

LIGHTENING UP

--The only lens that we have for viewing what the historical Jesus may have looked like are our four gospel accounts--Mark, copied closely by Matthew and Luke, and rounded out by the very independent fourth account of John.

In these narratives, we variously see a Jesus who is passionately concerned about the poor and the unprivileged, a Jesus who is not reticent at all about coloring outside the lines of prescribed expectations or established prohibitions when some greater point is at stake, a Jesus who puts himself on the line where matters of justice are concerned, a Jesus who is incisive and sharp-tongued when it is time to speak truth to power.

In these narratives, we find a Jesus who is perceptive, long-suffering, irritated, grieved, at times even edgy. Sadly, however, nowhere do we find a Jesus who demonstrates a sense of humor--though, in choosing the twelve disciples that he does, surely he must have had one.

In other words, where these four fundamental but selective accounts of the figure of Jesus are concerned, perhaps the biggest oversight is that not one of them captures any glimpse of Jesus so much as smiling, let alone grinning from ear to ear.

That's too bad, too, for it leaves one with the impression that to follow Jesus is a decidedly heavy experience--one only of punishing austerity, risky confrontation, and unavoidable sacrifice.

Perhaps to too significant a degree, the Jesus that we are acquainted with in the gospels is only the one who demands things of his disciples that they will fail at, who calls out the scribes and Pharisees for their hypocrisy, who indignantly tosses over the tables in the Temple. One strains to imagine such a serious and heavy-handed Jesus ever cracking some funny or even laughing out loud, though certainly he must have done both. In choosing how to follow this man, the characterization that we are left with influences the rather dour manner in which we often live out our faith.

Religion in the East, Buddhism in particular, seems to do a better job of depicting the religious path as being heavy, alright, but not just heavy. To be seen in Buddhist places of worship are those statues of the revered, holy ascetic practitioners of the past, so gaunt that you can count every rib. But there is also that remarkable rendition of the Buddha himself as a shirtless, rotund fellow, caught in a half-dancing pose, his face showing the unmistakable expression of laughter.

It is difficult to imagine Jesus--the frowning Jesus of the perpetually furrowed brow--in any such pose.

--All this is what makes this morning's reading from Matthew, then, so very important: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (11.28).

Basic human experience is hard enough, Jesus seems to be saying. Give yourself to me, with all your frustrations and contradictions, and just lighten up.

"Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (11.29).

You've made your lives far more complicated and onerous and exhausting than they need to be, he seems to be saying. Follow after me, and, for heaven's sake, do lighten up.

“For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (12.30). Mind you, light.

These are words aimed at the over-stimulated, over-stressed, over-worked human soul--you know, you and me, and all those souls among us who are inclined to turn the joyous Good News into much too heavy a thing.

Virtually everywhere else in the gospels, Jesus is depicted simply as pushing the limits, striving to be taken seriously, pressing to get it all done--no doubt, all salient dimensions to the man, but surely not exclusively the man. Only here in Matthew is this rather incongruent-sounding invitation issued, one by which all that pitched busyness can be balanced out with a marked lightening up--slowing it all down, taking that purposeful deep breath, settling quietly in the moment at hand.

--There's a concept in spirituality that at this point insinuates itself into our considerations. It is the whole notion of “enlightenment,” which is usually regarded as an intellectual breakthrough of sorts--as the light bulb going on, as a final “getting” it. You know, amazing grace--once I was blind, but now I see; once I was confused and confounded, but now I genuinely understand; once I was aimless and lost, but now I know the way. Enlightenment.

Spiritually speaking, the goal of our path is to achieve, or happily to stumble upon, that liberating burst of light and insight into the way that things truly are, and how they might be changed in manners that mightily please God. It is easy to imagine that finally grasping life as it is and as it can be are enough to bring at least a smile to one's face.

Hearing Jesus' words in Matthew, then, we might gain a slightly different understanding of what such enlightenment is. Perhaps “en-light-enment” is not the opposite of the overcoming the darkness; perhaps it's the opposite of overcoming all the heaviness. Perhaps the “en-light-enment” that we seek is nothing less than the lightening-up that we so crave. Now, there's a thought!

And so this Jesus, otherwise widely portrayed in the gospels in such humorless detail, invites us with purpose to an experience of him which is restful, gentle, and, well, lighter than we have been taught to think. “En-light-enment,” indeed.

--Speaking of Buddhism, over my lifetime, I have seen my share of their marvelous temples, including over our recent weeks away in Vietnam and Japan. No matter where, whether the Buddha is presented as reclining or as seated, I am always struck by the expression on his face. There is a Mona-Lisa-like smile which is the very opposite of burdensomeness and heaviness; the very opposite of stress, of effortfulness, of anxiousness.

To me, that enigmatic, compelling smile says, in terms that every good Christian can fully understand, “Come to me, because I know. I know what you have yet to discover for yourself. But if I have found it, you can find it, too. And you will know for yourself that it is a yoke that is simple, that is joyful, and that is light.”

Certainly, that is something at least worth wryly smiling about. No doubt, in our own Christian experience, we could benefit from a bit more of that.

Driven by all our centuries of sullen piety and grinding hard work, we could use some lightening up, don't you think?