

GONE MIA FROM THE IRD: JESUS

In a recent article on the Juicy Ecumenism website, a writer from the Institute on Religion and Democracy spends several pages castigating a 2021 webinar on Inclusiveness in the United Methodist Church, but there is a glaring omission in his attack on the Methodist community:

The omission is Jesus himself-his life, teaching, his Divine prophetic ministry.

This omission should seem surprising in an essay on Methodist Christianity-surely our Lord Jesus is at the heart of our response to God in our Scriptures-our Book does seem to call us to be faithful followers of Jesus. In fact, it is Jesus himself who at the beginning of his earthly ministry immediately calls ordinary folk with his invitation to "Follow Me."

I should better say that there is, in the five page essay, one single mention of Jesus, but it is not from Mr Bastian, the author. It is, instead, contained in a quoted citation from the Christian Leader demonized throughout the essay: Mountain Sky Conference Bishop Karen Oliveto who in her video asks listeners for "a response as followers of Jesus"!

How striking that it is only Bishop Oliveto who suggests that our work in God's world must begin with following the example and the teachings of Christ Jesus!!

While the name of Jesus is dramatically absent in Collin Bastian's essay, he uses other words and labels quite freely: gay, lesbian, queer, LGBTQ. I counted about ten mentions of those terms.

What he has failed to see or mention on his own is Jesus. The Prophet Jesus. The Jesus who is a disturber of the conventional, the Jesus who reverses the status quo. Jesus the subversive. Jesus the shaker of our shallow, comfortable foundations.

The Bible gives us ample warning of this subversive Jesus. In the protest song sung by Mary in the first chapter of Luke, she announces that in the Birth of Christ "God has scattered the proud, brought down the powerful, and lifted up the lowly and the humble."

And, of course, Jesus himself offers this same prediction of reversal and upside-down thinking in the fourth chapter of Luke where he reads from Isaiah 61, "God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and to set the oppressed free."

And, in his ministry, he makes that even more clear. The profligate, irresponsible, son is welcomed back with a feast. The hated Samaritan becomes the hero of Christ's second most famous story. The lepers and the tax collectors are welcomed into the inner circle while the self-righteous and smug are in danger.

Jesus has some harsh words for us when we think we have identified who belongs and who doesn't belong to the Family of God. And his teachings continue in the early Community when

in Acts 8, a double outsider, a eunuch and a foreigner, is welcomed and baptized by Phillip (this Acts story must have incited an uproar if people were deeply committed to the Law from Deuteronomy 23-no foreigners or sexual outcasts were welcomed. We may have underestimated its scandalous impact!)

It is just when we begin to “otherize” folks that we think are less than us righteous ones that God’s subversive message calls everything into question and reverses our hardened categories.

One of the pastors in my home congregation said in her sermon a few weeks ago, “Jesus was and is a threat.”

This is true.

King Herod understood this and sent soldiers to murder the newborn child.

Legalistic, ossified religious leaders understood this when they plotted early in in Mark’s Gospel for Jesus to be killed.

Roman rulers understood this early when they witnessed the disturbances caused by St Peter and St Paul and arranged for the government to execute them. (Christianity is the only major religion whose three early leaders were executed by the government.)

So, it seems, when we want to demonize persons who are not “like us”, I believe that Lord Jesus the Prophet will draw us up short and cause us to look inside.

Luckily, in Mr Bastian’s essay, he does manage to quote our “Lesbian Bishop” and give a new direction for all of us: “We are called to a response as followers of Jesus.’

In most of his vitriolic essay, Mr Bastian gets it wrong.

And Bishop Karen Oliveto gets it right.

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SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING ON BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF SEXUALITY:

MAKING SENSE OF THE BIBLE, Rev Adam Hamilton; especially chapter 29, “Homosexuality and the Bible”. This chapter is one of the most succinct and accessible resources that shows the very few references in Scripture to same gender behavior are actually condemning “gang rape, temple prostitution, pederasty, and idolatry.”

I believe from reading this resource and others, that there is no condemnation in Scripture of a committed, covenantal relationship between adults of the same gender.

HOMOSEXUALITY AND THE BIBLE, Walter Wink. Our UMARC group has distributed over 2000 of Dr Wink's 16 page monograph from 2005. Here again, this is accessible, Scripture based, and easily read. Copies may be ordered from The FOR Bookstore in Nyack NY. (845) 358-4601; bookstore@forusa.org.

HOMOSEXUALITY: A SCRIPTURAL WAY FORWARD FOR THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH, Rev Joe Miller, Jr. This is a resource for those who want to dig more deeply into the so called "Clobber Verses" in the Old and New Testaments. I especially recommend this for people who want to explore the context and meanings of the six or seven passages (out of 31,000 Scripture verses) condemning same gender sexuality.

THE MORAL TEACHING OF PAUL, SELECTED ISSUES, Victor Paul Furnish, (second edition). I especially recommend Dr Furnish's chapter III on Homosexuality.

WEBINAR ON THE CLOBBER PASSAGES from May 2021 on our UMARC.org website.