

Pat Conover: Jesus as the Center and Meaning of History

Sermon for Seekers Church

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Jesus as the Center and Meaning of History

Intimate Creator, we revere your name.

We long for the establishment of your guidance in this world.

Provide us with the bread we need for today.

Relieve the burden of financial debt from our families to the extent that we have erased the debt of those who owe us money.

(This is a transliteration of the Scholar's text of Luke 11:2b-4. Pat Conover, July 2001)

This is my third sermon in Seekers on Jesus as the center and meaning of history. The phrase "Jesus as the center and meaning of history" was created by Paul Tillich. It parallels the phrase "Ground of being" which Tillich used for God as creator. It also parallels Tillich's phrase, "Living Presence," which Tillich used for the Holy Spirit. These phrases were aimed at helping English speakers in the United States in the 20th century to appreciate the Trinitarian faces

of God. When Christians talk about the three persons of God, whether they mean to or not, they are talking about the three ways our single God becomes known to us. Looking for all three faces is the most basic of all guides to spiritual growth. We look at the creation we share as creatures, at the history/story of humanity, and at the immediate presence of God known in our prayer and reflection, known by the lures of what is not but might be.

I am focusing my preaching on our engagement of Jesus because I feel this is what Seekers most needs to hear from the pulpit these days.

It seems to me that Seekers is doing better with God as creator, the first person of the trinity, the father and mother of us all, the holiness of the created order and the grounding of our emerging ecological consciousness.

It seems obvious to me, but perhaps not to you, that the favorite face of God in Seekers is the Holy Spirit, the third person of the trinity, the shining face of Shekinah, the God of sexual ecstasy and still small voice, and especially, for Seekers, as the lure to embrace our gifts and to offer them in called-out ministry. In honor of Samantha's sermon last week, I will talk about this aspect of God as Shekinah, shining presence.

Like Samantha, I came to my own Christian adulthood, in large part, by embracing Shekinah as a counter-balance to the overwhelming emphasis on Jesus and the Bible in my mainline upbringing. I was baptized as a Presbyterian, a Calvinist.

Moreover, I was not alone in my generation in making this move. Some Christian historians have named the 20th century of Christianity as a time of displacing an emphasis on the second person of the trinity with an emphasis on the third, and, correspondingly, with a weakening of the Protestant traditions grounded in Luther and Calvin and an ascendance of Anabaptist and Pentecostal traditions.

Many of the traditions and forms of our Seekers Church come from Anabaptist sources, not least of all the Southern Baptist grounding of Gordon Cosby. We are much more likely to hear endearing words at Coffee Hour about our Quaker connections or our Anabaptist friends in the House Church or at Rolling Ridge while hearing critical words about the institutional church, by which we primarily mean mainline Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. In addition, we are clearly following a schismatic (or sectarian) organizational form common to Anabaptists.

Therefore, it surprises me not-at-all that Samantha and Seekers met last week in the renaming and reclaiming of Shekinah as a name and face of God. Many of the sermons from this pulpit are grounded in our preacher's awareness of what God is about in our personal and common lives. I think of them as testimony based sermons rather than scripturally based sermons. In particular, it seems to me that we do not ground many sermons in a common effort to understand and follow Jesus. Given my image of preaching and conversation in Seekers, a picture I largely admire and celebrate, you can see why I think we need some more Jesus talk.

When I tell you that I am thankful that Jesus is my savior, my

Christ; and when I say to you that I believe Jesus can be the Savior, the Christ, for all the world, I expect many of you to start clenching up and feeling resistive. Maybe my perceptions are unfair, but I need to tell you something of what I have seen or heard.

- Some of you may resist turning to Jesus because he is a man.
- Others may resist because Jesus seems distant or archaic, his stories unrelated to the world we live in.
- Perhaps you are put off by the scholarly debates about Jesus, feel shaken when you learn about the distractions and limitations of the recorded and unrecorded gospels.
- Others of you may feel rebellious because you have first learned about Jesus as an authority figure who set impossible goals and makes you feel guilty.
- I have been most distracted and put off by the common references, found in all expressions of Christendom, which reduce Jesus to a magical or supernatural figure, a pawn in a redemption myth that pretends the important reality of life is after death or after the end of the world.
- I am most aware that many of you do not like, are even embarrassed by, the sheer particularity of Jesus. How could one person be so important, no matter how great he was? How dare we devalue the contributions of other religious leaders by claiming that Jesus stands above them all?

This last objection is particularly strong for those of us who feel deeply insulted by the fundamentalist presentation of Christian Triumphalism. The question, "Do you believe in Jesus Christ as your only Lord and Savior?" can be presented in a terribly aggressive and domineering manner. Such presentations

ask for acquiescence and assault sensitivities that require a deeper engagement.

We must not lose heart because we understand so little, because we stand in the same place as the disciples. They did not understand very well either. Thank goodness, there is some help in today's Luke scripture. One of the ways the disciples tried to understand Jesus was to ask him about prayer.

The first verses in the 11th chapter of Luke, match up with the 6th chapter of Matthew. That means we are dealing with a scripture that was first written down in the long lost Q source. Q was apparently a sayings gospel with a form like the Gospel of Thomas. Q carried just the kinds of sayings that are found in Matthew and Luke, in this case as the Lord's Prayer. Quite possibly, someone who directly knew Jesus, someone who wrote down the highest impact comments he or she heard from Jesus, wrote the Q source before Matthew and Luke,.

Let us take up the Q only version of the Lord's Prayer once again. The transliteration I have provided for you is based on the Scholar's text, the most recent compiling of a Greek translation. The Scholar's text is based on the latest documentary discoveries and research and is certain to follow all the other translations of the Bible into inadequacy. Fortunately, the points I want to make do not depend on the nuances of one or another word or phrase.

Let us enter the Lord's Prayer again.

Intimate Creator, we revere your name.

We long for the establishment of your guidance in this world.

Provide us with the bread we need for today.

Relieve the burden of financial debt from our families to the extent that we have erased the debt of those who owe us money.

Notice first that this Q only version has none of the ruffles and flourishes of heaven or the end of the world or other additions from the early church. This is a here and now kind of a prayer.

Notice next that the prayer is addressed to God and not to Jesus. Jesus names God as "abba," an intimate word for father. "Our Father" is a fair translation, but "Daddy" is better. I use the transliteration "intimate creator" because Father is the traditional Christian name for the creator, the first person of the trinity. I also use it because it reflects the intimacy of the word "abba." Jesus used a single name that points both to the transcendence of the first person of the trinity and immanence of the third person of the trinity. Such a name deserves reverence.

The phrase most of us are used to, "Thy kingdom come," is translated in the Scholar's text as "Impose your imperial rule." The phrase, "Impose your imperial rule," must have been exciting for the hearers in 1st century Palestine who lived under Roman imperial rule that claimed divine establishment.

Nevertheless, it does not work so well today. That is why I went to "establish your guidance," though some might think that a weak phrase. At least it is here and now language that opens up a world of prayer, both personal and collective. It is just the kind of phrase that points to Jesus as the center and meaning of history.

Then we get two guidelines for establishing God's guidance.

The first guidance is perfectly and immediately relevant for itinerant prophets and healers, just the kind of thing Jesus would say with hope for understanding. *Provide us with the bread we need for today.* When you have walked away from the apparent safety of the social and cultural understandings and structures of the day, when you have started a risky path that can include a cross, you have become vulnerable and you need daily bread. You need all kinds of daily bread, not the least of which is food. It is a prayer that claims our need and insecurity. It is a prayer that emphasizes community, the sharing of whatever bread is provided as gift. It is a prayer that is honest about the dangers of the temple, the dangers of Jerusalem, the dangers of Rome.

The second guidance is similar to the first. The use of the language of financial debt is jarring to some of us, but it is true to the text and it fits perfectly with the rest of this prayer as based only in the Q source. Jesus is pointing us not only to freedom from social and cultural expectations but also to economic freedom. Rome had established a horribly oppressive economy. The economy of the United States is wonderful in comparison. Nevertheless, the economy of the United States has its own oppressions. The pending bankruptcy bill, supported by almost all Republican and some Democratic

leaders like Senator Daschle, will make debt oppression far worse.

My sense is that most of you have not known, and perhaps not even seen, oppressive debt. That is an excuse to tell two stories.

When I was 14 years old and living in Tallahassee, Florida, I started working in the summers for the U.S. Department of Agriculture on survey teams that measured crop allotments. I saw sharecropping up close and personal. The lenders in the sharecropping system took half the crop. The owners of the land, who also did all the work, never came out ahead. It is the way the rural white South reduced the slaves after the emancipation from slavery, after the reconstruction program of 40 acres and a mule. The people I got to know were still farming 40 acres with mules in the 1950's. It was not a pretty sight. After 80 years of labor, the families of former slaves were heading for empty-handed poverty in northern cities, scab labor to undercut union organizing. The plantation owners not only got the benefit of all that labor, they got the 40 acres and the mules. Maybe some of you will be happy that the white owners mostly stopped farming the land and mostly turned it into the open woods of hunting preserves.

When I moved to North Carolina, I learned about company towns. I learned about Kannapolis, the home of Cannon Mills. Cannon owned the mills, the houses and the store. They encouraged borrowing from the store and the workers never got out of debt. The owners also owned the YMCA building and controlled the churches. You can believe there were exciting stories about the few independent churches, burning churches, the Ku Klux Klan. The racism was awful but even deeper was the

manipulation of racism to threaten low-income whites into economic submission and then using those whites to oppress black people to protect their marginal survival.

It was ugly. And yes, I still buy Cannon towels.

Stewardship is not primarily about tithing a tenth of your income to the church. Stewardship is about holding all of your resources lightly and offering them up to God's purposes.

Forgiving the debts of others is also about ending the current forms of economic oppression that set the terms of buying and selling against those who labor here and abroad. We cannot escape the sin of living in this present economic system anymore that the followers of Jesus could escape the system of the first century. There are some wonderful things about the economy in the United States, but there is dreadful oppression as well, oppression that steals the life chances of millions. How do you feel about eating the labor of people who are trying to make a living on \$5.15 an hour, and the millions who earn even less? Last year, the Republican in the Senate blocked an increase in the minimum wage by pretending to support it, but only if there was an end to the law that requires overtime pay for hourly workers. The same threat hangs over this year's effort to raise the minimum wage to \$6.65 an hour by 2003.

Christians point to Jesus as the center and meaning of history because we see Jesus as making God manifest. In the Lord's Prayer, we see the manifestation of the longing for enough to eat everyday and a fresh start from economic bondage. Jesus

did not shrink from truths that would lead him, and many of his followers, to outrageously ugly and painful deaths.

Appreciating Jesus as the center and meaning of history is not Triumphalism, it is not Jesus over his religious rivals, it is about seeing the manifestation of God in our daily lives, not just in creation, not just in the potentials and visions of Shekinah. To honor Jesus as the center and meaning of history is to be willing to see where Jesus points, to see Jesus in all the people who incarnate wonderful and dangerous truth. Jesus can help you appreciate the following story.

Lillian Howard Potter was a student at Walt Whitman High School in Montgomery County. She is a recent graduate of Georgetown Law School. In high school, she was an athlete and she made life better for athletes like my Samantha. Before Lillian Potter, the Montgomery County Schools were not paying much attention to Title IX. Title IX requires schools to provide equal athletic opportunities for boys and girls. Lillian was a basketball player and she did not like having to practice at off hours, to play games at off hours, while the boys got prime time.

Lillian sent a letter to the school superintendent and threatened a Title IX lawsuit. The superintendent responded by asking her to withhold the lawsuit and to serve on a committee to review the situation and make recommendations. She served on the committee.

In her words:

During my senior year of high school, it was impossible for me

to walk down the halls of my high school without being called a "dyke" or my personal favorite "man-woman." The harassment followed my everywhere – to class, in the parking lot, at the McDonalds at lunch, at the mall, and at parties on the weekend. During every class period, at least one student would interrupt class with some epithet or insult directed toward me. Sadly, teachers did nothing to discourage the conduct. The athletic director, who was also my history teacher, managed on a daily basis to segue from American history into a "discussion on gender equity," which inevitably descended into an ad hominine attack on me by both him and other students. The principal in particular enjoyed arguing with me in public. Besides this verbal harassment from my peers, teachers, and school administrators, I was spit upon, received threatening phone calls, had threatening letters and notes left on my car, locker and mailbox, was shoved and pushed in the halls, and had my car spit on.

Many times, I wondered why I had chosen to take on this fight. Once, en route to yet another meeting of the county task force, I felt completely overwhelmed and drained.

In the end, the county committee declared that the total county did not comply with Title IX and made over 100 specific recommendations for corrections.

As a law student, Lillian wrote her story as part of a thoughtful analysis about how legal discrimination against transgender people and other sexual minorities can also be used against straight people like herself. I am not only thankful for Samantha. Since I am one of the people who actually fit the hateful names she received, I am thankful for her insight and advocacy.

- How can Jesus help you see God becoming manifest in and around you.
- How are you saved from meaninglessness?
- Do you really want to pray the Lord's Prayer?