

## 6A 2023

Jesus said to his disciples, “I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”

Jesus did not anticipate that people would all joyfully embrace the gospel.

He knew that some people were dedicated to power, fear, and division, and warns the disciples to “Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me.”

We know this turned out to be true.

Most of the disciples were martyred.

It can be said that, at that time, people at least took the gospel seriously enough to feel threatened by it.

Those who worship power were afraid that they would lose their privilege if the gospel spread.

We now live in very different times when many just roll their eyes at the thought of the gospel.

What has changed?

Christianity started out as a radical idea about God’s love for us.

Though others had spoken about God's love, to my knowledge, Jesus and his followers were the first to make this their central claim.

This understanding of God eventually reached beyond the confines of its founding religion of Judaism and spread around the world.

Though the total number of Christians in the world has continued to increase due to population growth, between 1910 and 2010, the *percentage* of Christians fell from 34.8% to 31.7%. In the global north, it fell from 86.7% to 69%, but this was offset by growth in the global south (17.8% to 60.8%).<sup>1</sup>

In the United States, Christian religious affiliation peaked in the 70s and 80s.

At this time, 90% of Americans declared themselves to be Christians.

As Christianity became widespread, it lost its edge and became the guardian of the status quo, the protector of a certain social order.

Too often, people do not distinguish between cultural norms and the gospel.

They confuse following a given society's rules with holiness.

For many, in other words, the gospel did not exceed whatever values their society held, or whatever values made them comfortable.

They turn a deaf ear to those who felt oppressed, the very outsiders to whom Jesus ministered.

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1 <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/>

What started as a radical notion that threatened division and power became in too many instances, reactionary, a supporter of a certain power structure.

We went from God's love of everyone to God as gatekeeper.

Others abandoned Christianity all together, trading it in for a kind of watered down, live-and-let-live philosophy that does not encourage robust mutual cooperation and support.

I am not going to stop you, in other words, but I also am not going to help you unless it really makes me feel good about myself.

Mostly, you are on your own.

There is no sense of communal support, of mutual responsibility, and we suffer for it.

Before I go further, I should say that, as an Episcopal priest and a convert who chose this religion and this denomination, I am clearly prejudiced, but I see the changes in the current '79 prayer book as having moved us once again towards living out the gospel.

For one, it shifted our theology back from individualism to nurturing relationships within community.

Private baptisms, for example, are no longer permitted except in an emergency.

Since baptism is about joining a community, it is to occur before the community.

In addition, our baptismal covenant makes clear our mutual responsibilities.

In the '79 prayer book, we also shifted emphasis away from our unworthiness before God to God's all-embracing love of us.

We are all flawed, imperfect, yes, but dear to God.

With this restored focus on God's love of everyone came greater inclusivity.

No longer were some more worthy than others.

God loves everyone equally, and anyone who is sincere in their interest in God and respectful of our community is welcome here.

I feel like we are the last place where libertarians and socialists and Democrats and Republicans all gather together, but I suppose that still might happen at places like the Rotary Club.

I hope it does.

Jesus clearly did not concern himself with the politics of his disciples.

We have no record of his scolding Matthew for collecting taxes for the Roman empire or upbraiding Simon for being a zealot who wanted a violent revolt against Rome.

Jesus just focused on the gospel.

Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's.

In the end, Jesus was willing to engage with anyone who seriously wanted to engage with him.

His most lively, lengthy conversation was with the Samaritan woman at the well, after which he was so elated that he told his hungry disciples that he had food of which they knew not.

He was filled with the joy of the encounter.

It is still very threatening when we truly take the gospel seriously, when we truly believe that God loves everyone equally.

The fact that people dedicated to power, fear, and division are not threatened by Christianity means that they do not believe that we mean it.

I suspect that this is in part because, despite the impressive numbers of people claiming to be followers of the way, so many Christians have turned Christianity into a thought problem rather than a way of life.

For some, it is a religion not about radical love, but about private salvation.

“If I get baptized and take communion regularly,” or, if I say “I believe that Christ is the son of God,” I will be saved from some miserable postmortem fate.

“Once I accomplish these things, I’m safe.”

Notice that this has no bearing on how we treat others.

“*I am saved.*”

Love itself becomes more of an idea to which we subscribe than something that I must practice.

Christ gathered disciples in community, ate with them, invited them to travel with him.

He did not teach a creed or a philosophy, *per se*.

He demonstrated how to love one's neighbor as oneself.

For him, it was all about how we relate.

Repentance, thinking anew, did not mean subscribing to a new doctrine, but relating differently.

He therefore often relied on parables rather than lectures because they are better at demonstrating how relationships could go awry and how they could be healed.

The churches that went down the intellectualized route have dominated the discourse.

When non-Christians think of Christianity, they seem to have this doctrinal approach in mind, and *private salvation is not intimidating*.

What threatens people is not thoughts, but a change in how people actually relate.

If people start listening to one another, respecting one another's different paths, using their various gifts to work together, then those who rely on fear and division to maintain their power and wealth will be threatened.

They are confident that they can put down a revolution, but not evolution.

Listening to the stories of others and trying to understand their perspective is a holy act, a sacred gift.

We recognize this from those times that someone granted us the gift of presence.

We were learning about and practicing this in the recently ended workshop that Fran and I taught together.

Presence was modeled for us by Jesus, who, in conversation after conversation, listened attentively and responded honestly.

He taught them to love others as they loved themselves.

We do not have the answers for others' lives.

We have the ability to walk with them, to share respect, to support one another, to model integrity and humility.

God has the answers, and we must work them out in our day-to-day lives with God.

Our role is to be humble and supportive, honest and compassionate.

Love listens, accepts risk, challenges, and promotes growth and understanding.

We must be as wise as serpents in that we do not get caught in others' fear traps, hopelessness, manipulation, and hatred.

We must not let them undermine or distract us.

We must also be as innocent as doves in that we continue to live out the love of God.

In doing so, we become a threat to those who rely upon fear and division.