

What Would Gaga Do?

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Edward M. Sunderland, Director of Crossroads Community Services,
at the eight o'clock and nine o'clock services, May 22, 2011: The Fifth Sunday of Easter.*

Based on 1Peter 2:2-7 and John 14:1-14.

I am so glad to see that you are all here today. In fact I must confess that I am very glad that the rapture didn't happen yesterday and that the world won't be ending in October because I just started working here at St. Bart's a year ago and I would like to keep working here for a while longer. When a religious nut convinces a bunch of other religious nuts that the world is going to end and they quit their jobs and leave school, I am always afraid that thinking people will think that all religious people are nuts. And yet Jesus said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled" or in the Scholars Version, "Don't give in to your distress."

I was reminded of the importance of following the teachings of Jesus this week by no less a skeptic than Bill Maher. He is an insightful and yet very profane comedian. He is also a self-proclaimed rationalist who calls himself an "apatheist." He is always quick to point out the foibles of the religious and takes special delight in highlighting situations in which religious people do not practice what they teach. At the end of the May 13th show Real Time he delivered the following monologue, which I have edited extensively but maintained the meaning. "New Rule: if you are a Christian who supports killing your enemies and torture, you have to come up with a new name for yourself. Capping thine enemy is not exactly what Jesus would do; it is what Suge Knight would do. Martin Luther King gets to call himself a Christian because he actually practiced loving his enemies, and Ghandi was so Christian he was Hindu." Maher goes on to point out, "Jesus lays on that hippies stuff pretty thick. He has lines like, 'Do not repay evil with evil' and 'Do not take revenge on those who wrong you.' Really. It is in that book you hold up when you scream at gay people. Non-violence was kind of Jesus' trademark, kind of his big thing. To not follow that part of it is kind of like joining Greenpeace and hating whales. If you ignore every single thing Jesus commanded you to do, you're not a Christian; you are just auditing. You are not Christ's followers; you are just his fans."

In this morning's gospel the story is told of Jesus' proclaiming, "I am the way, and I am the truth, and I am the life. No one gets to the Father unless it is through me." If one wants to be a literalist or believes that only the original intent of the human author matters, reading scripture as Antonin Scalia reads the Constitution, this verse could mean that a lot of very good people are in trouble. But I believe, and the church teaches us, that when we say that scripture is inspired, we believe that God inspired the human authors of scripture and that God still speaks to us through the Bible. I do not believe that the words attributed to Jesus form a message of Christian exclusivism but rather a message that must be taken alongside all of the other teachings of Jesus. His way, the way of loving one's enemies; his truth that it is better not to return evil for evil; and his life of nonviolence: all will lead us to the Father. In fact anyone who follows this way, this truth and this life will see God.

The question remains what to do when the crazies give us a bad name? One answer that came to me this week comes from yet another source, Ms. Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta. You know her as Lady Gaga, the chart-topping glam pop singer in the style of Michael Jackson, Madonna, David Bowie, and Elton John. In addition, this year the 25-year-old New Yorker took the number one spot from Oprah Winfrey on the Forbes annual list of the 100 most powerful celebrities. She is due to release a new album tomorrow, and in the hype that has surrounded the release I have discovered that she is also somewhat of a theologian. Now almost

every poet who writes of love can be understood theologically, but Gaga pushed the envelope once again in the song *Judas*. I am sure that the fact that this song was released during the week before Holy Week was purely coincidental, but as you might imagine it drew all the usual condemnations from all the usual condemners and it shot to the top of the iTunes Store download list.

In interviews she has stated that the song began as a ballad about her disappointment after a relationship with someone she believes betrayed her again and again. The man was into heavy metal rock music and particularly the music of the band Judas Priest. As she began writing the song she began to use Christian imagery of betrayal and forgiveness and sees the song as a metaphor for her need to forgive in order to be open “to make room for what is good.” In the video we see Jesus on a motorcycle, with the twelve apostles following him down the road, each one on his own motorcycle with his name spelled out in metal studs on the back of their distressed leather jackets. Gaga, dressed as Mary Magdalene, is on the back of the motorcycle of an innocent-looking, very handsome biker with a crown of thorns on his head. She looks back at Judas longingly and sings to Jesus, “I wanna love you, but something’s pulling me away from you/Jesus is my virtue, Judas is the demon I cling to.” Initially I worried that Gaga was caught in some type of dualism but then I began thinking that she needs to forgive Judas in order to “make room for what is good,” that is, to make room for Jesus. What does Gaga do when confronted with the betrayer? She would forgive him to make room for what is good.

But the real question is not what would Gaga do, but how can we do it? How do we learn to forgive and make room for what is good? The answer is, of course, in the first words of the lesson today, which the Scholars Version translates, “Do not give in to your distress.” It is too easy to give in to distress. Let me tell you it is easy to give in to your distress when your company is downsizing, to give in to your distress because the globe is warming and the economy is still not recovering. It is easy to give in to your distress when you have been hurt or wronged or when others seek to do you wrong. In fact our instincts tell us to give in to distress, we become afraid, we become hyper-alert, we tense up, ready for a fight. Instincts, which have evolved over the millennia, are hard not to give in to. And yet, Elie Wiesel, one of the survivors of the worst catastrophe in human history, reminds us that the Talmud teaches, “No one is the owner of his or her instincts, but controlling them, that is civilization.” Jesus says do not give in to your distress. Instead we are called to control distress, and do as Jesus would do—forgive. When I do give in to my distress, it always leads me away from following Jesus. It makes me sick and the sickness of distress, anxiety, and fear is very contagious; it spreads to others quicker than the common cold and is more virulent than the worst influenza. And there is only one antidote: do as Gaga would do. Forgive, make room for what is good, make room for Jesus who helps us to know God.

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