

Jesus Gets Us: A New Vision

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We are into the season of Advent, a season of anticipation and hope. For me, hope is not a pious wish. Rather, it is a fierce determination to participate in movements of renewal, justice, peace, grace, and compassion. Hope does not mean waiting for something to happen. Rather, hope means to get involved, get your hands dirty, and work with others to build a more compassionate and loving community.

In the past, the church has done that work in the name of Jesus. But the most recent census data shows that the church is no longer capable of doing that work. There has been a sharp decline in the number of people who have any religious affiliation. People no longer wish to have anything to do with organized religion which they see as being judgmental, unwelcoming, and out of touch with contemporary values.

I believe that the church has failed in North America and in westernized countries. The church no longer seizes the imagination of people with the radical message of love, grace, compassion, and radical welcome which Jesus proclaimed. In many cases, church people focus on the church buildings they attend once a week when they think about being part of the church. Buildings have become idols to many Christians, who expend so much energy and resources to maintain buildings which mostly sit empty throughout the week. They have barely any energy left to live as disciples, followers, of Jesus in this 21st century world.

As a result, people claim to have no religious affiliation and end up seeking community and connection with others who want to be more welcoming and open. They work to be the change they want to see. They connect with others who care about the environment, who welcome outsiders, who reach out to the homeless and others living on the margins of society.

Groups such as this would have been called “secular” in the past. But I believe that people who seek to connect in these ways are participating in the sacred task of connecting with their own hungers, with others, and with a deeper purpose, whether you call that the divine or not.

But at the same time, explicitly religious groups are no longer focussing on the business of property and other such things while trying to live according to the gospel values of Jesus. One such group calls itself “He Gets Us.” According to the website (<https://hegetsus.com/en>), “He Gets Us is a movement to reintroduce people to the Jesus of the Bible and his confounding love and forgiveness. We believe his words, example, and life have relevance in our lives today and offer hope for a better future.” Specifically, this group “aims to free the name of Jesus from those who judge, harm, and divide.”

They long to recover Jesus’ message of “radical forgiveness, compassion, and love.” They point to a human Jesus, who connects with us in our common humanity, a Jesus who experienced the same problems and emotions with which we deal, a Jesus who asked important questions about what it means to be human and part of a community, a Jesus who welcomed and accepted everyone else with a radical love.

If you see too many churches and Christians today as being judgmental and hypocritical, “Jesus saw that too, and he didn’t like it either.” Rather, Jesus offered radical compassion. He stood up for the marginalized, the poor, and those who were rejected by society. He understood the human condition and all its frailties because he experienced them too.

Indeed, the good religious folks of his day condemned him as a glutton and a drunkard because he welcomed anyone to sit at his table. In Jesus’ time, when you ate with someone, it meant that you were willing to welcome them into your life. Jesus invited everyone to sit at his

table. Jesus excluded no one, except those who wanted to exclude themselves because this notion of radical welcome was more than they could accept.

If you read the gospels carefully, Jesus spent a great deal of time sharing meals with other people. The company at those dinner tables was a remarkably diverse cast of people. He shared meals with outcasts. He spent time with the self-righteous religious elite. He cared for people who had broken every rule and were seen as being unclean. He dined at the tables of wealthy men who gained their riches with lies and corruption, and most often at the expense of the poor peasants of the time. He crossed over racial boundaries to eat with people who did not look like him.

He invited everyone to his table. No exceptions. No expectations. Just radical welcome and openness. And just as it was radical at that time, that kind of welcome and openness continues to be radical today. Imagine hanging around with homeless people. Or people with different understandings of sexuality. Or addicts. Or the working poor. Or business owners. Or the movers and shakers in society.

Imagine being that inclusive. No wonder the religious do-gooders of the time whispered behind his back. No wonder they began to look for ways to get rid of him. They called him a friend of sinners. They thought it was an insult, but Jesus wore the label proudly. He was a friend to everyone, looked down on no one, and welcomed every single person into his company.

And, while doing so, he had fun. He laughed and joked and poked holes into the pretensions of the self-righteous religious folks of his day.

This Advent, that is the kind of Jesus I'm looking forward to. This is a Jesus who gets us, and who invites us to get each other. This is a Jesus who welcomes us and invites us to welcome each other. This is a Jesus who loves us and invites us to love each other.