

Why Jesus? A Preacher's Mission-Minded Reflections

Colleagues,

Thursday Theology went quiet this Easter season. The undersigned, responsible for pushing it out, spent one of the seven weeks in Israel, and the other six sidelined by a weird combination of unusual busyness in the job that pays and a bout of mental torpor. Finally Pentecost blew in, dislodging some cobwebs. Or so I hope.

The Gospel text for most of us this coming Sunday is the final scene in Matthew. The eleven meet Jesus on an unidentified Galilean hilltop. He dispatches them to “the nations” to “make disciples.” Those with ears to hear this Sunday will understand that they too are under orders.

This drives the question that Pr. Timothy Hoyer tackles in today's offering, and as much for himself as for the rest of us. What do you say to the denizens of those nations when they ask why on earth they'd want to hook up with Jesus? Or if, these days, they're unhooking from him as they drift into secularity, what might give them pause?

Thoughtful preachers wrestle somehow with this question most every Sunday. Thoughtful lay folk do as well when they pray for children who are giving up on church, and wonder what they'd say in the conversations they'd like to have about this but are chary of starting lest they drive the child away that much faster.

You'll notice that Pr. Hoyer begins by inviting peer review. We are all his peers in our Lord's “great commission,” as we call

it. Whether ordained or lay, don't hesitate to respond.

It's been a while since Tim's work last appeared in Thursday Theology, so I tack on the note that he continues to serve as pastor at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Lakewood, New York, on gorgeous Lake Chautauqua.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

Why Do We Need Jesus?

by Timothy J. Hoyer

To get people to need Jesus is always a preaching challenge. Here are some of my ideas, written now to help me put thoughts together, and for peer review.

1. The reason we need a crucified Jesus is because Jesus was crucified. If God gave him to us to die for us, then surely we do need Jesus, else we call God a liar.
2. Do you, the listener, like living by the law?
 - a. Life is full of constant demands, even the demands to eat and drink to stay alive. There is even the demand to stay alive. Do you like living by constant demands? For some, those demands are a wearisome burden.
 - b. Life is full of people making comments about each other. What makes people do that? What makes people make comments about others without even wondering why they do it? How do you like having people make comments about you? For some, such comments are so mean, so demeaning, that they commit suicide to escape them. Do not take lightly the comments you

make.

- c. People yell at others who make mistakes. They condemn them, tell them they are useless and to go away. Do you like living where people believe (yes, this is to have trust in yelling) yelling is the way to deal with mistakes?
- d. People yell at those who hurt them emotionally or physically. People condemn others for what they did. Do you like living where people trust in yelling or are taught that yelling is the way to deal with being hurt?
- e. People condemn others. They judge them as worth little or nothing. We condemn the poor, we condemn people of color, we condemn immigrants...We condemn any who are different than we are. Do you like being condemned? Have you ever ben condemned?
- f. Whenever something comes to an end, like a movie, a TV show, a meal, the day, we always have to say something about what just ended. "Oh, that was a good movie." "That was a boring episode." "This meal was delicious!" "Today was a good day because..." "Today was terrible because..." When something ends, we must judge it. We judge it to give it meaning or purpose. It has to be good or bad, because if we don't give it meaning—its goodness or badness—then it has no purpose for us. One does not hammer nails into the living room coffee table and when asked why simply say, "Oh, no reason." To have no reason is upsetting. It cannot be understood. It is why three year olds continually ask, "Why?" Do you like living where everything you do has to be judged, including not only everything you do, but you yourself?
- g. People talk of needing to find themselves, or that they have to find a purpose in life. No direction is

given, but we do have to have a reason for why we do things, and a reason that is more than “get a good education so you can get a good job so the rich can make money off of you.” This demand to have a reason is the working of the law.

h. We may be told what to do, what needs to be done, what is required, but being told does not give us the strength, the will, the desire, the time, to do what is demanded of us.

i. Why is it that we define a “good day” by how much we get done? Why is it that if we don’t do anything we say the day has been wasted? Do you like living where we trust how much we do as the judge of how good our day is, and by implication, how good we are?

j. We are judged as good only by what we do. Most of the time we like that, trust it. Yes, always this is a matter of faith. But if we judge ourselves by the good we do, we must also be judged by the bad we do. How do you like them apples?

k. When we do something wrong, we feel that we have to make up for what we did. We said something insulting to a loved one and hurt their feelings. So we buy flowers to make up for what we did, or we take them out for dinner. The person hurt now has the power of judgment, to demand how much we have to do to make up for what we did. And that can never end. Do you like that feeling of having to make up for what you did? How do we make up for saying God is not God?

3. Death is a form of condemnation. Notice that when someone dies we do not simply say that they died and stop there. No, we have to say something, pronounce a judgment on that person. “Don’t speak ill of the dead.” Why? Is it because only if the judgment on the dead person is that they were

a good person that they get to go to heaven? Where does that idea come from? It's an idea that does not use Jesus.

4. Life is full of events. We react to events, talk about events, and they can change our lives, as when a parent of a child killed by a drunk driver works to form support groups or petition to have a law passed against drunk driving. So why do those daily events have more force in our lives than the event of Jesus' death and resurrection? Moreover, the event of judgment happens. We also have the event of forgiveness. Both speak their words to us. Which do we trust? It is a matter of faith.
5. From *The Promising Tradition*, in a story by Walter Bouman about a ride in a taxi, where the minister asks the cab driver, "What is so important to you that you would die for it?" Minister's comment to driver's response: "No, not bowling, okay, yes, your kids. Your kids are what say YES to you. But you worry because they will be drafted. This YES is not dependable. I know a YES that is dependable."
6. From Luther's *Large Catechism*, First Commandment, working from his definition of a god as that on which you depend for protection and care.
 - a. So what makes your life feel good? What do you depend on that will get you to say one day, "I have lived a good life?" Notice that whatever you depend on for that goodness does nothing to stop judgment of you, and it does nothing to overcome death.
 - b. What makes your life feel like it's not so good, or that it could be better? We fear those things, and when fear grips our heart, that is our god. What grips our heart—fear, love, trust, hope—that is our god.
 - c. People's hearts are gripped by sports, by winning, by entertainment (to keep us distracted from the economic system that creates inequality of income

and wealth).

7. Our poets—we might call them screenwriters—make comments about the idea of “god.” Captain Picard from *Star Trek: The Next Generation* states that his human culture has grown past the need for god to explain why things happen. Science does that for them. The movie *Angels and Demons* also has the fear of science replacing God. But they are both wrong, because law, judgment, purpose in life, meaning in life, and death still exist. It is those things that Jesus deals with.
8. We treat this earthly life as all there is and as what is most important. We have to get things done now. We have to do as much as we can. We have “bucket lists.” Some want to travel. Some want to watch their grandkids play soccer. We do all we can to make this earthly life feel good. But at the same time, we pay no attention to the fact (law) that everything in this life is temporary (though we treat things as if they will always be there); we treat this life as the one that counts, that needs our attention, that is our only concern. We will ask, “How are you?” We will be concerned about sickness, addiction, relationship challenges, but we do not ask, “How is your faith in Jesus? How is your peace in Jesus? How is your conscience?” We also have life in Jesus, in mercy, in forgiveness, in sharing the love he gives us, in our hope for eternal life with Jesus and his Father forever. We have Jesus’ promise to resurrect us. So life is not just what we see (and trust), but life, what we get to do, is in Jesus. So we can also act by faith in Christ and have our focus on living with mercy instead of judgment, forgiveness instead of condemnation, with willingness to lose this life (the time and effort to serve others at the moment of their asking for help) and not worry about not being able to do what we want. (We’re all still working on

this one.)

9. People have a need to declare they have lived a good life. Death demands it. The law demands it. Some determine that they have not lived a good life, either due to hardship, bad relationships, or addiction or crime. To both verdicts we hear that Peter spoke to the people, "Jesus commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that Jesus is the one ordained by God to be the judge of the living and the dead." Therefore, our judgments do not count. Our judgments about our lives, saying we have lived a good life, do not count. I am not my own judge. Our judgments about the worth of others do not count. We are not the judges of others. Jesus is because he rose from the dead. And his way of judging is to declare all people are good to God. The "all" makes full use of his death and rising, so that not some of it is used for just some people. Also, "all" includes us, me, so I am comforted that Jesus is for me. If Jesus was just for some people, certain kinds of people, good people, I would never be sure it was for me.

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When we diagnose how people need Christ, the need must be universal. "What is true for one Christian must be true for all Christians of all times." –Werner Elert

TJH

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