

Ian Punnett
June 1, 2008
"Jesus Thinks You're an Idiot"
Central Presbyterian Church Sermon
Matthew 7:21-29

First of all let me say "thank you" for inviting me to preach this morning. As a graduate of a Presbyterian seminary, it's a true pleasure to be back amongst those that know how to say the Lord's Prayer.

Even though I have been a functioning Episcopalian for the last seven years, I have never fully adapted to that whole, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" things. Half the time, even when I'm leading the prayers, I still want to say "debts and debtors" just out of force of habit. Just last Sunday when I was preaching at my home church in Minnetonka, I still found myself saying, "forgive us our debt-passers as we forgive those who debt-pass against us." Which when you think of it, forgiving our debt-passers has a kind of logical beauty to it, especially since the whole sub-prime loan scandal.

Goes to show you, the true beauty of our Bible and the strange way that scripture stays relevant to every generation. Hold on to that thought and I will get back to that.

But back to becoming an Episcopalian. It has not been a transition without its difficulties, especially for me, a non-drinker. They don't call themselves "Whiskey-palians" for nothing. At least Whiskey-palians have good taste when it comes to their libations. I'm sure you've heard how you can tell which ones are the Episcopalians at an Inter-faith service? They're the ones who try to send the wine back.

Have you never translated the Latin motto of the Episcopal Church that's around the Sword and the Shield logo of the Church? "When two are gathered in Christ's name there is a third. When Four are gathered in Christ's name, there is a fifth?"

In my experience, Presbyterians have always been a very well behaved bunch. So well behaved that it's difficult to actually write a good joke about Presbyterians. My favorite joke from seminary is actually more of a joke about the double-predestination of Reformer John Calvin. Two Presbyterian ministers are walking down the street when one of the ministers trips and breaks his arm and other Presbyterian minister looks down at him and says, "now, aren't you glad that's over?"

It's just slightly better than that joke about the man who's walking across a bridge in New York City when he comes across another guy who is readying himself to jump to his death. Thinking quickly, the passing man says to the jumper, "Brother, don't do this. Whatever it is, we can talk it out. Are you a man of faith?"

And the would-be jumper says, "Why, yes, yes, I am."

And the man passing by says, "I am too. See, we've already got something in common. Please let's talk. Are you a Christian, son?"

"I am" says the guy holding onto the railing.

"Protestant or Catholic?" the man passing by says.

"I am a Protestant." says the other guy.

"See, this is great, I'm a Protestant too. That's another thing we have in common. Which kind of Protestant: Lutheran, Presbyterian or Baptist?"

"I'm a Presbyterian," says the would-be jumper with a smile.

“Amazing,” says the passer-by, “so am I. You see, God put us on the bridge for a reason. Hey, what kind of Presbyterian are you, Presbyterian Church of America or PCUSA?”

“I go to a PCUSA church, of course!”

“OK, another amazing coincidence, I’m PCUSA too! OK, here’s one: At the 217th General Assembly Meeting, did you vote for or against the ordination of gays and lesbians?”

Happily the would-be jumper said, “I voted for the ordination of gays and lesbians.”

At which, the passer-by pushed the jumper into the water saying, “Die, heretic scum.”

For the record, I don’t agree with the mean-spiritedness of that joke, I just like how the joke illustrates the silliness of denominational arguments, how we can agree on so much but be separated for so little.

And by the way, having studied in the Presbyterian church and being ordained into a church that already has gay clergy, there is no difference. Before the recognition of gays and lesbians in the Episcopal church, Episcopalians were a strongly divided people facing many tough issues of our time. After the recognition of gays and lesbians, we’re still a strongly divided people facing many tough issues of our time. In many respects, the Presbyterian Church and the Episcopal Church are nearly identical. Just that the Episcopalians have nice shot glasses.

Which brings us back to this Sunday’s Gospel text from Matthew.

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock.

The meaning is so clear that we can communicate it with just a picture. House on the rock: stable. House built on sand, doomed. Our faith needs a strong foundation—got it.

And how do we get that strong foundation of faith? By doing the things that Christ taught us to do: Do many wonderful deeds in the name of the Lord! Cast out demons in the name of the Lord! Prophecy about coming tribulations, that’s the way to build a strong foundation in our Christian faith!

Right!

What happens when we do various deeds in the name of the Lord! Cast out demons; prophecy about the world to come! We get blown off by Jesus!

What happened to John 14:12?

I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father.

Aren't we doing God's work when we cast out demons, prophesy and do various deeds in the name of the Lord! Not according to this morning's gospel text! If we did those things in the Name of the Lord, wouldn't we be doing the Lord's work? No—just the opposite. In heaven on the day of judgment, Jesus would pretend that he doesn't even know us! And worst of all, Jesus would think we were evildoers!

An Evildoer! I don't want to be an Evildoer! Lex Luthor is an Evildoer! The Joker, Catwoman and the Riddler – those are Evildoers. Evildoers go to prison! Evildoers go to prison! Evildoers go to hell. Could Jesus have possibly meant that people who cast out demons, prophesy and do various works in his name are going to hell?

Maybe. I'm unprepared to correct Jesus on these very clear words. And being two thousand years and six thousand miles apart, I'm a little reluctant to say he didn't call his own followers, people seemingly eager to please Jesus, "evildoers," but this gospel text hits me as maybe meaning something a little different.

What I hear is a Jesus who labels "listeners to his words and/or listeners to God" as those people who get it. The people who are humble enough to truly listen for the Divine are the smart ones. These are the do-bees. Those that don't listen, those that think that public displays of religiosity are enough, these are not the smart ones. These are don't-bees.

I think the use of the word "evildoers" is a kind of hyperbole for the shallow-thinkers. It reminds me of that passage a little earlier in Matthew when Christ admonished his followers by saying:

If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!

In short, I think evildoers shouldn't be taken so literally, I think it's Jesus' way of calling his disciples out on their shallowness, on their stupidity.

And we are stupid in the eyes of the Lord when we put on public displays of piety instead of just listening for the still small voice of the Lord to direct us.

Listening to that still, small voice of God is the rock hard foundation of faith. Building your house on sand—that's just stupid. Stupid waste of time, stupid waste of money and like any poorly constructed house in a storm, potentially a stupid waste of life.

So, let's review:

Self-styled Christians who put all their energies into rebuking others in the name of Jesus, who posture themselves as mini-Christ's with the right to judge, Jesus says, "I don't know you, get away from me you strange person."

Christians who make a name and millions of dollars for themselves casting out demons on TV who think they're buying a stairway to heaven: Jesus says that's just stupid.

The Pat Robertsons of the world that make national news every year by making the most dire predictions like in January 2007 when Mr. Robertson predicted that a terrorist attack on the United States would result in "mass killing" late in 2007.

"I'm not necessarily saying it's going to be nuclear," he said during his news-and-talk television show "The 700 Club" on the Christian Broadcasting Network. "The Lord didn't say nuclear. But I do believe it will be something like that."

Obviously, no mass killing in the US in late 2007, nuclear or otherwise. We are left to wonder, was Jesus mumbling a warning to Pat Robertson was he saying to the televangelist, "You're an idiot."

Or maybe he got the message after all. This year, Mr. Robertson just prophesied a recession coming to the US. Gosh, couldn't have seen that coming.

What else? Would be fair to say that Christians who spend thousand of dollars on fancy Christian educations because it will make their children just a little bit more saved than those public school kids, will be disappointed when Christ pretends not to know them either?

Or for that matter, people who drive a Prius and never buy fur in Jesus' name because they believe that makes them more pleasing in the eyes of God?

Or send themselves to fancy seminaries and get ordained in Jesus' name. Does being called "reverend" and wearing white robes make our Lord up in heaven more likely to say, "Hey, I know you, come here you knucklehead?"

Turns out yes!

So, are you any closer this morning to having a faith whose foundation is rock and not sand?

Just because you don't prophesy, cast out demons or the like, do you think you've got this Christian thing licked?

Not until you listen, you truly listen to the will of God!

Who knows, maybe the Holy Spirit is talking to you right now!

Sh-sh-sh – let's take a few seconds to check whether you are following the will of God.

You may not have to do anything complicated. You may not have to do anything at all.

But listen. Listen for the Will of God.

Is that a storm I hear?