo surgery. So, caught off guard, he asked, "Really, I didn't know that. What kind of surgery is your mommy having?" He sticks the microphone in front of the little girl and out comes the answer, "A boob job."

When Sherry and I first got together we had a couple we hung out with. I would have described them at the time as "our best couple friends." They were Wayne and Linda McCleskey. I am able to say who they are because they are now both deceased - way too early for both of them. We spent almost some time every week with them. Linda was Sherry's dresser at our wedding and later became producer for a television program I did for the CBS outlet here. At one time, long before we met them, Wayne was actually on the staff of this church as a "youth minister."

A few years after we met them and got really bonded with them, they moved to Seattle. We went to Seattle for many years every year to spend time with them. We met them in other places in the country as well to hike and enjoy each other's company.

When they were in Seattle, Wayne was attached to the Methodist Church there. He was very active with University of Washington students and served in the church on an "as needed basis."

One Sunday he was in charge of the worship service. This is the University Methodist Church in Seattle. The lectionary that Sunday contained a reference to Jesus's teachings and said that "Jesus taught in parables." Wayne's sermon was about parables and specifically about the most famous of Jesus' parables - what we refer to as The Parable of the Prodigal Son.

The church had the custom of having a children's sermon and Wayne thought that a good way to teach the children about parables was to make a parable analogous to a riddle. So far so good. So, he invites the children down. There are a lot of them. Wayne tells them that his sermon is about parables and that a parable is kind of like a riddle. "How many of you know what a riddle is?" No hands. Wayne is a brave man. He keeps going. He said, "Well, the first riddle I can remember hearing when I was your age was this: what is black and white and read (red) all over?" This is before kids had smart phones and iPads. "What is black and white and red (read) all over?" Wayne was not only brave but also, in this case, stupid. Because, he waits too long for an answer. Finally, one girl holds her hand up and offers her answer almost as a question. "Is it two nuns in a chainsaw fight?"

The congregation never recovered. They tried. But, there were these explosions of snickering and laughing that continued like popcorn popping in a pot all over the sanctuary. Finally, Wayne comes to his senses, announces the closing hymn and

they all go home. Having created perhaps one of the best children's sermon stories I've ever heard.

Except maybe for this one:

One of my seminary classmates got a plumb of a church appointment on graduation and move to Georgia to be pastor of a flourishing church in an Atlanta suburb. He inherited a worship service that contained a children's sermon time. A few months after arriving he began a series of sermons based on teachings in the Book of Ecclesiastes. In case you haven't read it, it may be the most realistic and "normal" of all the writings in Scripture.

At any rate, this Sunday the sermon was on the wisdom of saving - saving money was just one aspect of what he had in mind. Saving resources, saving the planet, saving values, and so forth.

So he brought the children down for the children's sermon and started talking to them about saving. "How many of you get an allowance?" Some hands went up. He was off to a good start. "And, what do you do with the money?" There was a variety of answers: spend it for lunch money, give some to the church - that was practically a required answer, and so forth. To nudge them into the arena of talking about saving money he said, "I'm thinking of an animal. This animal can climb trees. It has a bushy tail. It stores nuts in its nest high up in the tree. Do any of you know what animal I am thinking of?" No hands went up

until one little boy stuck up his hand. Mike goes in front of him and he says, “I know the answer is Jesus but it sounds like a squirrel.”

And there we have, beginning so young, an example of the church teaching people what to see and now how to see. “I know the expected answer is Jesus but my intellect tells me it’s a squirrel.”

We ended last week saying that the three things, as far as our current focus in Ordinary Life is concerned, involved in moving into and inhabiting the Sacred Stream were

gaining clarity about Jesus, who he was and what he taught;  
growing in our self-understanding;  
and, consciously participating in the evolutionary process.

Today I want to begin our focus on Jesus and what he taught, and we will also, in the process, contribute to our self understanding as well as consciously participate in the evolutionary process.

Interest in knowing who Jesus, as a figure in history, was and what Jesus might actually have said was never a questioned issue until the middle of the nineteenth century. Up until then the entire world functioned at the mythic consciousness level. Then a German scholar, David Friedrich Strauss (1808 - 1874) decided to take the task on. He started what religious and

biblical scholars refer to as “the first quest for the historical Jesus.” The reason his work is referred to as the first quest is because many years after Strauss did his work, Albert Schweitzer undertook the same task and called his published work “The Quest for the Historical Jesus.” His work is now referred to as “the second quest.” The third quest was begun in the era I began this time talking about last week when Stephen Mitchell and the scholars that made up what was called “The Jesus Seminar” did the work their did.

Three of the most visible people in this “third quest” are people you have heard about or perhaps even heard - they have all spoken here at one time or another: John Shelby Spong, John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg. These are just the most visible, there have been literally hundreds of such scholars and mounds of scholarship.

I am sure you are aware that right down the street from where we are gathered, in a number of places in the famed Houston Medical Center, there are people who are researching and finding cures for cancer. They are making progress. I’m sure you are aware that the discoveries of the James Webb telescope and the work being done by physicists all over the world is leading to more and greater knowledge about the energy field in which we live that we call the universe or the cosmos.

Just so, but not as well publicized are gains that are being made in biblical and archeological research that are enabling

scholars to gain ever clearer pictures about who Jesus was and what he said.

I have decided that I the way I am going to teach that information as it is relevant and comes up as we go along. If and when I say something like “Jesus never said that” (or, he did), I’m basing what I say on what is to me the most trustworthy scholarship that I can find. Okay?

Even though these are now slightly dated, Marcus Borg’s books, “Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time” and “Reading the Bible Again for the First Time” are excellent places to start if this is new territory to/for you.

Part of what it means to grow up is to be willing to step out from under the shade of whatever worldview we inherited in our youth and learn to see and say the world as it is. If we were taught that the religious answer was “Jesus” when what we saw was a “squirrel,” we have to develop the courage to say so.

I don’t know about you but I grew up in a culture that professed goodwill toward all but had separate water fountains, entrances, restrooms, restaurants, and accommodations for “whites” and “coloreds.” Those are what some now refer to as “the good old days.” Memory is deceptive and the comfort that many in our culture now long for was an ignorance that kept them safe with fixed categories of belief and behavior where Jesus was the answer but a squirrel was the reality. It is only



when we transcend the values of tribalism that we ever experience renewal.

We have to pick a road to travel and I'm suggesting the one that Jesus traveled.

Let me quickly remind you of the cognitive developmental model that Jim Marion writes about in his books, "Putting on the Mind of Christ" and "The Death of the Mythic God."

The scholars, like Strauss, Borg, Crossan, etc., have all done their work at the rational consciousness level. The people who oppose them are all doing so from the mythic consciousness level. The purpose of their work is to enable us to move, if we so desire, beyond the rational level to vision-logic consciousness or beyond.

So, Jesus was a real figure in history who was born, scholars now say, about 4 B.C. Sometime in his young life he left home and the best theory is that he joined up with a prophet figure we know as John the Baptist. At some point Jesus left John to begin his own teaching/healing ministry.

We are getting into the Easter season with Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week, just around the corner. Very frequently around this time of year, PBS, CNN, and/or The History Channel will have programs about Jesus, the last week, the crucifixion story etc. One of the scholars very frequently used on

this programs is Bruce Chilton. In addition to be a really nice guy and scholar, his book “Rabbi Jesus” is one of the best books of its kind I have ever read. It is more like reading a novel.

The early followers of Jesus created a story about Jesus that said he began his teaching/healing ministry by going into the desert for forty days where he was tempted by the devil. The word “devil” comes from a word related to “diabolical” which means “to divide.” There is no way of knowing what the actual history is but at some point Jesus realized and began teaching non-duality. His way of putting it was, “I am a child of God. And, so are you.”

This was the “good news” that Jesus wanted to teach. He is characterized as saying, “Repent . . .”

I have this meme that shows Jesus in the typical artist’s rendition of Jesus teaching and he is saying, “Now listen carefully. I don’t want four different versions of this.” Didn’t happen. What he went around saying was “Change your level of consciousness.”

Back to where we started, this change is hazardous. If you change your world view, everything around you will likely change. Your relationships for one thing.

We don’t need to be angry at or ashamed about what we did believe. It was necessary. I am eternally grateful for the church

in which I grew up. It, among other things, taught me the Bible. Leaving that behind, knowing that my well-being at so many levels demanded that I leave that world behind, was extremely difficult but what it taught me was the basic lesson of Buddhism - nothing lasts.

I learned that “love your neighbor as yourself,” which my church taught but didn’t do, wasn’t a command, it was a law of life. We do love others as we love and care for ourselves.

In this process I also learned that cognitive and spiritual growth aren’t matters of how certain one is but how willing one is to be open to the future. Spiritual truth and well-being were and are about resonance. Is this right for me? Is it fair and just to everyone? Nowhere in the database of Jesus sayings can I find him saying, “I came that you might be comfortable.”

We are in a time of deep change. Some people are dismissive of this by saying we are always in a time of change. True. Everything arises and falls away. Nothing lasts. But, we are in a time of deep change. Climate crisis and crises caused by climate change have never in recorded history been what they are now. Human migration caused, in part, by these crises, and in part by human evil has never been on the scale it is today.

My belief and faith, and that is what I am teaching in Ordinary Life, is that we will move through this change more easily if we work to have clarity about the road on which we are

traveling, if we have a clear idea of the destination toward which we want to move, and perhaps even more important, what it is that is in motion on this journey.

I certainly want to move into and along with the sacred stream using the best knowledge and information possible. Even more, I want to move with wisdom and with those values I try to keep before us - love, honesty, freedom. And, I would add with “fearless joy.”

Permit me to take a brief excursion here.

One of the principles of Ordinary Life that I came up with twenty-five years ago now is that “we have a moral obligation to be happy.” We do. But, you can’t make yourself be happy. The desire to be happy and the feeling of unhappiness are one and the same. Happiness is not something we seek. Happiness is something we become.

The desire for perpetual happiness isn’t all bad. It accounts for why we have been so innovative and have developed the society in which we live. I’ll put that in a starker way: the fact that we are all barreling toward uncertain death drives the hunger for more which creates many of the pleasures we enjoy while we are barreling toward suffering and death. The constant feeling of a lack has driven us to find and have more. Not all of it bad. Cures for cancer are driven by the desire to avoid suffering and death.

The happiness I am referring to is a byproduct of doing things that are challenging, meaningful, beautiful and worthwhile. The fact that all of my most important teachers smiled and laughed a lot is what motivated my saying that we have a moral obligation to end up like that. It is not a matter of chasing what feels good but doing what is loving, honest, and freeing. Some people looked at the work being done by folks in the Jesus Seminar, for example, and were terrified. Others looked and learned and though it meant the pain and discomfort associated with leaving one world view in exchange for another, it was and is an experience of incredible joy and excitement; happiness.

The teachings of Jesus were greeted this way. Some folks heard his message and were overcome with joy and happiness. Some were so threatened they ended up executing him.

How do we tell the difference between Jesus and a squirrel? That is to say, how do we put down mythic understandings of and beliefs about Jesus and move into a more rational and, hopefully, vision-logic understanding? How do we know who Jesus really was and what Jesus really said?

As we go forward through the Jesus narrative, and I'm using Stephen Mitchell's version, I will give some information about why and how the best of current biblical scholarship answers the question(s) about what Jesus said.

The honest answer is that we don't know. (If, by the way, you have what is called a "revealed theology," what I just said is heresy.) We have some ideas. The fact is that there are no indisputable facts of history. We can know that certain events happened in the past but that is not the same as knowing what happened.

For example, we know that there was an event that occurred in this country on September the 11th, 2001. Planes flew into the World Trade Center towers. We know a few basic facts about that event. It means different things to different people. What we think it means depends on our history, our country, our personal involvement with that event as well as many other factors. There is the event and, then, there is what that event means to people. If you move further back in time before there were the mechanical recording devices we have now, it is even more difficult to know "what happened."

History is constructed. The history of this country has been written mostly by white colonizing males. What if it had been written by native Americans?

I am going to do my best to present to you a picture of what scholars refer to as "the Jesus of history." I just want to be clear that the picture I present is in no way the "real Jesus." That person is unavailable to us. Just as when you and I die, the real us will not be available. Stories and memories will be available.

The description I give of my father is different depending on the circumstance in which I speak of him and the person or people to whom I speak.

Up until the time of Strauss, and scholars like him, the understanding of Jesus was the understanding of a mythic level. Since the advent of rational consciousness, the picture of Jesus that has emerged is not of some person sent from the heavens above to do something for people but, rather, a person who directly challenged his hearers to a new and radical understanding of God, the world, and, most importantly, of themselves. Though what he had to said and what he did comforted and transformed some people, those in positions of power in the establishment of his day, both religious and political, were highly offended by what he said and did and, eventually, had him executed for it.

We all have to pick a path. The path I have chosen and one I want to learn about and teach is that way Jesus taught and lived. You'll have to say and decide for yourself your path. You can't not have one. Every day you walk some path. What I am looking for is to be affected in the same way that Jesus first followers were - to so apprehend and be apprehended by the Sacred Stream in this man that I experience the transformation he and his teaching offer.

Jesus himself underwent a transformation after the Council of Nicaea to the point that he would be unrecognizable to himself today.

Jesus was from a people, the Jews, who were and have been the most hated and persecuted people in the history of the world. He was poor. The level of his education has remained an object of debate. His life ended, not with a retirement party and rewards ceremony, but executed as a common criminal in the most hideous of death.

Jesus was a Galilean Jew. Judean Jews hated Galilean Jews even more than they hated Samaritans. He was born “out of wedlock.” The likely reason he emphasized both forgiveness and the nature of God as nurturing father is to be found in this origin and his living with it with compassion rather than bitterness. He was a man of compassion. Yet, all he got in return was hatred and abuse. He seems totally free from bigotry and prejudice and yet he was the recipient of it all his life.

The story of Jesus doesn't end with his execution. Jesus lived on the the lives of those who heard him speak, who shared his forgiveness, love and compassion, and who were empowered by the experience of his presence in their lives to carry on the work he had begun.

I want to say six things about the character of Jesus and what he taught.



First, Jesus was a wisdom teacher. Wisdom is not concerned with theories of sin and salvation, rules on how to live and get it right. Wisdom is concerned with how to cope with life.

Second, Jesus was a healer. That there were healers in the ancient world is clearly attested. Since we will soon be dealing with a healing episode from the Jesus narrative, I'm going to wait to amplify on this.

Third, Jesus taught an ethic of trust. Our culture is one of fear and work. We all know of "the Protestant work ethic." You earn your worth and way.

Fourth, Jesus taught "universal kinship." As you probably are aware, there has been a historic and huge debate over what is meant by the phrase "the kingdom of God" or "the kingdom of heaven." Scholars now are mostly agreed that what Jesus meant was "the kinship of people." People were invited into the empowering communities created by their relationship with Jesus. In a time of tribal culture, this was radical stuff.

"Love your enemies" was the second most radical teaching Jesus offered. The most radical? Seen in the parable of the Good Samaritan, it is "let your enemy love you."

Jesus taught the breaking of ties that bind people into frightened and competing communities.

Fifth, the teachings of Jesus are marked by celebration and joy. He taught with humor and irony. He was what we would call “a social deviant.”

Sixth, he was a person of integrity. One meaning of his death on the cross was his unwillingness to compromise his vision.

If you are wondering what is the practical application of this, look at the list. We need people like this in the world.

The kind of biblical and Jesus information that I teach is not new to the world of biblical or Jesus scholarship. It began with Strauss and has picked up speed ever since. When works like Stephen Mitchell’s book first hit the market, the church was, in general, highly suspicious of it, even hostile. After 9/11 I turned to teaching this material because I saw, and still see, that fundamentalism is dangerous and destructive and that Christian fundamentalism, now called Christian Nationalism, is the result of stupidity and ignorance.

After a talk I gave in here not long after 9/11 someone came up to me and gave his exit speech that consisted of, “I think you ought to stay away from this Jesus Seminar stuff and just preach the Gospel. People need to believe in Jesus.”

My response was and still is, “That, my friend, is precisely what I am trying to do. People need people like Jesus in this world today.”

People need wisdom - which includes religious and biblical literacy. In the beginning following Jesus wasn't about believing. It was about loving and living in loving relationships. When did the shift occur and why?

Trust is about moving into the future without being scared witless. We don't have to hang on to the mythic statements of the early church as literal truths. Those people struggled to make sense of their world with the level of consciousness they had. We build on the foundation they laid. We don't become living bricks in dead mortar.

Further, let's celebrate the joy that there is nothing to fear in uncovering the roots of our tradition. We follow truth. Fighting rear-guard actions is not trust. And, whatever we come up with will be provisional.

Perhaps most important on this list is the matter of integrity.

Taking personal responsibility for life and living, for the living of our lives is hard for people at the mythic level. They want someone else to be in charge. Which, of course, opens the

door to tyrants. The God of Jesus refuses to come to our rescue. Remember, Jesus' radical teaching It rains on the just and the unjust. We have to take responsibility for ourselves and our planet. Of course, if we stay at the mythic level of consciousness, that's like putting a billy goat in charge of the garden.

Here is my current statement of faith: (Borrow it if it is useful to you.)

I believe that by living by the wisdom teaching of Jesus we can be healed. This healing lies in trusting that it is both okay to go forward and to live as Jesus did, loving each other and all others as the relatives to are and to celebrate life to the hilt - to live with joy. Maybe even to know that we have a moral obligation not only to do these things but also to be happy.

Here is your moment of Zen, or today's class in a sentence.

Most people need someone to be Jesus to them and, perhaps more importantly, to be Jesus in their behalf.

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: you carry precious cargo. So, watch your step.