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Living Relationships: Living in Christ

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Finally, all we have is relationships. We stew about what to do with institutions, particularly what to do about "the church." Shall we challenge it? Shall we nurture it? What really matters are the relationships that build institutions, are shaped by them, or exist in spite of them. Are those relationships mutually just and mutually loving? Do they energize us in the Spirit and nurture growth?

Recently, a fairy godbrother of mine became a candidate for assistant pastor at a suburban congregation in another state. After the first interviews, he rocketed to the top of the congregation's prospect list. Phone calls, letters, conversations—all conveyed one message: "You are the perfect candidate; the one we want." Then he came out to the senior pastor. The senior pastor professed his support—and proceeded to sink my friend's candidacy. The search committee cut off communication, refused my friend a hearing, and denied they ever wanted him.

I was ready to pack my bags: sensibly low heels, modest pearls. I wanted to travel to that suburb, find that church, march in on a Sunday morning in my most middle-America-go-to-meetin' dress. But to what purpose? Should I go—or not?

What Would Jesus Do?

Which brings me to the question, "What would Jesus do?" Would he hike up his skirt, tear down the aisle shrieking "my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples," and overturn the In-Remembrance-of-Me furniture? Or would he don a man's three-piece pin-stripe, lace on the oxfords, and throw his fedora in the ring for denominational moderator?

I was raised in the 1950s and 1960s and I came of age in the 1970s. I grew up hearing comparisons of Jeremiah's sermons with Martin Luther King, Jr.'s speeches. Ezekiel's "sit-ins" didn't sound all that different from student protests (Ezek 4:1–8). And I quoted Jesus—"love your enemies"—when I staffed the state-fair booth of Kansans Concerned About Vietnam (Matt 5:43–44). So an anti-establishment Jesus in drag suits my biases.

Unfortunately, Jesus is hardly that simple.

Jesus confuses me. He declares peacemakers blessed (Matt 5:9). He also suggests that his disciples carry weapons (Lk 22:36). He longs for his people to "know what makes for peace" (Lk 19:42). But he characterizes himself as bringing "not peace but a sword" and setting members against one another (Matt 10:34–36).

Does he undermine the religious institutions? Does he support them? Predominant Western thinking demands consistent thought and purpose. Jesus seems to relish inconsistency. One day he pays the temple tax without objection (Matt 17:24–27). Another day finds him turning the temple upside down (Matt 21:12–13). Biblical pictures of Jesus resist systematic ethical, political, or theological organization. That may be due, in part, to the world in which he lived.

Jesus was Jewish by ethnic heritage and religion. But cosmopolitan Galilean Judaism may not have been fully respectable to some groups which organized Jewish identity according to ritual purity. He appears to have been a peasant. But his family identity included royal descent from David. His teaching appealed to sacred tradition and writings. But he interpreted them in ways that made the establishment nervous.

Jesus lived in a society dominated both by the Jerusalem Temple establishment and by Roman territorial occupation. Economic life was difficult. Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh note that between 35 and 40 percent of a peasant family's production may have gone to religious and political taxes.¹

Class, gender, and ethnic identities dictated very limited options for individuals. The social group one belonged to defined the individual, not vice versa. Men and women did not regularly mix or socialize (thus the male disciple's astonishment when Jesus talked with a woman—Jn 4:27). Patriarchal extended families were the norm, reinforced by economic necessity.

Physical life was difficult for both women and men. Most people worked hard. Disease and accidents limited life expectancy, if one survived childhood, to about forty. Jesus was past "middle age" when he began his teaching.

Medicine was largely what we would call "folk medicine" or spiritual healing. Jesus' acquaintances were well-acquainted with death and conditions that we consider handicaps.

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Thus, Jesus lived and spoke with a spontaneous immediacy that I find disconcerting. My generation had an extended adolescence and years of college to ponder the "meaning of life." But Jesus was an itinerant preacher, teaching wisdom on the fly.

My predominantly European-American-male-defined world puts great stock in the theoretical underpinnings of social structures. We rest our civic relationships on constitutions and written covenants. In church, we study "issues" and formulate "position papers." We focus on passing resolutions, changing books of order, or revising manuals of discipline. To change institutions, we seek to change people's minds.

Jesus seems unconcerned with changing people's minds. He doesn't argue issues. He addresses people and responds to concrete events. His words and actions modulate from situation to situation—and sometimes even moment to moment.

Such is the case in his encounter with the Canaanite woman (Matt 15:21–28). Her initial pleas for mercy for her sick daughter fall on unresponsive ears. Jesus appears to accept ethnic segregation, declaring that his mercy belongs only "to the house of Israel." The woman persists, and Jesus compounds the offense with an ethnic insult: it would be unfair to throw the "children's bread" to "dogs." But she seizes the insult and turns it back at him. Dogs, she reminds Jesus, can expect more than he is willing to give. In her single-minded devotion to her daughter's good, she forces Jesus to perceive that ethnicity is no boundary to faith. Jesus repents, and her daughter is healed.

Jesus doesn't retreat into defensive posturing when the Canaanite woman challenges his ethnocentrism. Instead, he listens to her. He opens himself to be transformed by her. What prompts him to listen—and elsewhere to expect others to listen to his challenges? Why does he expect transformation (of himself or others) where tradition and society say none is possible?

The New Testament depicts Jesus as extraordinarily in tune with the spiritual possibilities in all things. In him, no boundary exists between the holy and the mundane. He trusts the Spirit/God utterly. He lives his daily relationships from the perspective of the Spirit/the spiritual.

The earliest writings we have about Jesus (the letters of Paul) present almost no biographical information. Paul seems relatively uninterested in stories about Jesus—or even in his teachings. Yes, he quotes "the Lord" occasionally. But what seizes Paul, in his relationship to Christ, is the quality of Spirit found there. The quality of Spirit seems to be an energy of relationship that binds people together and makes people whole.

Paul doesn't speculate on the metaphysical nature of Christ's resurrected body. He simply describes his experience that the gathered community of Christ continues the reality of Christ's earthly life. In 1 Corinthians 11:23–27, Paul uses "the body" as a double entendre to mean both the gathered community and Jesus' body. He proceeds to explain how each movement and experience of any part of the body affects all the others (1 Cor 12:12–27). Christ is not only a person. Christ is also the relationship among Christ's followers.

To live in Christ, to follow Jesus, means living our relationships in constant spiritual communion. It means spontaneously being shaped by the ever-renewing, ever-growing perspective of the Spirit.

How Might Jesus Open Himself?

So what does this have to do with whether Jesus would wear a man's suit or a woman's dress to the church that rejected my fairy godbrother? It suggests that I must not ask "What would Jesus do?" Rather I must ask, "How might Jesus open himself to relationships with others and God in this moment?" Will the dress and pearls help to inspire new perspectives? Will the business suit foster mutual growth? Sometimes one must shatter old relationship patterns to enable new growth. Sometimes one must rest in the familiar and retreat from upheaval. Anger and insult may move with the Spirit, as when Jesus pronounced woes upon stagnant, oppressive traditionalists (Matt 23:13). A softer answer may also teach, as when Jesus refused to take sides in a legal dispute (Lk 12:13–15).

Should one abide with church tradition or challenge church structures?

I attend a congregation that has never been able to make a gay/lesbian-affirming statement. We do not all agree on issues of sexuality. Our regional Mennonite conference now threatens to expel our congregation unless it excommunicates gay and lesbian members. Nevertheless, we continue to welcome gay and lesbian members. Why do members who cannot agree to affirm the goodness of gay and lesbian relationships embrace us and risk expulsion? Why do I, an openly gay man, remain where my sexuality is not always affirmed? Although we do not fully agree, we sense in each other a movement of the Spirit that we trust. We perceive, imperfect though it may be, the energy of Christ's body in our relationship. In this mystery of Christ, I can say of certain people—whether we fundamentally disagree or agree about sexuality—that I would trust my life to them.

If I were to wear the dress in this my home congregation, it would be for fun and joy and laughter and learning. But, in some other congregations, I'd wear the dress to be "in their face." More likely, I would shake the dust from the soles of my pumps and leave before my pearls were cast before swine. Just as we must not divorce what God has joined, sometimes we should not keep bound what God long put asunder. Sometimes mutual good comes in parting.

Right relationships—Spiritual relationships—seek the good in one another. They promote growth in each other. They foster mutuality and justice between us. They tune our interactions to the energies of God.

We can stew about institutions. Shall we leave the church? Shall we support it? Shall we prophesy against it or work to change it from within? Some must leave. Others must stay. The sacred mystery of living in Christ is this: to discover and move toward the Spirit's potential, whatever the pattern of relationship.

Note

1 Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, *Social–Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), p. 134.

John Linscheid and his lover, Ken White, live in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. They will lead a retreat on creating and using ritual to face and move through the unique challenges of gay–male identity development (16–18 August 1996).

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