

## *They Said What?: Hard Teachings*

Lake Street Church of Evanston

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So the start of this month, for those of you earning your perfect attendance awards out there, you know I preached a sermon on the fact that we're already there – that striving for perfection or even advancement in your spiritual life can be a hindrance to that same advancement. Well, forget all of that. And you wanted your religion to be coherent and logical, full of vigor while also consistent? Come on – religion is full of the paradox, the wacky, the hard, the sublime all at one, that's what makes it interesting.

And so we have in our readings today two prime examples of hard teachings – and folks' reactions to them. In our reading the Buddha gives instructions to a set of disciples that make some turn away, some spout blood from their nose, and others to attain freedom from impurity. Notice that this is what these hard teachings always do – they liberate some and form a stumbling block for others.

Here we have one of the most hardcore statements from Jesus – let the dead bury the dead, for no one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God. This one's important for a lot of reasons, but it can be read as summing up Jesus' radical rejection of some of the purity laws of halakhah, or it could be read as him claiming some Nararite status, a not too uncommon thing in first century Palestine. One thing scholars are clear about? It's a harsh statement.

And that's perhaps what these statements do – they stand out. And because they stand out, in case you're curious, at least in the case of Jesus, what we end up with is that the Jesus seminar folks are pretty certain he said it. And so it heightens the prophetic drama. It goes along with fishermen dropping their nets to follow him. It also goes along with other harsh statements of Jesus – specifically Jesus is really anti-family. Your parents your brothers, your sister, you can't keep those attachments if you want to follow this path. You have a new family now.

At their core, they are a call to be all in on the mission of the Blessed One, or be all in with Jesus, or all in with whatever founder of a new religious vision you want to think about. There's all these statements that seem so harsh in our ancient witnesses, all these places where folks who are filled with compassion give no lead way for people to be people, and that's hard to deal with. But perhaps we would be better off just recognizing them as calls to commitment. To be all in. I see this all the time in my favorite writers of spiritual wisdom – 4<sup>th</sup> century monks living in the desert. In one of these stories a monk receives a great inheritance and asks what to do? His spiritual father says, well you could give it to the church, but they'd just make banquets out of it. You could give it to your family, but what difference will it make. You could give it to the poor,

but you won't listen to that, so what difference does it make what I have to say? Blunt, real, unimaginable clarity.

For the real teachings that have caused people to turn away, to spout blood from their noses in this day and age have not been statements about family or about the dead burying the dead. They have been about inclusion. About the love of neighbor, about love that overflows boundaries. How many people have lost their minds at the inclusion of queer folks in churches? I was talking to someone the other day who had his church picketed for putting out a rainbow flag.

Thankfully there's some tenuous progress in pockets of churches, but this has been time and time again what people have gotten tied up in knots about – radical welcome. And if these hard teachings show us anything at all it is that we had better get it right. That we had better be all in on the vision that our visionary founders have given us. And that vision has only gotten clearer, more bold, more visionary for folks who fought for it in this country at Stonewall, for people who continue to fight for it at our border, for black and brown folks who have had enough of violence and white folks who just don't get it.

Our faith is made better by paying heed to those voices. And that may make some folks uncomfortable, because the demands made on people of conscience are great – make no mistake. There is an old curse I'm fond of: "may you live in interesting times." Well, it is a curse inasmuch as living in interesting times demands action, not trite words. Too often the church trades in words over acts.

Do not forget that as much as I talked about attention last week, that attention is also supposed to give rise to contemplative action, action made better for the attention, action guided by those who are speaking a word that many don't want to hear in our society. As for me, God is still speaking today, just as she spoke at Stonewall, at the border, at Ferguson, just as she will continue to speak wherever people of faith and conscience are found doing the work that needs to be done.

So, what will you do? Will you turn back? No – you can't unknow something. It's here with you, it's gotten inside of you. That thirst for justice will always do that. It will have you uttering phrases that you didn't think you could. Perhaps with regards to religion that is bigoted or exclusionary you may even find yourself saying, let the dead bury the dead? Perhaps that's understandable to you.

That to me is the spirit of some of these teachings today – may you hear those words anew, may you grapple with how to be committed in a time where it is demanded of you. May you show up when you're called. Stand and be counted. I promise you will not get it right all the time, but don't be perfect. Be righteous, and be fallible. Admit your mistakes freely. Fail up. Embrace the call to be more than you have been told you could become, free-er than anyone imagined. Put your hands to the plow and. don't. look. Back.