

“Jesus Was a Rapper”

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Psalm 130

Mark 3:20-35

I cry out to you from the depths, Lord— my Lord, listen to my voice!

Psalm 130:1-2

Let us pray... O God,

Hear our prayers and hear the songs of our heart,
the happy and the sad.

Be patient with us as we seek to learn how to sing and work and live
in concert with others.

Amen

You are probably wondering about today’s sermon title –

and what rap music could possibly have to do with Jesus Christ.

Just to be clear, though – I don’t care for rap music, myself,
no more than I do for country music, for that matter.

To me, both for the most part, fall into the category I call
“Nanny-nanny-boo-boo” music –

protest that is more about whining than rhyming.

There are certainly exceptions in both genres that I even enjoy –

but for the most part, this kind of music was not composed for me.

I am on the outside of both audiences for which these music styles were intended...

Country and rap are exclusively oriented toward their group’s insiders,
if not downright offensive to outsiders.

They use language that is meant to be understood by their audience
and misunderstood by those who aren’t.

This is basically what a parable does – and how Jesus used parables
in the Gospel lesson today.

Hear how I interpret Jesus’ response to those religious experts from Jerusalem
who taunted him, and how Jesus was a rapper...

Jesus countered them with parables, saying,

‘How would Satan cast itself out?

Like a throne divided, would it not collapse?

Like a house divided, would it not fall down?

Thus, Satan divided will end with a crash.

But no one enters a bully’s house his goods to take.

Yet first this bully bound I’ll make and then the goods go free...

And is it not for their sake?’

Mark 3:23-27

Willard, p.2

I remember the first time I heard rap music I was in the Army
and a fellow officer who was African-American had me listen to a tape
of this new music called 'rap'.

He said it was a way of telling about the problems in the ghetto –
so it had a prophetic role before it got co-opted by 'gangsta'-style language.

Sex and violence are what sells – and that kind of rap music
as a shocking protest appeals to disaffected young people
white and black, here and throughout the world.

But that original understanding and purpose of rap music
helped me understand this Gospel text –
which is disturbing even with a straight reading of it.

This text opens up for us in a new way, if we consider how Jesus was a rapper...

The disciples, themselves, didn't always get what Jesus was saying
and he often had to explain the meaning of his teachings to them.

Sometimes, his adversaries caught on quicker than his disciples.

At those times when the scribes and Pharisees realized he was insulting them,
or saying something they considered heretical or blasphemous,

they would either be stunned into silence, or try to kill him on the spot!

But in this lesson, it was Jesus who was provoked almost to the point of violence,
not only by their obstinate disbelief, but by their vicious accusation
that Jesus was co-opted by an evil spirit.

The charge that Jesus was in collusion with Beelzebul –

which was an epithet for a Canaanite god, meaning 'Lord of the Flies',
seemed only to prompt Jesus to do a string of sharp-edged parables.

But when the scribes' slander was directed at the Spirit that guided Jesus –
the Holy Spirit, then Jesus lashed out,

condemning those who would sin against that Spirit.

The sound of his anger frightened his family, who came out of their house
to find him and restrain him.

This particular text could be very problematic for sensitive people – like children,
as the scribes were suggesting that Jesus could not be trusted, and
as Jesus said there could be a sin so evil that it could not be forgiven.

However, fomenting suspicion and fear, was, of course,
the intention of what Jesus' enemies were hoping to cause.

It is sad to think how often we see this kind of mudslinging rhetoric in the media –
and how we have come to expect the same 'punching below the belt',
every time an election year comes around.

Therefore, discernment of what is true or false is so important in life.

We have to be discerning to go beyond superficial appearances.

Sometimes we have to question our own affiliations
about where *they* stand on some issues and where *our* loyalties must be.

Willard, p.3

Here's how I interpreted Jesus' angry response and what prompted it...

But they said,

"It is he who has the evil spirit."

And because of this Jesus was furious, saying,

*"All the sins and curses committed by humanity
will be forgiven;*

But misrepresenting good by calling it evil

is to be blind to the Spirit of what is good.

And that cannot be undone by anyone..."

This is a reference to what Jesus said about the so-called

'unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit' –

which I infer to mean hard-heartedness

like racial prejudice and religious extremism.

Yet I believe that God still gives us a chance to correct ourselves

that even when we get caught up with the herd-mentality

there is still a chance to change the habit of our hearts.

So, "...misrepresenting good by calling it evil

is to be blind to the Spirit of what is good.

And that cannot be undone by anyone – except oneself."

We can change how we think and form our opinions.

We can change our hearts.

As it says in 1st Corinthians 13:11...

"When I was a child, I spoke like a child,

I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child.

When I became [an adult], I gave up childish ways.

So, the Christ of one's adulthood is the One who liberates us from literalism –

the lies that others tell us and the lies that we tell ourselves.

For like my missionary friend from Japan said,

'If [Christ] is who he said he is, then [he] cannot lie.

Jesus spoke in parables – not to deceive,

but to challenge his followers and foes alike, to dig deeper.

In this way, Jesus was a rapper.

Country western music has its origins with folk music

and rap with the blues – and both can be forms of protest.

Maybe this is just an urban legend,

but I once heard that rap music grew in popularity with children

when "big city" boards of education cut funding for school bands.

So, young people invented ways of using their own voices for percussion

to accompany the spoken poetry of rap.

Willard, p.4

One of my early experiences of working with youth and how rap could be used in a positive way, was in a Bible storytelling class I taught.

A brother and sister retold and recited the story of the prodigal son as a rap duet.

Another time, I worked in Boston one summer and helped out with a tutoring program for elementary to junior high city kids at a summer camp in New Hampshire.

They did a talent show for their parents and one of the teachers got out on stage with two of the boys beside her, doing a back beat.

They were all wearing sunglasses and baseball caps askew, as she rapped like this:
My name is Luselena and can't you see; I do my rap so viciously!

And those kids squealed with delight!

They were thrilled that their teacher was not afraid to get out there on stage;

They were thrilled that their edgy music was accepted –
by someone they loved and respected.

They were thrilled that they were accepted and heard.

Psalm 130 which Glen shared with us today, comes from a group of psalms called the 'songs of pilgrimage' which were sung as Jewish pilgrims made their way up to Jerusalem for the high holy days.

I cry out to you from the depths, Lord— my Lord, listen to my voice!

Let your ears pay close attention to my request for mercy! [Psalm 130:1-2]

Isn't this the context of the blues, of rap, of country music, of folk music – even of rock and heavy metal music,

as that cry to be heard that comes from the heart – sacred music even?

One time I asked my confirmation class to share songs that they liked so we could find spiritual themes.

We found such themes – about love gained and lost,

and about trouble getting along with parents, and this particular verse:

To get the devil-worshippers to say, 'God bless you'...

Isn't that the challenge before the whole world – relating to those with extreme views?

Sometimes it is hard to hear what people are really saying

and you got to dig deep to find out what they are really talking about.

But it boils down to people wanting to be taken seriously for who they are and what they have to offer in society and life.

We all have our part to play. We all have our song.

We are all in the same family, that way.

If only we could work in concert with each other;

If only we could sing together – or at the very least,

if only we could recognize when someone is singing from their heart...

Willard, p.5

And that is how the Gospel lesson concludes

as Jesus' mother and brothers and sisters finally arrive,
trying to find their way through the crowd to get to Jesus to protect him -
like that Baltimore mother who smacked her teenage son
and dragged him out of the riot.

However, Jesus was calm and back in control;

and when he heard that his family was looking for him,
he told them all, the whole crowd, that they were his family, too –
and that includes those obstinate scribes from Jerusalem.

And Jesus said to them,

“Here are my mother and my brothers and sisters.

*Anyone who does the will of God – which is simply to love,
is my mother and my brother and my sister.”*

Not all music is good. Not all music is meant for you.

But remember the music of your youth and why it was important to you –
and why your parents' generation may not have liked it.

That's your first lesson in 'music appreciation' for songs that are not your own,
but still come from the heart of the family of being human.

Amen

Our scripture lesson today is Psalm 130

and comes from the Common English Bible translation.

Forgiveness is one of the great themes of our faith that we share with Judaism;

And so is hope –

hope in the form of faithful vigilance for answered prayer...

[1] I cry out to you from the depths, Lord—

[2] my Lord, listen to my voice!

Let your ears pay close attention to my request for mercy!

[3] If you kept track of sins, Lord— my Lord, who would stand a chance?

[4] But forgiveness is with you—that's why you are honored.

[5] I hope, Lord. My whole being hopes,

and I wait for God's promise.

[6] My whole being waits for my Lord—

more than the night watch waits for morning;

yes, more than the night watch waits for morning!

[7] Israel, wait for the Lord!

Because faithful love is with the Lord;

because great redemption is with our God!

[8] He is the one who will redeem Israel

from all its sin.

Let us be guided and challenged by these words...

Mark 3:20-35

[20] [Then he went home] and the crowd came together again,
so that they could not even eat.

[21] And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for people were saying,
“He is beside himself.”

[22] And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said,
“He is possessed by Be-el’zebul,
and by the prince of demons he casts out the demons.”

[23] And he called them to him, and said to them in parables,
“How can Satan cast out Satan?

[24] If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand.

[25] And if a house is divided against itself,
that house will not be able to stand.

[26] And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided,
he cannot stand, but is coming to an end.

[27] But no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods,
unless he first binds the strong man;
then indeed he may plunder his house.

[28] “Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the sons of men,
and whatever blasphemies they utter;

[29] but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness,
but is guilty of an eternal sin”—

[30] for they had said,
“He has an unclean spirit.”

[31] And his mother and his brothers came;
and standing outside they sent to him and called him.

[32] And a crowd was sitting about him; and they said to him,
“Your mother and your brothers are outside, asking for you.”

[33] And he replied,
“Who are my mother and my brothers?”

[34] And looking around on those who sat about him, he said,
“Here are my mother and my brothers!

[35] Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother.”