

"Restaging Incarnation: What Might Jesus Do?"
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[Sociology & Urban Studies]
Matthew 4:12-23 ["The Calling of the Disciples"]

This text has all kinds of possibilities, but I want to focus on the impression left by Matthew about Jesus and the first Disciples. My question is simple: What was it about Jesus that might explain why men and women of nearly all walks of life made major changes in their lives and followed him all the way to Jerusalem? And a parallel question is this: if Jesus showed up on the shores of Lake Pepin or Calhoun or in Murphy Square, how might he invite 21st century folks, like you and me, to come be a part of his community?

Today's text depicts Jesus walking along the Sea of Galilee, seeing fisherman who seem to be complete strangers, calling out to them to "drop everything" and follow him. But, for me, this runs counter to most of the Gospel stories and almost everything I believe about Jesus and understand about leadership.

We know virtually nothing about what Jesus did in the nearly 20 years after his famous Temple interaction with the Elders. But his wisdom and teaching convince me that he did a lot of walking, talking, listening and interacting with a wide range of people, especially with those that he invited to join him. Each call, I am convinced, was prefaced by long conversations, deep listening and much talking—often late in the night grappling with life and death issues, the nature of God, the Empire, the Temple leadership, along with very personal sharing, including much that we would brand as "bull sessions" or conversations similar to Luther's vernacular "table talk".

For me, three magnets or characteristics of Jesus drew, and still draw, people to him: 1) his authenticity and integrity; 2) he really listened and learned from others, and 3) he was a window into the reality of God.

Jesus helped everyone that he met to experience and see the presence of God everywhere, *including in themselves and in each other*. And the "other side of the coin" reveals that the longer they were with him, the more they were drawn to him as a person of unfathomable authenticity, integrity and curiosity. *He walked his talk*.

Closely connected to his authenticity was that they also encountered in Jesus a "concentrated" presence of the divine, the "incarnation", "God with us". Today's

text reminds me that Jesus was *both* a real friend with whom they experienced integrity, intimacy, and humility, and, *paradoxically, the very same person in whose presence they experienced, day in and day out, the presence of God, including an ever expanding understanding of God and all of life.*

But today, I also want to fast forward the clock and have us audaciously visualize Jesus walking with you and me in the 21st Century, right here in the Twin Cities. Yes, I am asking you to play a mind experiment with me that I am cautiously calling “restaging the incarnation”.

If Jesus lived right now and immigrated to Minneapolis from Shakopee, something analogous to his move from Nazareth to Capernaum, *where do you think that this person with his inquisitive and brilliant mind would spend his time?* My own reflections on this question are shaped by my last semester collaboration with Mark Engebretson, David Murr, Ben Stottrup and other colleagues, as we read and discussed Krista Tippett’s interviews with numerous scientists in her book, *Einstein’s God*. Thanks to Mark, my own answers to what a 21st century Jesus might do are also being influenced by a dynamic conversation currently going on among dozens of Christian thinkers under the umbrella of “Evolutionary Christianity” [www.evolutionarychristianity.com].

Recently I took my son, daughter-in-law and my grandchildren to the Science Museum. We watched the Hubble Space Telescope I-Max movie and revisited the dinosaur exhibits where each of us had our curiosity opened further. The Hubble telescope in orbit around the earth and the huge Las Campanas Observatory in Chile allow us to journey back 13+ billion years to the virtual beginning of creation, leaving most of us in awe of our expanding universe and its Creator.

And, I find myself asking: “What would Jesus think and do in the face of such technology and discovery?” I am convinced that Jesus would be right there in the audience, sitting on the edge of his seat eager to look further into the vastness of the universe, if not be giving a lecture himself. And I think he would probably hasten out of the Science Museum to attend or lead a seminar on DNA and stem cell research at the University. *Everything I believe about Jesus convinces me that he also would push us to reflect upon the meaning that all this new discovery has for humankind, especially since the Creator God has bestowed upon each of us the gift and responsibility of co-creation and stewardship.*

This past week, a packed Mayo auditorium of citizens from business, education, and government joined Senator Amy Klobuchar in listening to the heads of

Medtronic, Cargill, and the U.S. Commerce Department to learn about many of the high tech innovations that are born here in Minnesota and how they can be shared with and benefit the rest of the world. *Again, I want to assert that I am convinced that a “restaging of the incarnation” would find Jesus right there on the front row, if not on the panels, learning about and contributing to this cutting edge thinking of the 21st Century. Jesus would likely be here Wednesday to learn from Augsburg alum and Mayo doctor, Paul Mueller, who just happens to have been one of my first Honors students.*

A year ago to this very day, I ventured into a deep cave in South Africa identified as the “Cradle of Humankind” where an 8 year old paleontologist’s son had recently discovered the cranium of the oldest discovered forerunner of humanity, thanks to his father’s use of Google Earth to identify caves with potential clues to humanity’s origins. Can we not believe that the Jesus of 30, who was calling others to join him, was any less curious and questioning than the Jesus of 12 who engaged in a lively conversation with the elders in the Temple?

Furthermore, it is impossible for me to imagine that Jesus would not also spend a lot of time at the State Capital, and, like the 1st Century Jesus did, be in and out of the nation’s capital, listening and raising questions both at the National Cathedral and in the Halls of Congress & the White House. Surely he would be listening to the State of the Union speech by President Obama tomorrow night, the Republican and Tea Party responses, and reflecting on Chinese President Hu and his recent visit. And I think he would be torn between whether to be with us in chapel today or visiting with imams in our local mosques or participating in the Buddhist meditations occurring in Si Melby as I speak.

Saturday, I returned to the office after meeting with LINK students to work on this homily, and I tuned into an online dialogue led by Michael Dowd and Connie Barlow, the husband and wife team who head up “Evolutionary Christianity” [www.evolutionarychristianity.com]. John Cobb, a source of insights to many of us, summed up much of all this for me when he said:

“The more deeply one is moved by Jesus, the Biblical word and by science, the more one will seek wisdom *wherever* one can find it”....Like Bernard Christensen, Cobb insists that “With a strong center in Christ, there are no boundaries to our openness to new ideas and to others.”

To put it another way in the words of Michael Dowd: “...it is through this wondrous human endeavor [of science and learning] that God’s Word is still being revealed. It is through this ever-expectant, yet ever-ready-to-be-humbled, stance of

inquiry that God's Word is discerned as bigger, as more wondrous, as more this-world relevant than could have possibly been comprehended in any time past....The meaning of the gospel is infinitely rich. No generation can possibly exhaust its depths. Every generation has the privilege and responsibility of reinterpreting the core insights of its faith tradition for its own time, as the Holy Spirit leads them." [Michael Dowd]

Surely this is a way for you and me to think about what it means for the Church to be the Body of Christ, in every generation. For we are God's ever new, co-creating, incarnational community of learners and stewards.

Are we not?

Being at Augsburg and having you as colleagues for this exploration and journey are gifts beyond measure. Thanks be to God. Amen

One major context for my thinking as this was written:

"Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore, we must be saved by hope. ... Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore, we must be saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness."
[Reinhold Niebuhr]