

GET OFF THE FENCE

When Jesus Won't Accept Our Balancing Act

Text: Matthew 12:22-32

The Dividing Call of Christ

Of all the people admired in the world today, Jesus of Nazareth continually ranks at the top of the list. Even those who don't call themselves "Christians," regard Jesus as one of the wisest teachers and most loving leaders the world has ever known. He is still making the covers of magazines and being talked about in coffee shops with a popularity like no other person who has walked this earth.

So why did his contemporaries *kill* him? What did he say or do that was so psetting that religious and secular leaders alike wanted to see him dead? What was it about Jesus that could make the crowds that once followed him finally turn upon him, demanding his blood and cheering his pain? If Jesus was simply the gentle genius some portray him to be, how could this have happened?

There's only one explanation, I think. Jesus was more than meek and mild. He was more than a poetic philosopher. Jesus was the Light of Heaven hitting a darkened earth like a cosmic laser beam. He made claims and commands that left people undone. He named realities that others sought to bury. He broke barriers and battered bastions no one else had the nerve to assault. He called for the utter dismantling of the way things were and the new creation of something better. Jesus was not politically correct or religiously pious or socially tame. Jesus was a dangerous man because he was and is the GOD who is dangerously good.

What I want to keep asking during this Lenten Series is: **"Do you and I know this Jesus and how does it show?"** Or has Jesus become so domesticated in our concept of him that he no longer really disturbs us, no longer really disrupts us, no longer – in a sense – really disciples us into the new life of the Kingdom of God?" For example today, what do we do with the Jesus who says: **No one can serve two masters (Mat 6:24). Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand (Mat 12:25).** What do we do with the Jesus who declares: **Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters (Mat 12:30).** In short, what do you do with the Jesus who says: "Get off the fence!"

Life in a Fence-Sitting World

I think it's hard to face a Jesus like that because we live in a world where "fence-sitting" has become pretty common. For good and for ill, our world has grown comfortable with partial commitments, with hedged bets, with trial periods and associate memberships. We like to feel part of the game but also enjoy the safety of the stands. We will crow about heroism and victories when it's going well for our side, but tend to distance ourselves from taking responsibility for the bad-plays and losses. We want good friendships and marriages but often avoid facing the sin patterns that keep them from being great relationships. We want our kids to be spiritually vital but also on the traveling team on Sundays. We want a sane, healthy life, but also one packed with all the pace and possessions of "success."

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I heard a story about a man named Homer who finally worked up the courage to propose marriage to the girl of his dreams. Dropping to one knee, he looked his beloved in the eye and said: *"Sue, I know I'm not wealthy like Tom. I recognize that I'm not handsome like Tom. I may not be as well-educated as Tom. But I love you, Sue."* The woman, obviously moved, responded sincerely: "Why I love you too, Homer. But tell me a little more about Tom!"

We do this fence-sitting with God too. We sing "Take My Life... And Let It Be." It is so much harder to get the "Consecrated" part – to go "All In" as fans of Texas Hold 'Em say. It isn't that we're not interested in God. We are. But we're wary of full investment. To paraphrase author Wilbur Rees: *"I would like to buy \$3 worth of God, please, not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep, but just enough to equal a cup of warm milk or a snooze in the sunshine. I don't want enough of him to make me love [THAT person or change me dramatically]. I want [inspiration], not transformation; I want the warmth of a womb, not a new birth. I want a pound of the Eternal in a paper sack. Can I have \$3 worth of God, please?"*

You probably don't come at God that way – and that's good – because Jesus makes it very clear that he is not interested in these partial investments and divided loyalties that produce such poor fruit. A religious leader can build quite a following by pretending otherwise. He can suggest that God is mainly interested in some fine-tuning of our personalities -- that He's content so long as we're spending time and money on Him on Sundays, even if our real affection is for "Tom" the rest of the week. Gordon MacDonald says that this is why: *When the crowd got too large, [Jesus] would sharpen the blade of his teaching. He would make it clearer that there was a dramatic cost to discipleship... It was almost as if he were saying the size of this crowd suggests that you haven't heard me plainly enough or some of you wouldn't be here; so let me give it to you another way. And when he finished restating his message, many would then leave because they finally understood that No one can remain in the presence of Christ and be merely a very nice person.*

Grounding on God's Side of the Fence

This is why Jesus said such crazy-sounding things at times. To the Christians at Laodicea, Jesus says: **I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. How I wish you were either one or the other! (Rev 3:15)**. In other places Jesus described life with God as about leaving your family (Luk 14:25-27), and getting out of a safe boat (Mat 14:25-31), and quitting your current job (Matt 4:18-20), and selling possessions (Luk 12:33-34), and denying yourself (Luk 9:23). In all these statements, Jesus is not really saying that there's something intrinsically wrong with those things. It's clear from other things Jesus says that he isn't against family or safety or having a job or possessions or a self. He is simply calling the question of whether we're going to define and pursue these values in the World's way or the Kingdom's way. "Where are you mainly putting your feet down?" Jesus asks. Who and what do you really love and put first? What's the ground you're planting in? What sort of fruit is it producing? Or are you trying to sit on the fence?

Lent is the season when followers or would-be followers of Jesus have traditionally screwed up the courage to look down at where they've been sitting or examine the line they've been walking, the investments they've been making, the loyalties they've been dividing – in order to start walking in an even more Jesus-like way. Will you do that with me in these next 40 days? Historically, Christians have done this by taking hold of a spiritual discipline or two to aid them in this process. The spiritual disciplines are simply means of grounding ourselves on God's side of the fence.

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In our bookstore or online, you can find a copy of Adele Calhoun's *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*. If you don't own one already, I encourage you to pick one up and simply try one of the very doable practices that Adele suggests. This Lenten season I am investing in a practice called the *Examen*, a simple exercise I am doing daily to help me better discern God's hand and voice. You might try that practice or one of nearly 60 others describe there. If you do, I think you will find at least three blessings proceeding from that side of the fence.

For one thing, the spiritual disciplines lead us into a greater integrity -- a greater integration between what we say we believe and want and what we actually feel and do. To use Jesus' metaphor, they help you to see where the house of your life has gotten divided against itself, or where it's gotten shifted off of rock-solid foundations (Mat 7:24-27). Through the disciplines, God will start to improve the alignment.

Secondly, as God uses the disciplines to further transform our character and conduct, that will lead to a greater influence. To be ruthlessly blunt, the world has plenty of people just like us today. It has millions of fragmented people, running under their own power, driven by anxiety, fear, or anger. If the Church is going to truly be the kind of influential salt and light that Jesus calls it to be, then it will be because there are disciples who have taken deliberate steps to get off the fence and ground their life more deeply in God.

Finally, I believe you'll find that the ultimate fruit of the spiritual disciplines is greater joy. I know that discipline is not usually a word we associate with joy. But, as my former colleague, Bob Geelhoed, once observed, ask an Olympian standing on the medal platform how she spells "The Path to Joy," and she will say "D-I-S-C-I-P-L-I-N-E." Ask Jesus, says the writer to the Hebrews, why he disciplined himself in the face of temptation or endured the pain of the cross. The Bible answers that **C**]it was for the JOY of pursuing with integrity the mission his Father gave him (Heb 12:2) and for the JOY of exerting an eternal influence on people.

No Wonder

Jesus came to earth, proclaimed the kingdom of God in word and deed, and gave his life on a cross to restore integrity (i.e. a beautiful alignment) in our relationship with God, our neighbors, and our self (Mrk 12:29). He then called together the amazing community of disciples we call the Church and sent us out to extend his influence here, wherever we go this week, and **to the ends of the earth** (Mat 28:19-20; Acts 1:8). **I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit (Jhn 15:5),** said Jesus. And one of the greatest fruits of fully dedicating ourselves to him is joy. **I have told you this so that my joy might be in you and your joy might be complete (Jhn 15:11).**

I've been meeting on Wednesdays for the past few weeks with a small circle of men. We've got a lawyer in the group, an information technology pro, a couple of guys in the world of personal or corporate finance, one who runs a healthcare company, another who coordinates the top franchisees of a restaurant chain. They are young dads and granddads; divorced, widowed, married and single. Some have been walking with Jesus for a long time, while others are new to the church and even the faith. They've come to study the story of the Bible and how God shapes hearts after his own. They've got crazy busy lives. But they are looking for greater integrity, influence and joy, so they prioritize this spiritual discipline of seeking God together.

How about you? Would you like your life to be marked by greater integrity, influence and joy? It can be. But if you want this, Jesus says it won't help to be content with being hot for him some weeks and cold the next. You can't let your life become a divided house where you give him access to these rooms, but refuse to let him enter and renovate these other ones you prefer to keep for yourself. You must get off the fence and ground yourself in God.

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I'd like to think that if I were there on that day that Matthew 12 describes, I would have gotten off the fence. I'd like to believe that I'd have heard the Spirit of God speaking through Jesus. I would have seen the way he restored that **"demon-possessed man"** to a level of integrity, influence, and joy no one thought possible.

I'd have said, with **"all the people"** there, **"Could this be the Son of David,"** the promised Savior? I'd have found some group of his disciples to meet with or adopted some spiritual discipline to bring me closer to Jesus. I'd have taken some next step in going further with Him -- as I hope some of you will.

But it occurs to me that I might NOT have. I might have been more like the Pharisees. I might have been so used to sitting high and mighty on my familiar fence, and so sure that change was mostly what other people needed, that I would have done the one unforgivable thing. I might have regarded the Spirit of God, still trying to reach me, as "evil." I might have called the Light, "darkness." And so so smug in my niceness, so satisfied with my religion, so content with my righteousness, I might have started thinking: **"How do we get rid of this man?"**

How about you? Jesus wants you and me off the fence. He wants our total, undivided devotion. **"No wonder they crucified him."**

Benediction

The poet, Edward Sandford Martin, once wrote:

"Within my earthly temple there's a crowd.
There's one of us that's humble; one of us that's proud.
There's one that's broken-hearted for his sins,
And one who, unrepentant, sits and grins.
There's one who loves his neighbor as himself,
And one who cares for naught but fame and pelf.
From much corroding care would I be free
If once I could determine which is Me.

Who are you? And who with Christ's help, at work through the disciplines, might you one day come to be?

Jesus knows.

May his redeeming grace be with you.
May the everlasting love of God our Father surround you.
May the renewing power of God's Holy Spirit continue his good work in you and in me
Throughout this Lenten season to come. Amen.