

Mark Belletini

### **Opening Words**

We are here,  
*on an early spring day,*  
blessed by greening willows, tulips & daffodils,  
*to worship, to consider with honesty*  
and heartfelt compassion the difficult truths  
*which lead us deeper into the world. And so*

**Mindful of the responsibility our freedom presses into us, blest by the beauty of the world, and drawn by a vision of a community known for its honesty, generosity, depth, love, and justice-work, we focus our time together by the kindling of light.**

### **Sequence:**

As we move through the season of spring,  
this at least is clear:  
there is a contrast between  
a snow-crusting oak trunk in December  
and a delicate branch of willow in April.  
there is a contrast between an icy windstorm  
and a scented spring breeze.  
As we move through the season of Passover,  
this is clear:  
there is a contrast between forced labor  
and walking freely in the wilderness.  
There is a contrast between entitlement  
and liberty.  
There is a contrast between giving thanks  
to a power that encourages liberation,  
and giving thanks to a golden calf that just sits there.  
As we move through this season of abundance,  
this is clear:  
There is a contrast between ordinary daily  
struggles here in central Ohio,  
and the outrage and bloodshed in Darfur.  
There is a contrast between talking about  
local loved ones as our sisters and brothers,  
and speaking of the decimated villagers  
in East Africa as our sisters and brothers.  
As we move through this season of silence,  
this is clear:  
there is a contrast between this silent pause

of simple rest and the silence which surrounds those who are oppressed and those who are in deep need. May this silence serve as an invitation to break that other silence, and to embrace for ourselves the claim of the great Cynic philosopher Diogenes: I am a citizen of the world.”

### *silence*

Remembering our interconnection with all that is, we set aside this time to remember and embrace the memories of our hearts, the people who dwell there because we have dwelt in them all of our lives: we speak their names in love aloud or in the silent recesses of our hearts

### *naming*

Now let there be music to embrace us with possibilities, to celebrate the seasons of our lives, to teach us about the goal of harmony and beauty, and to lift our hearts on high.

**The First Reading** comes from the *Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, a text we ascertain was written sometime in the mid-second century, probably by an anonymous woman. It is what is called a Gnostic gospel, like the recently discovered *Gospel of Judas*. This means that it talks about Jesus in terms of metaphysics and it usually reflects severe conflicts about authority in the church. We have only a few pages of the original text, from which you will hear just excerpts.

The Savior said: “Every creature exists in, and with, each other.” Then Peter said to him: “If that is the way the world is, what is the nature of sin?” The Savior answered: “There is no such thing as sin, except for when you claim intimacy with other worlds than this one. It’s important to get to the root of everything.”

Then he departed from them. Mary tried to comfort the rest of them, saying: “Do not weep and be distressed, for his grace will shelter you. He has prepared us, after all, and thus has made us truly human.”

Andrew asked: “What is your opinion about what was just said?”

Peter said “Has the Savior spoken secretly to a woman so that we may not hear what he had to say? Surely he was not trying to show us that she is more worthy than we are?”

Levi said to Peter: “You are always giving in to your tendency to respond to the world in anger. And even now you are questioning this woman as if she was your enemy. If the Savior considered her worthy, who are you to disregard her? Rather, we should be ashamed. We should announce the good news and not be laying down any rules, or making laws.”

**The Second Reading** comes from the classic New Testament criticism from the Mennonite tradition, as written by John Howard Yoder over 30 years ago. I tell you the date especially, since 30 years ago long hair in males was still in vogue, whereas it is less so now.

One of the inner contradictions of our claim to have left Christendom behind is the peculiar place of Jesus in the mind of many young rebels. It may be a meaningless coincidence that some young men wear their hair like the Good Shepherd of a Sunday school poster, but there is certainly no randomness in their claim that Jesus was, like themselves, a social critic, an agitator, a drop-out from the social climb, and the spokes-person of a counterculture. The equation seems glib...but is it really that simple? Or might it be that, in this half-spoofing exaggeration, there is breaking into awareness a dimension of truth that we ethicists had been hiding from ourselves? This study makes that claim. It claims not only that Jesus is a model of radical political action, but that this issue is now generally visible throughout New Testament studies, even though scholars have not stated it in such a way that others had to notice it. Our study then, seeks to describe the connection which might relate New Testament studies with contemporary social ethics, especially as this latter discipline is currently preoccupied with the problem of power.

### Sermon

So here we are. On Sunday Morning. Gathering in this lovely room, under the golden wood of our ceiling. Gathering, too, in the very state among the 50 United States which a thousand so-called Patriot Pastors want “to claim” for Jesus. “Ohio for Jesus” is their slogan. Pastor Russell Johnson, of Fairfield Christian Church near Lancaster, who organized—with great skill—the Patriot Pastors, preaches openly on his website that anyone who would call his claim inappropriate, and even cruel (as I most certainly do), is part of one of the “hoards of hell.” That must make me a devil, I guess, in Mr. Johnson’s theology.

Now, I can take a little name-calling. God knows I’ve been called names before. Fag. Wop. Guinea. Spick. Heretic. Traitor. So being called a devil hardly makes me break out into a sweat.

But still, I’m angry. I’m enraged. Not because he insinuates I’m a devil, but because Mr. Johnson claims the authority to snatch Ohio for his “Jesus” alone, without caring a whit what Ohio Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, agnostics or people like me might say.

Now clearly, if I would dare to *interpret* his actions, by claiming that his Jesus seems a lot more like a projection of his own anger and desire for control, dressed up in a beard and a bathrobe, he’ll say that I am just “persecuting” him with my unbelief. He’ll say I’m trying to force my unbelief onto the state of Ohio far more than he is trying to force his Jesus on the state. So I guess there is no real point in trying to interpret his motives: it always gets reduced to the eternal ping pong match in literalist minds: Yes it is. No it isn’t. Yes it is. No it isn’t.

And then someone else always comes along who tries to make peace by saying, “Well, Pastor Johnson has his opinion, and you have your opinion. Everyone has an opinion. That’s what America and Ohio mean, you know.”

The clear implication to me when I hear people say this, is that the whole pursuit of truths deeper than superficial or literalist readings, is a waste of time, that the scientific method and the work of critical historians and archeologists is a farce, and that the purpose of life is that everyone simply chooses their belief and then lives unperturbed, side by side, happily ever after, with June Cleaver in her apron, Ward in his study, and Wally and Beaver getting ready for supper, forever.

But that is not the real world. Organizing literalist pastors and calling them Patriots and claiming Ohio for Jesus is NOT a 1950s sitcom any more. The issues at stake here are high, not low. My

life as a citizen is at stake. My religious future is at stake. I dare say your future is at stake, just as much.

This is why what people say about Jesus in Ohio is not just a game of opinion ping-pong. There are consequences that go with stated opinions. There is a sharp contrast, after all, between proclaiming a Jesus that defines family as “Leave It To Beaver” only, a Jesus who saves the blest, once all of them and the planet they live on are dead, *and* proclaiming a Jesus who was a social justice agitator in this world. I cannot let Mr. Johnson’s proclamations go unchallenged as merely one opinion among many, all of which are equal. This is why today I must speak of a human Jesus who lived and died long ago. I must speak of a man who dreamed of justice in this world, not the next.

And, I need to say this: Ohio does not need Russell’s Jesus. Ohio needs justice for the poor and disenfranchised, jobs for workers that pay a living wage, honest politics, and good education. Ohio may, in fact, need a modern version of the enacted dreams of that ancient Galilean; but Ohio does not need more self-serving teachings that everyone sitting in this church will burn in hell, while all the folks in Johnson’s church in Lancaster can look over the edge of heaven and say to us forever, “Tch tch tch. We told you so.”

But, it’s important to point out that even in ancient times, there weren’t many who appreciated a social agitator Jesus, a Jesus who dreamed of justice for all, not privilege for the few. Later writers buried him in a tomb of miracles and titles. And Gnostic Christians, like the author of the apocryphal Gospel of Mary of Magdala preserve, if not the authentic teachings of Jesus, then at least some records of ancient arguments about authority in the church...can women speak? Can they teach? Does the spirit speak through them too?

Jesus seems to have thought so, along with other liberals of the time. But since that time, as the Gospel of Mary suggests, the authority in the church to speak of Jesus has largely been confined to men, whether Benedict XV or Russell Johnson, who deny religious validity or moral grounding to anyone who disagrees with them. The ancient conflicts around authority are still being fought, you see, but now the territory is Ohio, not the Roman Empire.

This is why John Howard Yoder’s words are so important. “Our study,” he writes, “seeks to describe *the connection* which might relate New Testament studies with contemporary social ethics, especially as this latter discipline is currently preoccupied with the problem of power.”

Ah yes. Power. The ethics of power in our day being no less problematic than IN the days of Jesus. For there are modern Herod’s, modern Pilates. There are ranking prelates right now, who don’t want anyone to know what hard working scholars *have been saying for a century now*, indeed, long before the famous Jesus Seminar, namely, that Jesus had a social message to bring to both religion and politics, teaching that power...whether from temple or governor’s palace or even from this church... must be used to make more justice for everyone on earth, or else it is just unholy oppression and abuse.

So this is why, on this Sunday before Easter, I want to talk about Jesus. Not just my little idiosyncratic opinion, mind you, but the developing consensus of scholars, both Christian and Jewish, believing and unbelieving, male and female. Not just my opinion, no. Hardly. But please, it’s hardly an irreligious story I’m telling here. Perhaps Pastor Russell will tell you that since I

am the devil, everything I am saying about Jesus is evil incarnate. Let him say what he wants to say. He has a right, still, to say so.

And I have a right still, and every intention of challenging every single thing he says about Jesus, from beginning to end. Everything.

This is the life of Jesus.

First, Jesus is a late English form of a Greek word which clumsily represents the Aramaic Yeshu', a form of the name Yehoshua, or Joshua, as we say it in English. Yeshu' was a common male name back then, like Michael or Jeffrey is in our own day.

What did he look like? We can hardly know, except to say that undoubtedly, he was a lot shorter than most of us, since the whole human race has shot up about ten inches in the last 2000 years. He *was* from the Eastern Mediterranean, however, so on the cover of your orders, you'll find a typical representation of an Eastern Mediterranean man from Jesus' time. It's an actual portrait of a 30-year-old found on his coffin lid in Fayum, Egypt. The style of hair and shape of the face was very typical for that era. So think of it as a clue if you'd like one.

When was he born? Most likely in the last years of the reign of the paranoid King Herod the Great, who died in 4 BCE. And surely Jesus was not born in Bethlehem, because the Christmas stories were designed, not to explore biography, but to depict Jesus as a clear, but non-violent rival to Caesar from the very Beginning... after all, Caesar, too, was called Savior, Lord, and Son of God. Caesar, too, was born of a virgin. And Bethlehem was the birthplace of David, the "anointed one," the original Hebrew Caesar, as it were.

Surely Yeshu' was born in the tiny village of Nazareth, up in the Galilee, a four-day's walk north from Bethlehem. There were no more than twenty-five families in that hamlet, built literally into the side of a hill. Because the word "family" then meant extended family, not nuclear family, there may have been 250 people tops in town. Many dwellings there were simply faced caves hollowed out of the limestone. There was one abundant spring for fresh water.

About a forty-minute walk away, you would find the capital city of the Galilee, Sepphoris, with a Greek theater, a stadium, and an acropolis behind its high walls, as well as a significant market place. If, as the gospels suggest by calling Jesus a "tekton" or house-framer, Jesus came from a family of itinerant builders, then perhaps this growing city was the place where Jesus found most of his day-to-day work. In any case, as a Galilean, he undoubtedly knew enough Greek to get by in that territory, even if his ordinary family language was Aramaic, a Semitic language related to both Hebrew and Arabic. The Galilee was a very Greek place, after all.

His mother was named Maryam, or Mary, and he seems to have had many brothers and sisters and uncles and aunts. He may not have been first born, as the text insists, but born second after his brother Yacov, or James. We will never know for sure. Certainly his mother was hounded by innuendo, and there are many suggestions that Jesus was rejected as "illegitimate" when he was an adult. We cannot be sure what happened for sure...the texts are too sketchy, too apologetic. But in those patriarchal days, when a Roman recruit could have his way with a young woman anytime he wanted, and women were still always the ones blamed for their out of wedlock pregnancies, these stories may reflect some sad family truth.

Jesus grew up without a synagogue as a separate building. None were built until after the temple fell in the year 70. But people did call the large rooms of their houses “synagogues,” that is meeting places, which also, sometimes, served as schools, using whatever scraps of scripture the town may have possessed. Written materials were expensive in those days, remember. So it’s possible that Jesus may have participated in such events, and even learned to read and write a bit. But most likely he was illiterate, in the modern sense of the term. Still, as part of an oral culture, he knew the literature of the day by always hearing it recited aloud in home and village.

We can never know why he permanently left home, although it was a rare enough event in a clan-centered culture. Perhaps his constant itinerant work helped him to enjoy rootlessness. Some folks have playfully speculated that Jesus himself was the “prodigal son” of the story the kids heard this morning, and he himself left home to find himself only to return to a grouchy older brother. But such novelistic speculation can never be proved. And ancient writers just didn’t explore the “inner life” of their characters anyway. That’s a modern, post Freudian idea.

So Jesus went south when he left home. The gospel writers are all embarrassed about telling us that Jesus allowed himself to be ritually cleansed in a *mikvah*, or purifying ritual bath near the Jordan River, presided over by a sage named Yohanan, or John, the Dunker. John was much more famous than Jesus in the day, because he furiously critiqued the economy-destroying war that King Antipas was then fighting against the King of the Arabians.

Eventually, however, perhaps after a long time by himself, Jesus came back north to lease out a home-base room in Kefar-Nahum-By-the-Lake, a fishing village of some size at the top of Lake Kinneret, called the Galilean Sea in the gospels.

During a few years...as little as one, as many as four or five... Jesus, while plying his itinerant building trades, seems to have told stories that gained the interest of both the disenfranchised and the very poor in society, which were plentiful in that era in the Galilee. The stories were very often told over the supper table. What made these supper stories so unusual is that people who were rarely together suddenly were eating at the same table. Merchants and tax-collectors, the sick and healthy, the homeless and well-to-do, the deeply religious and pious skeptics, women and men (who never, but never, ate together in ancient times), Greek pagans and Galileans who worshipped down at the Judean temple, the old and the young, even children, who were really never seen nor heard in most ancient societies. They all reclined at table with Jesus. Apparently at his invitation.

These cross-cultural meals became what he was known for. And his stories almost always featured people in a pickle, people who were resentful because of injustices, or worse, resentful because of encroaching justice. They addressed the economic hardships of the time, the systemic oppression that had developed in the most recent decades. Some folks thought of Jesus as some sort of a prophet, because he, like Jeremiah before him, taught that any religious life, where justice did not come first and foremost, was not religion but banditry. Either everyone had a place at the power table of society, or no one should have one. Others thought Jesus was a sage, like that Greek Cynic guy, Diogenes, who used to wander about the countryside, homeless, taking ethical pot shots at his critics, and inviting people to ask questions for themselves.

During this time Jesus seems to have developed a reputation as a healer. There were many other teachers in his day who also had that reputation, so it’s hard to tell if any of the precise stories



which have come down to us are historical rather than emblematic. Certainly, many of the stories told about him are entirely symbolical, according to the literary practices of that time, if not our own day. The story of the feedings of the thousands, the stories of him walking on water, these are all stories interpreting him from a post-Easter understanding. But clearly, some at least experienced his presence and care as healing.

His family, however, seems to have been embarrassed by him. Maybe they feared because he was going around preaching, in a Roman colony, of a society based on principles of justice, not entitlement, and on principles of welcome and hospitality, not principles of exclusion, division and class, that his days were numbered. If so, they were right. Also, a fair number of students, both male and female, seem to have helped him in his teaching and healing work.

He brought his observations about justice to Jerusalem one fine April day in what we now call the year 30. Joining the throngs of pilgrims for the celebration of the great religious holiday of liberation, Jesus took the opportunity to organize a counter-demonstration to the military parade of the Roman Governor then entering the same city from the other direction. Basing his theatrical entrance on a passage from an ancient prophet, Jesus thereby proclaimed the coming of an age of peace and justice, an Empire, not of Caesar, heavy taxes and oppression, but of liberation. The next day, he staged another theatrical demonstration, accusing the monopolistic temple system of collaboration with the oppressors, a collaboration that destroyed, not encouraged, the justice and peace and economic parity taught by the Hebrew prophets and the Torah, especially in the passages about the Jubilee Year. Nevertheless, the demonstrations were non-violent, because one of the surest things we know he said was “Love even your foes.”

These two demonstrations upset the Roman Prefect, Pontius Pilatus, a man famed for his efficient but brutal governorship. It also seems to have threatened the collaborationist priests of rank from the Hanan clan. They joined together to find out where this strange man from up north was hiding out among the already testy crowds. Upon finding him, perhaps with the help of the temple police force, Pilatus had him summarily crucified, the usual Roman treatment for non-citizens accused of sedition. It’s even possible that Pilatus did, as the gospels suggest, put a sign on top of the stake which called Yeshu’ Bar Maryam “The Emperor of the Judeans,” since they clearly crucified him for political not religious reasons. But there was probably no trial per se. He was simply whipped, according to Roman practice, forced to carry a beam of wood to the stake already in place at the rock quarry outside the walls, called Skullhead because of the shape of the outcroppings. Then he was nailed to the beam, which was then nailed to the post along with his ankles; and there he hung, asphyxiating, until he died a half a day later. All of his friends, and even his family, abandoned him, although a few may have watched from afar. They were all fearful, understandably, of being tarred by his brush. When he was dead, the soldiers took his body down and threw it into in a lime pit as was their practice. No one ever knew what happened to his body, which was the intended practice of the Roman occupation ...complete humiliation and destruction of a person, without so much as a grave to visit afterward.

I wonder. What would happen to Ohio if it went for the dream of *this* Jesus, the historical sage, instead of Pastor Johnson’s demonizing Jesus, aflame with hellfire and a desire to control?

I can’t help but wonder.

### **Offering**

Knowing with certainty that the responsibility for this place resides with no one else, let us gladly pay our pledges, offer our gifts, and bless the grace and work of our principled and rooted community.

### **Short Prayer**

Justice.  
For everyone.  
Nothing less than that.  
But at least that, O Love.  
And involve us completely.  
Amen.