

Sunday, August 15, 2021  
Rev. Dr. Rodney Kenedy

Who Is Our Jesus?  
John 6:51 – 68

I challenge our conception of Jesus. Almost everyone wants Jesus to be on their side in America. Jesus, to hear us talk, is on everyone's side. He is both "for" and "against" every issue. President Lincoln noted that both sides prayed to the same God. Sound familiar? And now, each side accuses the other side of not really being on the side of Jesus. Like children choosing sides for a pick-up game, each captain says, "I choose Jesus." Do we sense our difficulty? People want Jesus to be on their side. Make no mistake. We are obsessed with Jesus, but not so much the Jesus of the Gospels as the Jesus of our imaginations. Unless our Jesus is the Jesus of John's Gospel, "I am the living bread," we are following a spurious Jesus. Jesus is the flesh and blood, bodily, fleshly Jewish male from Nazareth. Jesus was as human as you and I. If you asked him, "Where are you from?" he would have answered, "I am from Nazareth. Ever heard of it? It's a small town in Palestine. If you asked him, "What do you do?" early on he would have said, "I am a carpenter; my father Joseph before me was a carpenter. My yokes fit well." If you asked him at age 33, he would say, "I have come to save the world." If I be lifted up, I will draw all persons to me. This is not a different Jesus from the carpenter Jesus. Same human Jesus. We are in trouble when we try to spiritualize Jesus so we can be free to do pretty much we please with what we think is the real stuff: politics, money, sex, and entertainment.

Let me state the problem: There's a Gnostic Jesus and a Gospel Jesus. The Gnostic Jesus likes what we like, believes what we believe, supports what we support. The Gnostic Jesus doesn't matter in the real world. He's spiritual, pliable, usable. He's a convenient label to stick on our worst tendencies. The Gnostic Jesus is not the Gospel Jesus.

The Gnostic Jesus is our problem. Gnosticism – second century heresy – has returned like some spiritual Godzilla as an imminent danger to Christian faith and to our democracy. The early Gnostics ripped Jesus away from his Jewish identity, separated him from humanity. We are still in the same business of removing Jesus from almost all of life. There are not only Gnostic Christians but there are also Gnostic politicians in our midst. Gnostics shunned the material world and embraced the spiritual world. Basically, they claimed Jesus was not actually

human. The Gnostics also claimed a special kind of knowledge. Think of Gnostics as an ancient QAnon.

Fred Craddock says the church at Colossae became fascinated by things that were unusual, far-fetched. They gravitated to things no one else understood or even thought. Craddock says, “They had a practice that is hard to translate from the Greek. Nobody really knows how to translate it, but I will try: they ‘walked in the middle of the air.’ I don’t know, but they had experiences of elevation. ‘Seek the things that are above,’ the scripture said, and they replied, ‘Hey! We’ve been raised with Christ. We are not like we used to be,’ and to prove it they had some kind of ceremony of elevation that they called ‘walking in the middle of the air.’”

This defines a Gnostic politics: “walking in the middle of the air.” Life is about ideas floating in the air rather than flesh-and-blood human beings marked with pain and agony. Gnostic politics lives in the clouds with fantasies and conspiracy theories like the Rapture. I think the Rapture is a perfect example of gnostic Christianity. The vision is of bodies floating in space to meet Jesus in the air. In our culture, ideas matter more than bodies. Money matters more than bodies. Rules matter more than bodies. The escapist illusion of bodies flying in the air to meet Jesus contrasts with the reality of bodies being treated with cruelty. The Gnostic politicians debate endlessly about ideas as if they are emotionally dead, but they may be unaware that they are being cruel to others and taking delight in the cruelty. In some sense, this is now boomeranging back on those who have been in power for so long: “Bodies that once felt like the unchallenged masters of their space—white bodies, male bodies, cis bodies, straight bodies, rich bodies, citizen bodies—are being confronted, more and more, with a demand to respond to the violence trailing in the wake of the comforts and pleasures they enjoy” (Schaefer).

The Irony of Gnostic Greed On the one hand, Gnostic politics worships the goose that lays the Golden Eggs. Make no mistake, money drives D. C. politics and they are gnostic politics. This is what has become of a people who have worshiped for too many generations at the altar of the god of Mammon. Money is his or her modern name. Gnostics, having divorced the issues of money from faith, believe they are free to do as they please when it comes to money. Jesus has more to say against the power of money and wealth than almost any other subject that he approached. Jesus never discusses homosexuality or abortion, but he condemns wealth and money at every turn in the road. Jesus never talks about the environment but he said we could not worship money. Jesus never talks about welfare programs, but he tells a rich man to get rid of his money because it was killing him.

We have an insatiable desire to be wealthy even if there's not a snowball's chance in hell that we will ever be wealthy. We do everything in our power to appease and satisfy the wealthy because we are afraid they will turn against us. We idolize the wealthy. The rich are America's royal family. We make lists of the richest people in the world. We hang on their investment strategies, marvel at their economic prowess, worship the ground they walk on. This means we treat the wealthy as if they were a pantheon of Greek gods – capricious, fickle, and likely to turn on mere humans if they don't get their way – get what they want. We have given the super wealthy billions and billions of dollars in tax breaks to appease them. Gnosticism's greed is killing us. The goose with the golden eggs is going to develop hardening of the arteries, heart trouble, and die of a heart attack because of the greed on which she feeds every day. It's the worst kind of diet and it is killing Christianity as well.

We have the illusion that one economics will finally save us and the other destroy us. So, we live in the cloud of ideas about economic theories; some conservative and some liberal. We blame each other for depressions, recessions, inflation, deflation. We blame one another if unemployment goes up and the stock market falls. It's all in the air – in the clouds. Economists, like the TV weather people and rapture preachers make predictions, and it doesn't matter if any of them are right.

Money hunger can warp our minds and deaden our feelings: A European CEO: "A cyclist is a disaster for a country's economy. He does not buy a car and does not take out a car loan. Does not buy car insurance. Does not buy fuel. Does not send his car for servicing and repairs. Does not use paid parking. Does not become obese. Yes - and he stays well!! Healthy people are not needed for an economy. They do not buy drugs. They do not go to hospitals and doctors. They take too long to die, depriving funeral homes of high casket charges. They add nothing to a country's GDP. On the contrary, every new McDonald's outlet creates at least 30 jobs: 10 cardiologists, 10 dentists, 10 weight-loss experts apart from the people working in the McDonald's outlet. Walking is even worse. These people don't even buy a bicycle!!"

Cornell West argues that Gnostic strains of American Christianity have been on the wrong side of so many of our social struggles from a dogmatic justification of slavery (Using the Bible, for God's sake), to the parochial defense of women's inequality. Bodies are dying and we are debating gun ownership. Bodies are being abused and we are debating rights. Bodies are starving and we are doing cost analyses. Bodies are being harmed and we are debating endlessly about filibusters. The money has us by the throat.

Individual salvation, personal conversion, being saved, being born again – these are our Gnostic ideas. This has left little room for the systemic issues of justice that face us every day. Our willingness to serve the least of these, the most vulnerable of human beings in our midst, has been compromised by our commitment to “walking in the air,” spiritualizing the faith to the exclusion of anything that smacks of justice. These American Gnostic Christians are sincere in their faith and pious in their actions. But that is not what makes a person a Christian.

There’s a conventional saying: “God helps those who help themselves,” but it’s not biblical. That’s right, it’s not in the Bible. The truth is those who have are helping themselves. The rich can take care of themselves and they are helping themselves to most of this nation’s wealth. The middle class is becoming the just above the poor class. But God helps the helpless, the vulnerable, the poor. I am not going to support billionaires in their race to space. How Gnostic – a race beyond the clouds, a hyper-Gnosticism. I am not a supporter of Bezos; I am a herald of the gospel of Jesus: “Good news to the poor.” I choose not to represent the interests of the 1%.

This is my story: I’m an advocate for the poor. I want more good news for poor people. There are not enough advocates for the poor, the left behind, the left out, the people who feel they are treated like leftovers. 98% of the lobbyists in D.C. represent big money. I am not asking you to join my crusade; I am explaining to you that I am a preacher for the poor.

Slang words for money include bread, bacon, biscuits, blue cheddar, broccoli, cabbage, cake, cheese, clams, dough - - - reads like a grocery list and if you’re going to the supermarket today, bring a lot of cash, but please understand that money is not the bread of life; Jesus is. Money belongs to the god of Mammon; Jesus gives us the manna from heaven – our daily bread. The Gospel of John anchors us in a sacramental and incarnational faith. John’s Jesus claims, “I am the bread of life.” We are invited to eat the bread and drink the wine of the Lord's meal which becomes for us Christ's body and blood. I am asking you to grasp that it is far more than we have imagined.

Now, this is a lot to take in on one Sunday morning, so let me wrap this in a reminder that you may be following the Gnostic Jesus rather than the Gospel Jesus. We are called to be Christians, members of the body of Jesus, not Gnostics with a strutting, self-important, know-it-all attitude. We are here worshiping Jesus so let us remember that Jesus is the bread of life. Jesus is our salvation.