

Jesus as TROUBLE

Luke 12:49-56

Jesus: spell his name TROUBLE. The words in Luke are loaded with trouble: fire, baptism, stress, division, and eight times the word “against.” A Baptist deacon voted the same way on every issue: “**I’m agin it preacher.**” His whole existence was an encyclopedia of being against. Well, in America “being against” is a growth industry. It pays well, you get to be on television, and you don’t have to do any actual work.

Well Jesus was all the trouble in the world from the outset. At his dedication in the temple, all of eight days young, Jesus caused a prophetic outburst: “**This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel.**” TROUBLE! As a baby Jesus haunted the dreams of Herod, who ordered the killing of all boys under the age of two in Bethlehem. TROUBLE! As a twelve-year-old boy he worried his parents: “I must be about my Father’s business.” TROUBLE! At his home town synagogue of Nazareth, he enraged the congregation by insisting that God cared for foreigners. They tried to kill him for that sermon. TROUBLE! Jesus was trouble from the outset.

As a teacher he got under the skin of **every** religious/political group in Palestine.^[i] Jesus had little patience with the **Pharisees**, religious strict constructionists; the Sadducees, first-century equivalents of T. V. evangelists, who turned the Temple into a den of thieves; the Herodians, a “downtown luncheon club,” aligned with the powerful elite of the city; the Essenes who left town years before, refusing to have anything to do with politics; the Zealots super patriotic tea-drinking conspiracy masters and violence lovers. TROUBLE!!!!

But haven’t times changed? Jesus isn’t trouble today, is he? Haven’t we made him so easy that everyone can believe in him and ignore him all at once? But what does Jesus say to us? “I have come to bring division.” He was talking about families divided over faith, but today, Jesus offends our cultural sensitivities. Good heavens, all along we have been thinking of faith as an easy-going compromise with the world – where no one is offended, and every truth claim gets equal billing?^[ii] We aren’t asking for stars in a crown, but shouldn’t we get a pat on the back for being so agreeable? Instead, “I came to bring fire and division to the earth.” We are shocked.

Now, do we see the little game we’ve been playing? Have you ever taken your granddaughter to American Girl Doll Store? You can order a doll that looks just like you. Well, welcome to the American Jesus Doll Store. Make Jesus look like you, talk like you, think like you. In the delightful novel, *Raney*, Charles, college librarian and Episcopalian, and Raney, small town Baptist girl, are a newly married couple. They get into a fight over Jesus. Charles says, “Raney, Jesus Christ was a radical. If the people in Bethel Free Will Baptist met Jesus they’d laugh at him . . . or lynch him.” “A radical? Charles, I had a personal experience with Jesus Christ when I was twelve years old. He wasn’t a radical then. And I didn’t laugh. As a matter of fact, I cried.” “Were you saved, Raney? Is that it? Were you saved and now you’re going to heaven and nothing else matters?” “Charles, you can run down whoever and whatever

you want to, but you run down my experience of Jesus Christ you are putting yourself below the belly of a hog.” Raney went to the bedroom and slammed the door with both hands as hard as she could. Charles stomped out of the house and drove off. And didn’t come back for thirty minutes. Divided family. Jesus was and is trouble.

Is that what we’ve been up to around here? We think Jesus thinks like us, believes like us, and blesses all we do. Jesus is a commodity, a symbol, a flag to run up the pole. Perhaps this is why Jesus appears to matter so much more in America than in Europe. Here we use Jesus for every political and social cause.

Almost everyone has opinions about Jesus. Movie makers, novelists, newspaper columnists, the garden variety atheist at the Boston Stoker, the comic writers of *South Park*, the television opinionator. People just think they know Jesus, but they are suspicious of the Jesus specialists. If you had cancer, you’d see an oncologist; depression, a psychiatrist; tax issues, a CPA; legal problems; a lawyer. But in our amazingly anti-intellectual culture, the one person who can’t seem to be trusted with Jesus is the Christian theologian, who has given his or her life to the study of Scripture, theology, philosophy, and ethics, and who clings to a faith informed by Scripture, history, and tradition.^[iii] “I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, light of light, very God of very God.” “BORING!” shouts our world, but it makes a lot more sense to me than the theory that Jesus was a great teacher who gave good advice.^[iv]

Listen, if you want good advice for prosperous living, listen to Joel Osteen. But if you want a gospel that’s tough enough and trouble enough to survive our kind of world, let me recommend that you give the real Jesus another chance – **“the one who lived a human life and had a human will whose power and joy was the perfect performance of who God is and what God wants, the performance of the Word of God.”**^[v]

Now, perhaps, dimly, we start to understand. Jesus refuses to fit our agenda. Jesus is not a candidate, sponsor, or on a side. He was never a member of the moral majority; they crucified him as a member of the immoral minority – between two thieves. Faith is not about Jesus joining our side; it is about us following Jesus. Jesus may not be on our side. Let me say this again: Jesus may not be on our side.

New Testament scholar, E. P. Sanders, reminds us that today’s story of families divided over faith was a later church issue. Known as “retrojection,” this method takes an issue and puts it back in the time of Jesus and allows Jesus to speak with authority to the church about the issue.

I’m asking that you join me in a single project: Take our troubling issues and overlay them with the words of Jesus. Let Jesus, whom we assume is present with us, lead the way as we discern the purpose of life. We have Jesus and we have Scripture and we

have all these troublesome issues. Let's work with the material we have. Let us run the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

[i] It is a mistake to assume that these groups are anything other than representatives of society, culture, politics, and life in any age, including our own. These are our kind of people. This eliminates the prospect of anti-Semitism and it also gives the gospel story a chance at transforming our lives rather than us simply continuing to act as if the Pharisees and et al are the ultimate and only enemies of Jesus.

[ii] Religion is not a private affair and it is not just individualistic. If religion is private and for the individual only, pretty soon there will be no religious conversation. There's an anxiety among believers that we lack the words to describe our faith in public. In the short story, "Personal Testimony," a twelve-year-old minister's daughter at a Baptist summer camp makes hundreds of dollars running "a ghost-writing service for Jesus," composing for other campers the personal testimonies of conversion they are expected to give. We have actually grown comfortable with this amazing silence, this complete lack of a faith language in our daily lives. As Flip Wilson once said, "I'm a Jehovah's Bystander. They wanted me to be a Jehovah's Witness, but I don't want to be involved."

[iii] See Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate*. Eagleton challenges the new atheism of Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. He even conflates their names into one name, "Ditchkins," and then skewers them both as spokespersons of the new atheism. But this is not the usual response even among the churches. We give the new atheists too much credit. There is a persecution of Christian faith by secular, materialistic, intellectuals. They pour so much scorn on belief in God and make such fun of believers. And their intellectual gravitas is so accepted, their professional vitae so honored, and their intelligence so prized, that thousands of ordinary citizens buy their arguments without carefully checking them out. For example, how many of you are aware that the arguments of Dawkins and Hitchens are against believing in a notion of God that was alive in the 19th century, but one which no believer embraces today?

[iv] Are we really determined to be part of a Christian movement that marginalizes Jesus so that he becomes merely a quizzical teacher of wisdom, to be ranged alongside other quizzical teachers of wisdom, from many traditions. No reason emerges as to why we should take this teacher any more or less seriously than any other. It is not clear why even a sustained attempt to follow his maxims, his isolated aphorisms, should offer hope in a world threatened by ecological disasters, nuclear holocausts, resurgent tribalisms—and, for those insulated from such things in certain parts of the Western world, the moral and spiritual bankruptcy of materialism. The whole point of calling Gospels "Gospels" was, I suggest that they did contain reason for hope, good news to a world that badly needed it. If we persist in our distancing ourselves from Jesus, we are systematically deconstructing our own faith. If Jesus really is just a

wise rabbi, a great teacher, and an inspiring role model, then there is no gospel, no good news. There is only good advice, and we have no reason for thinking that it will have any effect. From a historical point of view it might of course be true that there is no good news to be had. Christianity as a whole might simply have been whistling in the dark for two thousand years. Subversive aphorisms may be the only comfort, the only hope, we have. But I seriously doubt that is so. There is still Jesus in this house and he is still making trouble and that means he is making trouble for us in our minds and hearts. Never let go of that. Never become so immersed in this materialistic world that Jesus no longer matters to you. Never let go of the serious, intentional, engaged effort to follow Jesus.

[v] Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust*.