

STANDING WITH JESUS

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As some of you have noticed, the CAC renewed its vision and values statements a few months ago, and I will be taking the next seven issues of *Radical Grace* to expand on our seven core principles. Our first principle and criterion is that “**The teaching of Jesus is our central reference point.**” He is our guide in how we stand with culture, how we stand against culture, and how we stand in service of culture.

For those of you who have been our readers for any length of time, I hope our principles are already obvious. But let me say why we wanted to put Jesus first and foremost. We, like all who are trying to act with integrity, know that we need a North Star, a final authority, a clearing house, a guiding teacher who orients and critiques all the rest. That “one God before us,” as the Hebrew Scriptures advise, is clearly Jesus of Nazareth. If Another is not my reference point, I am burdened with being my own.

Without his assurance, I would not have the courage or the confidence to teach. How can I trust that things like non-violence, the path of descent, simplicity of life, forgiveness and healing, the preference for the poor, radical grace itself are the central issues unless Jesus said so? This discernment is made even harder, however, by the fact that these do not tend to be the issues emphasized in the Christian churches. Without Jesus, I would have no authoritative place to stand either in reference to church or culture, and I would be left with merely culturally shifting opinions.

This has also been true for the eighteen years of the CAC as a school. With the best of intentions, and from the very first meeting in 1987, good people have pushed for other central reference points than Jesus. Most of them have been very good, but they are just not the same as the holism and authority that Jesus brings to most questions: Native American spirituality, feminism, peace and justice activism, Catholicism, the gay and lesbian issues, critical politics, eco-spirituality and earth care, running our own local hospice or soup kitchen. All of these surely share in, or follow from the teaching of Jesus. But they also have the ability to become *myopic*. Jesus does not have “eyes closed to everything else” (myopic), but in fact, Jesus teaches us to look at all of these issues with “a third eye,” what he calls the Big Picture, or the “Reign of God.” That is very different, indeed much more difficult, and today not so popular—with either the Right or the Left. It is clearly our task, and we hold ourselves to it.

Now let me share how Jesus is our precise way of connecting to culture, because again I think he is unique, authoritative, and compelling. First of all, he combines humanity and divinity in one act. Human and Divine can be one. That is his great service to human history, and reveals to us our own task.

His social stance, however, is often hard to explain, precisely because it is a third way, not easily seen by our normal dualistic mind. Jesus does not stand against culture, which appeals to the oppositional mind, nor does he stand in conformity to culture, which

appeals to the uncritical mind, but instead he does something quite astounding. He consistently stands with the excluded, the outsider, the sinner, and the poor. That is his place of freedom from every local culture, his unique way of critiquing all self-serving culture, and his way of standing in union with the suffering of the world—all at the same time. That is his form of world healing.

Brilliantly, Jesus names “sin” in a totally new way, which most Christians are still largely resisting. Sin, for Jesus, is not found in any kind of localization of evil *outside* or *over there*, where I can point to it, punish it, and try to change it. That is too easy, and thus it is religion’s constant temptation. Without denying sin or making light of evil, he shows us the one way of actually overcoming it. Sin, for Jesus, is *the very act of accusing itself*--whenever you try to expel and accuse evil groups, nations, religions, or people, and somehow leave yourself out of the equation.

Notice that “accusers” in various forms are the ONLY people that Jesus himself accuses. (In fact, Satan means “the accuser” and is rightly seen as the opposite of Jesus). Jesus would never deny objective evil, but he knows that any human attempts to conquer it, or control it, can only be done according to the pattern of the crucifixion itself. There he teaches us how to *hold it, carry it ourselves, and finally transform it*--by standing in solidarity with it. (See Romans 8:3, Galatians 3:13). That is the humiliating position of Jesus where few choose to stand.

It is rather obvious that Jesus spends most of his ministry *standing with* the accused, the excluded, the unworthy, the so called bad people, the demonized. It is actually rather scandalous how the only way he tries to change them is by loving and healing them, never accusing anybody but the accusers themselves. His social program is primarily solidarity. As Fr. Greg Boyle, S.J., the street priest in Los Angeles, says, “Jesus stands with the demonized until the demonizing stops.” He insists that this is Jesus’ primary form of justice work, which is why Jesus’ “strategy” is always so hard to pinpoint and name. *His justice strategy is solidarity*. Even more than working or fighting for justice per se, which disappoints many activists. Mary is doing the same, by the way, by standing at the foot of the cross. He and she stand with the pain, to call us all to lives of communion with the world’s suffering. This is so much harder than merely trying to fix it, understand it, control it, or even localize it. Only love can do this, and really only God’s love.

I am sure you see how that Jesus’ insight has led us to our emphasis on contemplation and spiritual conversion here at the CAC, over pure and simple activism. If the universal kinship, the solidarity, the communion with God, with ourselves, with the rest of the world, is *daily experienced and lived*, we do have a very grounded plan and runway for peacemaking, justice work, social reform, civil and human rights--but now from a very positive place, even a mystical place, where “I and the Father are one.”

This demands our own ongoing transformation, our changing places, and even a new identity, as he did in his great self emptying (Philippians 2:6-7). Instead of accusing others of sin on the Left or the Right, Jesus instead “became sin” (2 Cor. 5:21). He stood

in solidarity with the problem itself, hardly ever with specific answers for peoples' problems. This was his strategy and therefore it is ours. It feels like weakness, but it finally changes things in very creative, patient, and humble ways. Such solidarity is learned and expressed in two special places--*contemplation* and *actions* of communion with human suffering.

This is our name, and our task, and it comes from watching Jesus.