

August 9, 2009

A sermon preached by Rev. Donald Wester

A CALLED CONGREGATIONAL MEETING

As chair of your Religious Leadership Team, it is my duty today to present to this meeting of our congregation the report of your Religious Leadership Team on our recent interviews with Jesus, as well as a summary of our interviews with those from our congregation who claim to have had first hand experience of signs that Jesus is what he claims to be, “the bread of life,” or perhaps the “Messiah”.

First, let me say how much I appreciate those of you who came to this meeting today. The question before us has the potential to change this congregation forever. Some of us would be just as happy if this controversy had never come up in the first place. I also want to thank each of you who have spoken here today for your eloquence of speech and for maintaining a spirit of civility in your comments. We all feel passionately about the question before us today. I must confess, there were times when I feared our passions would get the best of us. But I think it is fair to say that so far we have been able to keep our comments fairly civil. I thank you for that.

As most of you know, this issue over bread began when the last administration in Jerusalem decided to align itself with the Roman Empire. As several of you have pointed out already, there was a time when a person could enter the market place and know without a doubt that whatever was purchased was going to be Kosher according to the teachings of Moses and the prophets who followed him. Today our town is filled with foreigners, and our market is filled with all kinds of strange and exotic foods. It is practically impossible to know what is Kosher and what is not.

Then there is the recession that has hit our community. With all the foreign goods in our market, the price of our home grown products, with the Kosher guarantee, can no longer be sold at a price that will sustain any of our local farmers and fishermen. Suddenly, we find that people of faith are going hungry, while the pagans in our midst, who have no trouble at all eating the leftovers from their religious sacrifices, are eating just fine.

It is no wonder that many of our finest members, starving half to death, have been going about in search of a new Prophet in the tradition of Moses. These poor souls are hoping this new prophet would approach God on behalf of his chosen people, hoping that God would send down manna from heaven for them to eat, just like God did for their ancestors in the desert.

Recently, members of our little congregation have been going out and listening to any rabbi or false prophet that comes along claiming to be the new Messiah. So it was determined by our executive council that a select group of religious elders from our congregation would be called upon to question anyone claiming to be a prophet, or messiah, to determine on behalf of the congregation if they truly were from the one true God of Moses and Abraham, or just trouble makers passing through our town, trying to take advantage of our members who are struggling to put bread on their tables.

Then last year Jesus shows up, teaching and preaching, creating great crowds of groupies that followed him everywhere he went. Some of you probably know Jesus' father Joseph, and his mother Mary. Joseph has done a little carpentry work for some of us around town. Well, as I was saying, Joseph's son Jesus starts showing up, not to do carpentry, but going about town, teaching and preaching to anyone who would listen, that the Kingdom of God is near! Well as you would expect, people began to gather to hear him preach and to check out his teachings, hoping that perhaps he was the new prophet God had sent to re-establish order to our lives and put proper food back in the bellies of our starving congregation.

As sister Rebecca has reminded us today, it was not too long ago that Jesus showed up down at Lake Tiberius holding some kind of revival meeting, and a crowd of around 5,000 people gathered to hear what this new teacher had to say. Like a lot of new preachers, Jesus went on and on until suddenly everyone began to realize that it was getting late and no one had bothered to bring any food for them to eat.

Well to make a long story short, as sister Rebecca tells it, there was this boy who wandered through with the groceries his mother had sent him to fetch at the market down by the lake. Jesus had his disciples confiscate the boy's basket. Then, taking this family's food, by some miracle, they began to feed all those who had gathered on that hillside. Now, I would have hated being that boy who was going to have to explain to his mother what had happened to the family supper, bringing home nothing but leftovers in his basket. But, according to sister Rebecca, the leftovers turned out to be rather substantial.

Anyway, before you knew it everyone in town was talking about this miracle of the feeding of the 5,000. Some in our congregation began to openly suggest this Jesus was a prophet sent from God to save us from starvation. As a result of these and other events, the Religious Leadership Team of our congregation, with the authorization of the Cabinet, approached Jesus to examine his credentials and determine whether or not he is qualified according to the teachings of Moses and the prophets.

Your Religious Leadership Team also interviewed several of our members who reported to have witnessed signs indicating that Jesus is truly from God, possibly the New Messiah.

I would like to now read for the record the findings of your Religious Leadership Team:
(see below)

Report of the Religious Leadership Team
First Central Congregation of Capernaum
Submitted on the 9th day of the month celebrating Caesar Augustus.

THE JESUS INTERVIEWS

POINT I

Our tradition teaches us that Moses was able to pray to God on behalf of our ancestors, securing Manna from heaven so that they would not starve while lost in the desert.

Jesus seems to be claiming, in spite of the miracle feeding of the 5,000, that in fact what he is offering is a different type of food. Jesus is quick to quote Moses when he says “that people cannot live by bread alone,” but then he twists Moses words to justify his claim that he is offering food for eternal life.

It is therefore, the determination of your religious leadership team that Jesus is **not** offering to help us feed the hungry among us. Instead, Jesus seems to be using bread as some kind of metaphor for another way of living life in relationship with God.

POINT II

Jesus seems to be discrediting the very teachings of Moses and the prophets, claiming that he is speaking according to the word he has received directly from God, and that his word takes precedence over the Law of Moses and the prophets. According to Jesus, and I quote: “No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day.” We actually heard him say: “And they shall all be taught by God. Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me.”

It is the determination of your religious leadership team that the teachings of Jesus are dangerous in that they undermine the very traditions that led us to this land and gave us authority over everything and everyone that lives in this land. Everyone here has known from birth that we are a privileged people, and that it was for us that God gave Moses the Ten Commandments and the children of Israel this land of milk and honey. Every time we have strayed from these teachings we have suffered the wrath of God.

Further, the teachings of Jesus border on sacrilege; if you listen closely to what Jesus is teaching, it sounds like he is claiming to be God. If not God, at least Jesus claims to have been sent directly from God. The truth is that we know for a fact that Jesus is the son of Joseph and Mary from up at Nazareth. Many of you will remember that Jesus and his father did some work on our synagogue not that many years ago.

It is the determination of your religious leadership team that Jesus is a subversive who is only going to lead people down a path of revolution against established law and order.

POINT III

Moses promised our ancestors in the wilderness that those with a blood claim as direct descendent of Israel, and were willing to be circumcised, a land to call our own. Jesus, on the other hand, appears to be teaching some new kind of ritual cannibalism, although no evidence of actual cannibalism has been discovered. Your religious leadership team can report that we actually heard Jesus say, and I quote: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

It is the determination of your religious leadership team that unless Jesus is again speaking in metaphors, this is a very dangerous solution to the needs of the hungry. And, this teaching could lead to serious consequences if misunderstood by those who hear it.

Therefore, it is the conclusion of this report that, based on the Jesus interviews, the likely result of the congregation voting to follow Jesus would result in our congregation:

1. Being expelled from the Jewish faith by the leadership in Jerusalem.
2. We would be risking being brought up on charges of treason and heresy by the Roman & Jewish leaders in Jerusalem.
3. And, ultimately we run the risk of being crucified on a cross by the very people we are trying to help.

After our interviews with Jesus, the committee went to many of the members of our congregation who have personally witnessed signs indicating that Jesus might be the New Messiah.

Our summary of these interviews is as follows.

THE WITNESS INTERVIEWS

Brother Phillip reported being at a wedding in Cana that Jesus and his mother were hosting. Once again they obviously were not very well prepared, for they ran out of wine. But as brother Phillip tells it, Jesus took a cask of ordinary water and turned it into wine. The guests were amazed that the hosts had reserved the best wine till last.

Sister Miriam reported to us the incident in Jerusalem where Jesus cleansed the temple of those trying to make a living, the moneychangers, and those providing animals for the sacrifices. Some have claimed this as a sign of his authority because of the words of the prophet, "Zeal for your house will consume me."

Brother Nicodemus reported on his secret visit to Jesus, and provided further evidence that at least for some, Jesus is sent from God. Although, it is still rather confusing as to how those who have already been born must be born again.

Your leadership team also interviewed others who spoke of the healing that Jesus has done as signs that he is from God. Some of these reports raised additional concerns. The team was concerned to hear about the healing that took place on behalf of an official working for the Romans. We are also troubled by the reports of Jesus healing on the Sabbath, in direct violation of our Sabbath Laws. Still, Jesus' ability to heal the sick along with the other signs reported to the Religious Leadership Team is evidence that Jesus is authorized by God.

Therefore, it is the conclusion of this report that based on the WITNESS INTERVIEWS; your religious leadership team can confirm that these signs, when taken independent of our interviews with Jesus, are ample evidence to suggest that Jesus of Nazareth truly is the Son of God – the Messiah.

While it is the opinion of your religious leadership team, based on the Jesus interviews alone, those who want us to become followers of Jesus are asking us to make a huge leap of faith. But, the Religious Leadership Team cannot ignore the testimony of so many of our members who have experienced powerful signs that Jesus is from God.

At the end of our deliberations, after many meetings, your Religious Leadership Team could not reach a consensus. We have concluded that there is just too much at stake for us to make a recommendation. The team felt that a decision of this magnitude required the vote of the entire congregation. Therefore, it has been decided to bring the following proposal to the congregation for vote.

“We the members of First Central Congregation of Capernaum accept the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth as revealed to some of our members through first hand experience and explained by the witness of the Evangelist John. Further, that Jesus of Nazareth is to be understood as the ‘Bread of Life’.

Upon approval of this proposal, we the members of First Central Congregation will consider ourselves to be Christians with the full privileges and obligations of disciples of Jesus Christ of Nazareth with the full expectation that in this act we will never be hungry, and we will never be thirsty.”

Respectfully submitted by the Committee of Religious Leaders
First Central Congregation of Capernaum
Submitted on this the 9th day of the month celebrating Caesar Augustus.

So that there is no confusion at the ballot box that might lead to accusations of voting irregularities, “Let me be perfectly clear”:

THE CHOICE

If it is your desire that this congregation continue to practice our faith as we have for generations, according to the Law of Moses and the word of the Prophets, and to reject the signs and words of Jesus, you will need to vote no!

If it is your desire to see this congregation become followers of Jesus of Nazareth, the self described “Bread of Life”, you will need to vote yes!

The future of our congregation depends on how we vote today! I would ask that you cast your votes as you leave our “House of Worship,” either through the doors in back, or, for those attending coffee hour, the doors to my right. May God bless the decision we are about to make. God help us if we are wrong!