



**July 11, 2010 Sermon by Kimiko Karpoff**  
*Jesus of Being*

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our strength and our redeemer.

Once there was someone who did such amazing things and said such wonderful things that people followed him. One day they asked him "Who are you?" and he said, "I am the light of the world."

Imagine trying to describe to someone who has no knowledge of a peach, the experience of eating a peach warm off the tree, moments after picking with the juice running down your face and fingers. How would you describe the taste of it?

I might say it is as sweet as the sun. Someone who doesn't know might have a sense of what that means, but would they really get it if they'd not tasted it? And someone else might describe it as the nectar of gods, like honey imbued with the flowers of heaven.

So which is it? Sunshine or flower-imbued nectar? It's actually neither, potentially both and probably something more. These are simply metaphors trying to capture what ultimately you just have to experience to know. And arguing about the descriptives is pointless because they are not the peach, only ways in which we are attempting to describe the peach.

Jesus said, "I am the Light of the World. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." But Jesus is Light in the same way the peach tastes like the flowers of heaven. It is a way to try to capture in words the essence of something that has to be lived.

It seems to me that the Christian tradition has been inordinately focussed on the description, rather than the lived experience of Jesus the Christ. Whether you believe in sunshine or nectar has become more important than whether or not you ever take the time to walk into an orchard in August and search for a peach at its perfect moment of ripeness.

Christians have fought about belief for centuries. One such argument was about whether Jesus is of the same or a similar substance to God. Votes cast at the famous council of Nicaea in 325, decreed that Jesus is of the same substance as God. And votes at the council of Chalcedon in 451 determined that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine.

I can say that I do or don't believe either of these statements, but really it doesn't impact my life or my behaviour one way or the other. I remember hearing once that people don't change their behaviour because of something they think, but they often change what they think because of something they do. That's why it's most important to go eat at the community soup kitchen. Don't just talk about the peach, get into the orchard.

In today's scripture, Jesus sends 70 of his followers out ahead of him. "Go on your way," he says.

"See I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves." They are not to carry a purse, bag nor sandals. They are to cure the sick, eat what is given them and to proclaim the Kingdom of God.

Jesus is notably not lecturing them about what to believe. He's saying engage with the world. You will meet people you don't like, but look at them and know them as human. Heal those who need it, knowing that they will likely be unclean and poor. You will be fed good food, or not. Accept each graciously and with thanks. It is through the doing that you will learn what it means that "the Kingdom of God has come near to you."

John Shelby Spong talks about shifting his understanding of the practice of prayer. He used to spend, he says, the first two hours of each morning in prayer preparing for the day. Now he spends those two hours in preparation for a day of prayer.

Let me say that again. He spends two hours each morning *in preparation for a day of prayer*.<sup>1</sup> "My actions," he said, "my engagement with people, the facing of concrete issues--all these became for me the real time of prayer. My prayer came to be identified with my living, my loving, my being, my meeting, my confronting, my struggles for justice, my desire to be an agent of the world's transformation."<sup>2</sup>

This is what Jesus was getting at with the disciples. Go be in the world, engaging God and engaging life. This is how Jesus lived.

Marcus Borg talked about following *the way* of Christianity. He said, "Once one sees Christianity as a *way*, it means the practice, which means paying attention to the reality of God and our relationship with God. It means that practice, not believing is central."<sup>3</sup>

*The way* harkens back to Jesus' ministry where he sat at tables and ate with social outcasts, where he healed people. This is the kingdom of God. *The way* is described in Acts when the apostles shared their wealth with any in need, broke bread together and ate with glad and generous hearts, healed people and praised God.

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1 John Shelby Spong. *A New Christianity for a New World: Why Traditional Faith is Dying and How a New Faith is Being Born*. [San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 2001.] 196-197.

2 Ibid. 197.

3 From a 2009 video posted at <http://gnoscast.blogspot.com/2009/09/christianity-as-spiritual-path-marcus.html>. 4:01. Accessed May 12, 2010.

4 Acts 2:44-47; 3:6; 5:12-16.

Barbara Brown Taylor<sup>5</sup> also talked about the growing importance, for her, of the *practice* of being Christian. She emphasized the practice part, the doing in contrast to any kind of specific belief. This was her impetus for writing "An Altar in the World," her 2009 book that explores spiritual practice in everyday life.

The Christian way, Brown Taylor says, is not essentially a way of words, but action. "With all kinds of opportunities to tell people what to think," she notes, "[Jesus] told them what to do instead. Wash feet. Give your stuff away. Share your food. Favour reprobates. Pray for those who are out to get you. Be the first to say, 'I'm sorry.'"<sup>6</sup>

It is through our bodies that we experience being both human and divine. "To be fully one is to be fully the other."<sup>7</sup> Jesus shared bread and wine with his friends and named this fully human act as sacrament. "Do this," he said--not *believe* this but *do* this--"in remembrance of me."<sup>8</sup>

We touch, we smell, we hear, we do. Through this, we are. We know things through our bodies that we cannot learn through someone else's mere words.

How we live our lives is how we experience Jesus, how God is manifest as God was manifest in Jesus. This does not mean piety or some notion of holier than thou goodness. It means allowing ourselves to be emptied of our ego and through the transforming presence of God filled with our highest human selves, and taking *that* understanding of ourselves into the world.

I resonate with Diarmuid O'Murchu when he said "If we honour, as Jesus did, the primary role of the Kingdom of God, which is about life radically lived to the full, then resurrection is not so much about the vindication of his death as about the affirmation of a life lived in utter fullness."<sup>9</sup>

Being, doing, is how we connect with the Divine viscerally, how the Christ becomes incarnate. Our culture has tended toward cerebral knowing and understanding, to the detriment of other ways of knowing.

There is a delightful story that I have heard with many variations. In its essence it is this:

There was a Christian monastery in which all the monks were aging and dying. The buildings were run down. The fields were mostly bare. No villagers came to worship at the chapel. All seemed destined to end within the next few years. The doors would certainly be closing soon.

One day, the Abbott was visited by a dear friend, a Buddhist monk. They enjoyed the

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5 Barbara Brown Taylor. May 9, 2010. G. Peter Kaye workshop and lecture series at the Vancouver School of Theology.

6 Barbara Brown Taylor. *An Altar in the World: a Geography of Faith*. [New York: Harper Collins, 2009]. 118-119.

7 Ibid. 118.

8 Ibid. 44.

9 Diarmuid O'Murchu. *Catching Up with Jesus: A Gospel Story for our Time*. [New York; Crossroad Publishing Company, 2005]. 26

day together as they laughed and shared stories over a lifetime of knowing one another. The next morning, the Buddhist monk arose to leave the four monks and their mostly empty monastery. He said to his friend the Abbott, "During the night I had a dream and I dreamt of your monastery and you remaining monks. I heard a voice say to me, 'The Christ is One of You.'" He looked at his aging friend and said, "It is clear to me, the Christ is One of You."

With that he left. The Abbott thought, which one of us is the Christ? Brother Martin is always sleeping through morning prayers. Certainly it is not Martin. Brother Simeon is a terrible cook and makes us ill with his concoctions. Certainly it is not Simeon. Brother David is ill-tempered and surly. Certainly it is not David. And I, certainly, I am not the Christ.

That day at lunch, the Abbott shared his friend's dream with the others, concluding, "The Christ is one of us." They shared his judgements of the other monks, although each one saw the others' failings in slightly different shadows of truth. But, just in case, they began to treat one another like each of the others was the Christ.

With joy they greeted one another. With love they embraced one another. With grace they forgave one another. With delight, they saw the fullness of God in one another. Soon, they found energy for serving. Soon, they discovered their joyful voices of singing. Soon, their fields began to yield fruitful harvests. Little by little, their monastery came back to life. People from across the countryside came to worship.

The word spread and people knew that "one of the brothers was the Christ!" The question always remained, "Which brother is it?" When all of the brothers had departed this life, it was said that the spirit of the Living Christ remained in the monastery. It was no longer a dream. The Christ was alive and dwelling within his people.<sup>10</sup>

Ronald Rolheiser said that "We are the Body of Christ...God's presence in the world today depends very much upon us. We have to keep God present in the world in the same way Jesus did. We have to become, as Teresa of Avila so simply put it, God's physical hands, feet, mouthpiece and heart in this world."<sup>11</sup>

And it is through doing so that we will truly know Jesus for ourselves.

May it be so.

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<sup>10</sup> This version was told in a sermon by Timothy C. Ahrens, at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, March 29, 2009. Accessed on-line, May 12, 2010. This story is often told with a Rabbi and is known as "The Rabbi's Gift."

<sup>11</sup> Ronald Rolheiser. *The Holy Longing: the Search for a Christian Spirituality*. [New York:Random House, 1999]. 80. Accessed on-line Googlebooks, May 15, 2010.