

## **Awesome Basilea!**

A Sermon Preached at Hanover St. Presbyterian Church

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Texts:

Jeremiah 17: 7-8

Matthew 13: 31-32

My older son, who has a mind like a steel trap, and little patience for opinionated people less intelligent than he, has coined a phrase for those pitiful souls who, in letters to the editor, earnestly protest the work of some clever artist or another, who has tried to express a truth by indirect and humorous means. He says of such wooden headed critics that they are "irony impaired."

Now, irony impairment is no laughing matter! It is a pitiful affliction to take everything at face value, and so, to miss entirely that cleansing, rapier wit which would save us from idolatry by mocking something or someone wanting to be taken far too seriously.

I might as well come right out and say it, because it's where this sermon is headed: Jesus had a terrific sense of humor, an ironic sense of humor. He was fond of jibes, not merely to entertain, but to teach. I pointed that out to someone in Bible class the other day, pointed out how, when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, and not just any old donkey, but the colt of a donkey, he was making fun. Can't you see his legs dangling down to the ground as he barely managed to stay astride that miniature mount? Clowning, Jesus, was enacting a passage from the prophet, Zechariah (9.9). That passage speaks of a prince of peace riding upon the foal of a donkey. Jesus recognized good parody when he saw it, yes, even in scripture. Miming this sacred text, Jesus mocked the Roman governors who were intimidating his people by towering over them on majestic stallions bred for war. Many Jews expected a military Messiah to rescue them from the Roman oppressors. Jesus mocked such a hope, in order to rescue his people from their own misconceptions.

Now, this interpretation did not sit well with my friend in Bible study. It bothered her to think of Jesus mocking anyone. Wasn't he too kind and gentle for that? "You mean, the man who called the scribes 'white washed tombs?'" I said, "and old Herod, a fox?" How is it that we Christians, who turned an instrument of torture, the cross, into a symbol of victory, have become irony impaired? Is it because we think of Jesus as divine? Lord, any learned Jew would

tell you; even God has a sense of humor! Why, to make old Sarai and Abram parents in their doting old age-- What a hoot! No wonder they laughed. To make a tree grow up over Jonah and then zap it to make him whine--now that's almost Vaudevillian. We miss a lot of the Bible's earthy wisdom because our Puritan piety has rendered us irony impaired. We are convinced that poking fun is at least frivolous and at worst mean spirited, that for Christians at least, satire and parody are strictly out of bounds. Jesus most certainly did not make fun! Did he?

Well, Walter Wink thinks so. For instance, Jesus said: "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's." Sounds like straightforward discourse, right? No, it's ironic says Wink. Jesus was handling a coin that bore the detested image of the Roman emperor who claimed to be divine. The people had to trade with that coin, but they loathed doing so, because it implied that they recognized the authority of an idolatrous ruler. Jesus was not honoring the emperor by saying he deserved that coin. He was saying: Here, take this minted dung and give it to the one who deserves it! But Jesus replied so cleverly, so ironically, that his response allowed for a respectful interpretation, too. So he escaped the clutches of those who were out to trap him in a dilemma of conflicting allegiances.

Another example: Consider Jesus' saying: "When someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other to him as well." Straightforward discourse, right? Jesus is telling us to bear all unwarranted reproaches without resisting, correct? No, says Wink. The saying is ironic and clever, and if we understand it rightly we will see that Jesus was very far from advocating no resistance. When people who were lording it over them struck lowly people of Jesus day, they would whack them by a backhand shot. That was the way to strike inferiors, with a backhand swipe that didn't bear one's full force. This was a way of showing that you were superior. By withholding some of the force that you could bring to bear on your inferior if you chose to, you showed you were benign even in your wrath, and thus you shamed your victim. But Jesus called for his followers to resist this shaming. If someone strikes you on the right cheek--"(most people are right handed, and therefore, if they back handed someone standing before them, they would strike that person on the right cheek)--"then offer him the other cheek, said Jesus. To turn the other cheek would make it impossible for your assailant to strike you with another backhand. If he were to strike you again, he would have to do so with a forehand blow, the way that equals fight with equals. Turning the other cheek after being shamed by a backhand was a way of saying to your assailant: Come on! I'm your equal! Give me your best

shot. I can take it! It was an ironic gesture of bold resistance.

All the gospel writers agree that Jesus' preaching was chiefly about the coming Kingdom of God. The Greek word for kingdom was *basilea*. As far as we know, Jesus spoke Aramaic, not Greek, but the New Testament sometimes quotes him, even in the same sentence, speaking of two kinds of kingdoms, a *basilea* of this world and a *basilea* of God, or heaven. Some scholars, wanting to make scripture more relevant to modern people, and aware that kings are mostly passe, have translated *basilea* as "imperial rule." Think of the imperial rule of the dark forces that Darth Vader represents in the Star Wars movies and you get a good idea of what *basilea* meant to Jesus' contemporaries. *Basilea* was the imperial rule wielded by the Caesars. *Basilea* was the unjust and cruel tyranny of Jewish puppet rulers like Herod. But, when Jesus spoke of the *basilea tou theou*, the imperial rule of God, he was using ironic language, for the imperial rule of God was characterized by mercy and forgiveness. Under God's imperial rule, Jesus taught, people are treated as equals, and even enemies are loved.

Notice, Jesus did not engage in irony just now and then. The gospels report that pretty much everything he said related in one way or another to this imperial rule of God, which was already breaking forth. The awesome *basilea tou theou* is at hand, he taught. It is in your midst already. Open your eyes! See how God is already supremely powerful here! This was supremely ironic language, uttered in a context of blatant oppression. Was Jesus deluded? Even some of his family thought so. How could Jesus talk seriously about the imperial rule of God when Caesars or their viceroys had their boots on the people's necks?

To understand what Jesus was doing when he spoke of the amazing and awesome imperial rule of God, we would do well to keep in mind the personal perspective of Matthew, the gospel writer who included more of Jesus' *basilea* sayings than any other gospel writer. Matthew was a Publican, one of those hated Jews who skimmed off money for themselves as they collected outrageously high taxes, levied by the Roman occupiers. Jesus invited Matthew into his fellowship, along with other disreputable people such as prostitutes. Matthew was wowed by this unconditional love. The first thing he did was to throw a big party, and invite other tax collectors and prostitutes to hear Jesus too. Matthew and these other despised people felt the imperial rule of God, the awesome and amazing *basilea tou theou*. They felt it in the unconditional friendship of Jesus. In his presence God's imperial rule wasn't just a tenet of faith that would come true some time in the future when God's Messiah would zap their

enemies. No, God's imperial rule--oh, what an ironic phrase that was! -- was now, right here and now, in the upside down reality of a crazily loving community.

Considering Matthew's bio, I find it interesting that only in his gospel do we find basilea sayings where the basilea of God includes good people as well as bad people. As the Christian community aged, the basilea of God became more and more futuristic and ideal. Accordingly, people came to believe that in the basilea of God there would be no more weeping, no more suffering, no more injustice. But in much of Matthew's gospel the basilea tou theou isn't an ideal projected into the future. The basilea of God happens in the ambiguous present, whilst good and bad are still mixed together, something that Matthew experienced for himself. In Matthew's thirteenth chapter the basilea of heaven is compared to a garden plot where the gardener allows the tares to grow alongside the wheat. The basilea of God isn't at the end, when the harvest comes and the wheat and tares are separated. Rather, the basilea of God begins already, whilst the two are growing alongside one another. Another example: In the forty-seventh verse of the same chapter the basilea of God is compared to a net which is cast into the sea, gathering fish of every kind. Later, God does sort out the good fish from the bad, but the basilea of God is (present tense) the net that is cast wide and catches all, the good and bad together. Finally, in the twenty-second chapter, Matthew compares the kingdom of God to a wedding banquet. The host of this feast, a king, is disappointed when the preferred guests turn down his invitation, so he sends his servants out the hedgerows and by-ways, to bring in "both bad and good," says verse ten.

The awesome basilea of God is awesome not because it is unearthly, but because it is a taste of heaven here on earth. The imperial rule of God--please, let's remember the irony--is so astonishing and wonderful because we don't expect the world's hierarchical, patriarchal, aristocratic, rules ever to be lifted. But low and behold, here and there a bit of heaven on earth does break forth. We experience an unexpected oasis of mercy wherever justice is done, even at great personal sacrifice, and where hospitality is extended to the "least of these," (Mt. 25), meaning not just the poor, pitiful, needy folk, but the despicable and undeserving folk, most especially.

So, when you hear Jesus speak of the kingdom of God, listen for that transforming gospel irony about which I have been preaching this morning. When we sing hymns like, "Crown Him with Many Crowns," and "He is King of Kings," let's remember Jesus' very frequent irony,

often evident in his parables, and let's not slip into a messianic idolatry that he himself resisted.

One more example of gospel irony before I close. I've said that we experience the basilea of God especially where hospitality is extended to the undeserving. One of my favorite basilea sayings is the one read just before the sermon began, because it tells me that God is able to do so much, to extend so much redeeming hospitality, even with our miniscule resources:

Jesus said: "The basilea of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field: Indeed it is least of all seeds, but when it is grown, it is the biggest shrub of them all, and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches." Sounds like standard metaphor, like that beautiful image from Jeremiah, where the faithful person is compared to a tree planted by water that sends down its roots deep, and is not affected by drought. But, I wonder whether, with this humble image of the mustard bush, Jesus is poking fun at the pompousness of Daniel's dream (Daniel 4: 20-22), where he says to King Nebuchadnezzar that in his dream he saw a tree whose height reached to heaven, and overlooked the whole earth, whose leaves were fair, and whose fruit was plentiful, such that it gave shelter to all the fowl of heaven. "That tree is you, King Nebuchadnezzar!" interprets Daniel. Oh, please, Jesus seems to be saying with his mustard bush story. You do exaggerate the power of earthly potentates! The basilea of God is truly awesome, for it achieves so much with no fanfare at all.