

**“Jesus of Nazareth – The Impractical Teacher”**

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

20 March 2022

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Texts: Luke 6:20-36

Matthew 7:24-29

*“Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.”*

- Matthew 7:28-29

**Prayer**

**God who befriended us through Jesus of Nazareth,**

**May the whispers of your Holy Spirit**

**Be audible to us this morning.**

**Speak to us once again**

**So when we return to our lives outside this time of worship**

**your life-giving Word may continue to speak through us.**

**In Christ, we pray. Amen.**

***“Could the Earth be one of God’s failed experiments?”***

This provocative question has been on my mind since I saw it in an article the Jesuit priest Thomas Reese wrote for the Religion News Service at the beginning of January.<sup>1</sup> A few weeks from the article’s publication, Russia launched the military invasion of Ukraine, unleashing a wave of brutal attacks against the neighboring country and sending shock waves throughout the international community. As the war drags on into its 24<sup>th</sup> day, we have watched in shock more than 3 million Ukrainians become war refugees and 2 million being internally displaced in the worst humanitarian crisis on European soil since the Second World War.<sup>2</sup> The World Food Program USA has warned that the Russian invasion of Ukraine will have dire consequences for people living far beyond the Ukrainian borders. Soaring prices of fuel, wheat and corn are driving up food prices everywhere and the poorest people in the world are already struggling to buy their daily bread.<sup>3</sup> But the refugee crisis, the rising food and energy prices and a potentially devastating wave of hunger are not the only challenges and threats humanity faces as Russian missiles continue to fall and strike all over Ukraine. Last Monday, the United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres made a bone-chilling warning at a news briefing in New York City, ***“The prospect of nuclear conflict, once unthinkable, is now back within the realm of possibility.”***<sup>4</sup>

On February 28<sup>th</sup>, four days after Russia began the full-scale assault on Ukraine, the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released a comprehensive report on the impact of global warming on human life and on the planet. Scientists from around

the globe noted that the cumulative scientific evidence points unequivocally to human-induced climate change as an undeniable threat to life on Earth. The report states with stark honesty that world leaders and policymakers have “**a brief and rapidly closing window of opportunity to secure a liveable and sustainable future for all.**” If humanity does not step up our collective efforts to curb climate change, the report predicts that we will see the collapse of entire ecosystems, an exponential growth in extinction of species, deadlier heatwaves, wild fires, storms, floods and droughts that will make the Earth hotter, sicker, poorer and universally more dangerous to human life, but especially to people in poor nations who live in “danger zones” where ecosystems are already at a point of no return. António Guterres said that the IPCC report is “**a damning indictment of failed climate leadership**” and he accused the world’s biggest polluters of being “**guilty of arson of our only home.**”<sup>5</sup>

Is humankind one of God’s failures? Is the world a crime as Jack Miles, the Distinguished Professor Emeritus of English & Religious Studies at the University of California, Irvine, claimed in one of his books?<sup>6</sup>

Thomas Reese’s answer is direct and emphatic. In his article, Reese says that God gives humanity every opportunity to evolve morally and spiritually, but we keep blowing our chances. Reese is convinced that unless our spiritual evolution matches our scientific development, the human experiment will fail. Our hope, he believes, is in the Risen Christ whom Reese holds as the example of the spiritual evolution that can save humanity and the planet. Jesus put service above dominance, being the last of all above greatness, forgiveness above revenge, generosity above greed, friendship above enmity, peace above war, love above hate.<sup>7</sup> The Jesus’ Way, Reese says, is our way to full life. The question that really matters for the followers of Jesus is whether we will hold on to the mindset of deathly acquisitiveness, materialism, individualism, hubris, violence, xenophobia, nationalism, militarism and rivalry of a world that is teetering on the edge of self-destruction or if we are going to keep on trying to practice the life-saving teachings of the Gospels even if our efforts to do what Jesus taught his first disciples may look rather lame before the problems humankind faces today.

Journeying with Jesus in a world where Russian bombs hit hospitals and kill a pregnant woman and her baby means to allow Jesus’ teaching to show us a way of life that strips us of the illusion that strongmen and powerful nations, military alliances and nuclear weapons, national heroes and the state can free us from a world hell-bent on following a path of peace enforced by economic and military domination. Being with Jesus on the road means to believe that he is telling the truth when Jesus insists, despite the evidence to the contrary, that discipleship is a way of life that orients us away from a global community that is constantly grasping for wealth and power at the expense of life on earth. Following Jesus requires an openness of heart and mind to understand that Jesus never asked every single one of his disciples to give up all their possessions and live in abject poverty. What Jesus did do was to instruct his friends not to be so attached to prestige, success, comfort, money, race, religion and political ideologies that they might no longer be outraged by the disparities and injustices of a

world where Christian Orthodox Ukrainians are welcomed with open arms while non-Christian Syrian and Afghan refugees are denied the right to claim asylum in countries like Poland and the US. A Syrian refugee who now works for Amnesty International in Ireland commented recently on how Polish border agents are welcoming Ukrainians to bring their cats and dogs into the country but not too long ago the same agents were putting up fences to keep Middle Eastern refugees out, allowing children to freeze to death.<sup>8</sup> Taking Jesus seriously as the example of what it means to be human and as a spiritual Teacher requires that we keep asking ourselves to whom and to what we are granting the power to frame our reality, our perception of the truth and define how we should live our lives in community. Jesus spent three years of his adult life teaching his followers a radically unusual way of life. He urged the disciples not to keep up with the sinners – which is a New Testament word for people who are addicted to being less than God created them to be – people that only love those who love them back and show kindness only to those who are kind in return and lend only to those who they hope will pay them back in full. Instead, our Teacher Jesus encouraged the disciples to keep up with God's grace. To let God's grace change the assumptions, rules and logic by which they lived. Jesus asked his closest friends to let God's love re-frame their understanding of what is important, valuable, meaningful, sacred and life-affirming in the world. ***“Do to others as you would have them do to you,”*** Jesus instructed the disciples. And, just in case his followers might have any questions about what he meant, Jesus told them not to forget that God ***“is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked”*** and if they were going to keep up with God's grace, the disciples would do well to be merciful much like God is merciful.

You and I know that loving, doing good and investing without expecting absolutely nothing in return is not how our world operates. We like the idea of Jesus' teachings, but, in reality, we know the truth is that we live in a world of trade-offs, tit for tat, and quid pro quo. Collectively, we have agreed the world works better if we divide humankind into friends and foes, rich and poor, the powerful and the powerless, heroes and villains, good guys with white hats and bad actors in black hats, people we are willing to help and people we want to keep out and away, brave Ukrainians and evil Russians, desirable Christian refugees and suspicious Muslim asylum seekers. We are well aware that to tackle the existential threat of climate change, those of us who live in rich countries have to make bigger sacrifices for the sake of God's creation. Small and easy changes in our lifestyle are not enough. We have to re-think how we live, what we eat, how much we consume, and transition to clean energy, but our shared longing for unlimited economic growth, prosperity, wealth and greatness tells us that re-imagining our economy to save the Earth is impractical. So we keep doing business as usual. In fact, theologian Matthew Myer Boulton wrote a photonegative version of Jesus' Beatitudes that lay bare the mindset that makes the world turn. Boulton named it ***“business-as-usual beatitudes.”***<sup>9</sup>

***“Blessed are the rich, in things and in self-assurance.  
Blessed are those untouched by loss.  
Blessed are the powerful.***

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***Blessed are those who are ‘realistic’ about righteousness, compromising at every turn.  
 Blessed are those who demand and exact an eye for an eye.  
 Blessed are the crafty and opportunistic.  
 Blessed are those bold enough to make war.  
 Blessed are those who, doing good things, receive many accolades.  
 Blessed are those who, following Jesus, are widely praised and adored.”***

But, ***“Woe to the poor... for they will be trampled and left behind in a dog-eat-dog world.... Woe to the peacemakers, for the human appetite for retribution is surely insatiable...”***<sup>10</sup>

Jesus simply did not want anything to do with the structure of this world of business as usual. He refused to let the system of reciprocity that underpins practical human relationships dictate who is worthy and who is unworthy of God’s love. Surrounded by his disciples and a great crowd that gathered to listen to his teaching,<sup>11</sup> Jesus flipped the script and offered them a completely new blueprint for human relationships. His words made Jesus sound like an impractical religious teacher who was an idealist at best or a lunatic at worst. He rejected everything that is rational, sensible, and possible. Jesus imagined things that would never go together becoming the new reality of our lives. The poor inheriting the Kingdom. The hungry being fully satisfied. Those who weep rediscovering the joy of laughter. He warned the rich, the satiated, the well-connected, and well-liked who are happy to treat human relationships and the environment as a commodity, as something to be used, exchanged and exploited for greater return of the emptiness in their lives. Then, Jesus taught his friends that the only way to be saved from the reality imposed on us by the dominant powers of this world is to challenge the accepted social, economic and political norm of transactional reciprocity that endangers the future of our planet. Jesus encouraged his friends to dare to become the person, the human being, they were born to be. In other words, Jesus expected his disciples – a word that in Greek means “students” – to demonstrate in their individual and communal life the spiritual maturity to love enemies, do good to people who hated them, bless those who cursed them, pray for those who abused them. Jesus asked his followers to live as if the Kingdom of God were already here. As Tripp Fuller put it, ***“Jesus did not come to give the disciples the perfect update to the religious operating system or to install an invincible antivirus program; the kingdom of God brings an entirely new operating system.”***<sup>12</sup>

A whole and entirely new operating system, this is what humanity needs most right now, isn’t it? Well, Jesus’ teaching continues to affirm that only the love that is capable of transforming the mindset of unless-they-are-with-us-they-must-be-against-us into generous living that cares for the well-being even of our enemies can re-program our world to operate in a life-sustaining manner. In the lesson plan of the Teacher Jesus, loving others has nothing to do with the idea of being passive and submissive in situations of violence, injustice, abuse or oppression; much to the contrary, for the impractical Teacher Jesus love is a powerful God-given force that if used and handled

correctly as it is meant by God can make humankind see and enjoy the liberating and Earth-saving energy of reconciliation, friendship, generosity, and peace.

The war in Ukraine, millions of refugees crossing into other countries, the brutality of the Russian attacks, the terrible loss of innocent lives, the horrifying possibility of nuclear annihilation, the increase of chronically hungry families around the world, our apparently inexorable march toward climate catastrophe, and our everyday lives too full of struggles, loans, curses, reciprocation and retribution are the very opposite of everything Jesus taught his first disciples on the Sermon on the Plain in Luke's Gospel. There are moments when I can't help but ask myself why we still hold on to these absurdly impractical Jesus' lessons that fly in the face of the reality of raw power, violence, war, poverty, hunger, global warming and business-as-usual on Earth. I think we do it, I believe we still come to church on Sunday, gather around the words of Christ, and allow his teachings to demand us to embrace a new operating system for our lives because we have given our hearts to the Christ of the Gospels. We know Jesus' words do not fit easily into our world. We are not even sure if we can do what he asks of us, but we bet our lives on Jesus' teaching because he gave his own life away, holding nothing back, to show humankind that whoever controls our mental framework and defines the concepts of what is true, possible, normal, acceptable, and powerful enough to change our history controls us. This is the reason Paul wrote in his Letter to the Romans that the new life in Christ begins with the transformation of our minds. ***“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.”***<sup>13</sup> And Jesus, our impractical teacher, hopes that God's mercy, love and grace will set our minds and hearts free to imagine what is good for human life and work for a planet full of grace, full of hope, full of compassion, full of love and full of life.

I have chosen to build my faith in the solid rock of Jesus' impractical and demanding teachings. As the old hymn says, ***“On Christ the solid Rock I stand; All other ground is sinking sand.”***<sup>14</sup> But I confess that my faith is lunar rather than solar. Episcopal writer Barbara Brown Taylor explains the difference between these two kinds of faith experiences in this way. People who have the gift of the solar faith are always shining. They could enter any dark and complicated and difficult situation without ever doubting, questioning or putting their faith at risk. Their light never flickers or falters. People with lunar faith on the other hand know that their faith waxes and wanes. Sometimes, their faith is large, round and bright as a headlight; other times, it is as thin as the blade of a sickle; and there are moments when it appears to be altogether gone. Barbara Brown Taylor said that the waxing and waning moon is a truer mirror of her faith than the sun that looks the same everyday.<sup>15</sup>

Friends, the teachings of Jesus make no sense in the reality of our world and it is very understandable if your faith in his words or in your own ability to embrace the Gospel waxes and wanes. But I believe that if we allow God's love to reframe and refocus our lives, we can dare to begin to imagine what appears impossible. We can

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live differently. Act differently. Love more boldly. We can refuse to let the operating system of this world frogmarch us toward planetary failure. We can be faithful disciples that will keep challenging each other and the human race to stop blowing our chances to re-build our global home on the rock of God's love. We can keep following Jesus our Teacher, not because his teachings conform to the business-as-usual-beatitudes of this world, but because the Gospel gives us words of life, faith, hope and love that grounds us in God's power to do more than we can imagine. Then no matter what challenges may come our way, by God's grace, we will stand together on the rock and life will flourish once again because, in Christ, God loved the world so that humanity should not fail but live fully, even eternally.

May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> By Thomas Reese in Earth: One of God's failed experiments?, Religion News Service, 05 January 2022

[<https://religionnews.com/2022/01/05/earth-one-of-gods-failed-experiments/?fbclid=IwAR0Qdo9A9zH5qVtBBaeLxMwnFftGEuNkkLx9RbTQ8D3zgGfa8bhd89gF6fU>].

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR - The UN Refugee Agency, Operational Data Portal [<https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/Ukraine>].

<sup>3</sup> World Food Program USA in The War in Ukraine is Triggering a Wave of Collateral Hunger Across the Globe as Food and Energy Prices Surge, 15 March 2022 [<https://www.wfpusa.org/articles/war-ukraine-triggering-wave-collateral-hunger-food-fuel-prices-surge/>].

<sup>4</sup> United Nations, General-Secretary António Guterres in remarks to reporters at UN headquarters on the war in Ukraine, 14 March 2022 [<https://www.un.org/sg/en/node/262394>].

<sup>5</sup> UN News in IPCC adaptation report 'a damning indictment of failed global leadership on climate', United Nations, 28 February 2022 [<https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/02/1112852>].

<sup>6</sup> Jack Miles in Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God, p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> By Thomas Reese in Earth: One of God's failed experiments?, Religion News Service, 05 January 2022, adapted, [<https://religionnews.com/2022/01/05/earth-one-of-gods-failed-experiments/?fbclid=IwAR0Qdo9A9zH5qVtBBaeLxMwnFftGEuNkkLx9RbTQ8D3zgGfa8bhd89gF6fU>].

<sup>8</sup> By Aymann Ismail in The Complicated Reality of Why Europe Has Embraced Ukrainians—and Shunned Others, World, Slate, 03 March 2022 [[https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2022/03/ukraine-war-2022-ukrainian-refugee-middle-east.html?fbclid=IwAR2lTdZU-E2AQ2PWLA-3RnvszoeVMHgg\\_1g0V-mQiZ4KZSWM71nfRbHtXTA](https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2022/03/ukraine-war-2022-ukrainian-refugee-middle-east.html?fbclid=IwAR2lTdZU-E2AQ2PWLA-3RnvszoeVMHgg_1g0V-mQiZ4KZSWM71nfRbHtXTA)].

<sup>9</sup> Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson in Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew, Volume 1, location 2621, Kindle Edition.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., locations 2627 and 2637.

<sup>11</sup> Luke 6:17.

<sup>12</sup> Tripp Fuller in The Homebrewed Christianity Guide to Jesus, p. 52, Kindle Edition.

<sup>13</sup> Romans 12:2.

<sup>14</sup> "My Hope is Built" composed by Edward Mote circa 1834.

<sup>15</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor in Learning to Walk in the Darkness, p. 8, Kindle Edition.