

Crazy Jesus

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Ancient Witness: Mark 3:13-21

One of the best of my U.C.C. colleagues, Robin Meyers, in one of his books, reminded me of a great poem that I first read sometime ago. The poem is called, "Maybe," by Mary Oliver, and I'd like to use it as a modern witness to complement our ancient words this morning.

*Sweet Jesus, talking
his melancholy madness,
stood up in the boat
and the sea lay down,*

*silky and sorry.
So everybody was saved
that night.
But you know how it is*

*when something
different crosses
the threshold -- the uncles
mutter together,*

*the women walk away,
the young brother begins
to sharpen his knife.
Nobody knows what the soul is.*

*It comes and goes
like the wind over the water –
sometimes, for days,
you don't think of it.*

*Maybe, after the sermon,
after the multitude was fed,
one or two of them felt
the soul slip forth*

*like a tremor of pure sunlight
before exhaustion,
that wants to swallow everything,*

gripped their bones and left them

*miserable and sleepy,
as they are now, forgetting
how the wind tore at the sails
before he rose and talked to it –*

*tender and luminous and demanding
as he always was –
a thousand times more frightening
than the killer sea.*

And the idea is, that Jesus, if we look at him properly, is, well, kind of crazy. He's scary. Threatening. This is how he was perceived by those around him, but the church has completely lost track of this aspect of Jesus. In our passage today from Mark's gospel, it says "When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, 'He has gone out of his mind.'" (Mark 3:21)

We often forget that Jesus was not received with cheers and accolades. Most of the time he was viewed with suspicion; he was challenged; he was rejected. At his first sermon the crowd wanted to throw him off a cliff. They spoke of him derisively: "He's a drunkard and a glutton, a friend of tax collectors and sinners." They accused him of "having a demon" and being possessed. This Jesus was nuts, and even his family was beginning to have their doubts and were worried about his mental health. "Yet," says Meyers, "nowhere in the liturgies of the church does a Christian promise to 'be crazy like Jesus was crazy.'" (*The Underground Church: Reclaiming the Subversive Way of Jesus*, p. 12)

This is, perhaps, the main problem of the church today. It has domesticated Jesus and other spiritual leaders. It has chosen sanity over the craziness of Jesus. Institutional religion—and I include myself—is too often much too sane, too safe, too respectable, too predictable, too boring. Reminds me of a great passage written by Annie Dillard:

*On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does not one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. (from *Teaching a Stone to Talk*)*

We are invited, I must warn you, on the spiritual pilgrimage whose demands are "a thousand times more frightening than the killer sea." It's an earth-shattering, world-subverting path of deep, internal and foundational change.

You know, most of my career I've worn the Genevan gown, which is primarily an academic vestment. Now, don't get me wrong, I think it is very important to use our intellect and our mind. But the spiritual experience is much, much more than this. Because, it seems to me, it's about the encounter with the Mystery, something we cannot pretend to understand. It's not about achievement as it is a posture of openness.

Meyers points to Thomas Merton, someone who never lost track of this openness to radical craziness. Merton wrote a critique of the militarism and nuclear war (“A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann”):

*One of the most disturbing facts that came out in the Eichmann trial was that a psychiatrist examined him and pronounced him perfectly sane. I do not doubt it at all, and that is precisely why I find it disturbing...
We equate sanity with a sense of justice, with humaneness, with prudence, with the capacity to love and understand other people. We rely on the sane people of the world to preserve it from barbarism, madness, destruction. And now it begins to dawn on us that it is precisely the sane ones who are the most dangerous.*

And it was Martin Luther King, Jr., who said that there are certain things in this world to which we should be maladjusted:

I never intend to become adjusted to segregation and discrimination. I never intend to become adjusted to religious bigotry. I never intend to adjust myself to economic conditions that will take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few. I never intend to adjust myself to the madness of militarism, to self-defeating effects of physical violence...

I'm about convinced now that there is need for a new organization in our world. The International Association for the Advancement of Creative Maladjustment--men and women who will be as maladjusted as the prophet Amos. Who in the midst of the injustices of his day could cry out in words that echo across the centuries, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream."

...As maladjusted as Jesus of Nazareth who could say to the men and women of his day, "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you. Pray for them that despitefully use you." Through such maladjustment, I believe that we will be able to emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of man's inhumanity to man into the bright and glittering daybreak of freedom and justice. (December 18, 1963)

The early communities that built up around the way of Jesus were maladjusted. They were a self-conscious alternative to the ways of the Empire. They were countercultural. They were communities of radical inclusiveness, voluntary redistribution of wealth. They were pacifist, rejecting violence and refusing to fight in Caesar's wars. And these were joyfully egalitarian communities where the nobodies and the somebodies broke bread together. The Jesus way, of course, would show true dignity, respect and compassion to those who have true mental illness. It would not view it as an insulting or diminishing term. They were mocked for following the folly of the cross and the foolishness of powerless love. But something happened. They devolved. They became sane. Adjusted.

The communities changed from being a religion that subverted and challenged the Empire to being a religion *of* the Empire. Instead of *followers* of the alternative path of Jesus, they became *believers* of creeds and dogmas. Meyers puts it well when he says, “we are now seen as the ‘sane’ ones who go out to ‘restrain’ him by marginalizing the very people who are foolish enough to take his teaching seriously.” (p.32)

We're embarrassed by Jesus' "melancholy madness." And we forget how the world is so threatened when "something different crosses the threshold," and because of this, how demanding and dangerous the real Jesus is, "a thousand times more frightening than the killer sea."

We've lost track of the Jesus who used parables to confront and subvert the status quo, the Jesus who was "never afraid to put things in a hard and ego-demanding way," says Richard Rohr, who offended, "the rich, the arrogant, the superior, the righteous and the supposedly orthodox."

Christianity, by and large, has become domesticated. As Meyers points out, "If we have become indistinguishable from our own empire, then we have lost our souls." Our current empire, it seems to me, is the nationless empire of corporate wealth and power that exercises control over the policies and governments of the world. It's an oligarchy that manipulates and divides the people with fear and scapegoating and lies. So the way to recover our souls is to recover the crazy and dangerous aspect of Jesus and distinguish ourselves from this empire. As Archbishop Oscar Romero, himself assassinated for following this Jesus, once said, "A church that doesn't provoke any crisis, a gospel that doesn't unsettle, a Word of God that doesn't get under anyone's skin, what kind of gospel is that?"

Ten years ago Chris Hedges wrote a column that called for what the great theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr once termed "a sublime madness in the soul." Niebuhr wrote that "nothing but madness will do battle with malignant power and spiritual wickedness in high places." Traditional liberalism, wrote Niebuhr, "lacks the spirit of enthusiasm, not to say fanaticism, which is necessary to move the world out of its beaten tracks. It is too intellectual and too little emotional to be an efficient force in history."

Hedges pointed out that the Hebrew prophets (I would include Jesus in that lineage) had this sublime madness. The words of the prophets, wrote Abraham Heschel, were "a scream in the night. While the world is at ease and asleep, the prophet feels a blast from heaven." Hedges's conclusion is amazingly prescient:

I do not know if we can build a better society. I do not even know if we will survive as a species. But I know these corporate forces have us by the throat. And they have my children by the throat. I do not fight fascists because I will win. I fight fascists because they are fascists. And this is a fight which in the face of overwhelming forces against us requires us to embrace this sublime madness, to find in acts of rebellion the embers of life, an intrinsic meaning that lies outside certain success. It is to at once grasp reality and then refuse to allow this reality to paralyze us. It is, and I say this to people of all creeds and no creeds, to make an absurd leap of faith, to believe, despite all empirical evidence around us, that good always draws to it the good, that the fight for life always goes somewhere—we do not know where. ("The Myth of Human Progress and the Collapse of Complex Societies," 1/27/14)

And so we can always stand to be a little more crazy, a little more maladjusted. But be prepared for the ridicule. As Lilly Tomlin once said, "When I talk to God, that's called prayer. But when God talks to me, that's called schizophrenia." *But, my friends, this is what authentic spiritual experience is! It is to hear and see a reality that is hidden from the empire and the world-as-usual.* And this is something that those who are too sane and respectable do not understand.

As Nietzsche once said,

*Those who were seen dancing were thought to be crazy
by those who could not hear the music.*

Friends, let us be brave enough to listen for the music, to join in the crazy, subversive dance, to embrace the sublime madness, and to defy the forces of repression against all odds—like King, like Romero, like the poets and prophets, like Jesus, like our truest selves.