

THE PROCLAIMED WORD

You may have noticed our third reading today comes from something called "Pseudo-Matthew." Pseudo-Matthew is also known as "The Infancy Gospel of Matthew."

Pseudo-Matthew was part of a genre called "infancy narratives" that were written to fill in the gaps of Jesus' childhood. Those infancy gospels didn't make it into our bible, but they did have their audiences and they influenced some of the art and beliefs of the middle ages. Where the canonical gospels skip the majority of Jesus' youth, the infancy gospels try to fill in those missing years. Pseudo-Matthew, if I am not mistaken, is the first to mention the ox and the ass being present at Jesus' nativity. And, please forgive the harshness of that word...you must realize that until recent times the word "ass" was considered proper and had not slang connotations. It comes from the Latin "Equus Asinus" and is the preferred word in the King James Bible for what we call a donkey.

All this donkey talk reminds me actually of when I was kid, growing up in the hills of Arkansas . My great-aunt Gladys came to visit once. We had an old donkey we called Dadgummit (yes, Dadgummit the donkey – though, being of rural stock, we usually referred to our donkey as a jack ass). See, there's the connection.

Anyway, my great-aunt and I thought it would be fun to take a stroll around the countryside with Dadgummit. So, little tot that I was, I climbed up on Dadgummit and my great-aunt walked in front of us, holding Dadgummit's bridle.

We passed in front the old Nazarene church, and the pastor's wife saw us, and even though she was standing alone, she said out loud, "I can't believe that naughty, selfish, wicked little boy is making that poor old woman walk while he rides in comfort on that jack ass!" I was so embarrassed. Immediately I hopped off and insisted that Aunt Gladys ride. I wasn't big enough to lead Dadgummit, but I could walk at their side.

Soon, we passed Bubba's Bait & Tackle Shop. And Bubba was standing outside with a customer. The customer said very loudly to Bubba, "What a mean old lady...riding on that jack ass while that poor little kid has to walk in this heat." So, Aunt Gladys jumped off of Dadgummit and we both walked on either side of our donkey.

But then we passed some older kids who were very rude, and they starting taunting us, saying, "what a couple of idiots, walking when they have a perfectly good jack ass to ride."

Demoralized, Aunt Gladys and I both jumped onto Dadgummit and we started riding him together. Until...

We passed by the Widow Glenn's house, and Widow Glenn was sitting on her porch and yelled at us, "You two ought to be ashamed of yourselves, over burdening that poor old beast. That old jack ass isn't strong enough to carry two people." Aunt Gladys said, "you know what? She may be right." So we both jumped off the donkey and picked him up to carry him on our shoulders.

Now, unfortunately, the winding roads of the Ouachita mountains in Central Arkansas are narrow and treacherous, and they don't all have guard rails. My great-aunt was not exactly an athlete anymore, and I was just a little kid. So, we were quite a sight carrying this huge braying monster on our shoulders on the side of a winding road next to a drop off on the side of a mountain.

Predictably enough, on a narrow curve, we lost our balance, dropped Dadgummit the donkey, who fell right off the side of a mountain and bounced all the way down until finally, in the valley

below, we heard a faint “splat.” I looked up at my great-aunt Gladys with tears in my eyes, and she just said in her usual dry tone to me, “Let that be a lesson son. If you try to please everyone, you’ll lose your ass.”¹¹

A true, if not factual, story.

Notice how the pastor’s wife, and Bubba’s customer, and the truant children, and the nose neighbor all knew what others “should” be doing. Sadly, that is the religious experience that many of us have had. Our churches told us what to eat or what to refrain from eating. Who to love, or who we couldn’t love. What to read, or what we should never read. Religion was reduced to a list of do’s and don’ts (mostly don’ts). And we thought our only option was to please the powers that be by doing everything we were told, even when we received contradictory messages, or to abandon religion entirely. What to believe, or what to avoid, or who to exclude...that was the unfortunate message we received.

A similar situation arose at the beginning of the 2nd century, around the year 100. An elder in a particular worshipping community is responding to discord. People have left the church, and the ones who have remained are at each others’ throats. They are arguing about the nature of Jesus. They are arguing about if and when and how the so-called 2nd coming will take place. They are arguing about what one must believe to be a “true” member of the community. Apparently, the situation is contentious and bitter and becoming increasingly dysfunctional. The elder of the community, who probably wrote the letters of 1st John, 2nd John, and 3rd John, responds to the messy, discordant situation. And his response to the various arguments is revolutionary, even still.

The elder who writes this text says that the standard of our faith and our unity is NOT doctrinal. What brings us together and what keeps us together has very little to do with what we believe. We don’t even have to all believe the same things! We get to be adults, with differing opinions and experiences. We can think for ourselves and choose to behave out of a sense of integrity rather than out of fear of retribution. We can explore our beliefs, and try on new ones, and discard old ones that no longer serve us. We can enjoy the journey.

If faith and unity don’t depend on our pretending to believe the same things...not only the same things that everyone else believes, but also the same things that our ancestors believed...as if it were possible to not learn new things and incorporate the new learning into where we are in our faith journeys...if it isn’t about agreeing with an inherited doctrine, then what could possibly bring us together and keep us together and make any of it worthwhile?

The writer of 1 John has a response...What can bring us together and keep us together is simply the practice of love. He even goes so far as to suggest that apart from the practice of love one can’t even know God. Commitment to the Jesus tradition isn’t about what one can accept cognitively. Commitment to the Jesus tradition isn’t even primarily about one’s own spiritual attainment. Commitment to the Jesus tradition is about demonstrating, sharing, and celebrating love. That love is shown in caring for the lonely, advocating for the oppressed, challenging injustice, offering compassion to those who are in pain.

Love doesn’t require that you let yourself be walked on. Love doesn’t require that you appreciate every attitude or action. Love doesn’t even require that you feel warm and cuddly toward everyone. If that’s what love was, there be precious little of it in the world.

Love does require that you recognize the sacred value of the other. Love does require that you acknowledge that each person deserves love, whether or not you can be the one to show it at a given moment. Love does require that we do what we can to make our world a more hospitable place. Leadership guru John Maxwell says people don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care. The writer of 1st John agrees entirely.

The writer of 1st John says that while we're arguing over theological points which we could never prove, we're missing an opportunity to show compassion or to offer help or to embrace someone in their moment of need. Even to argue about Jesus is to overlook the simple truth that Jesus' mission was one of love. The writer is telling us, whatever Jesus did, he did for love; whatever he stands for must represent the love of God.

Our opinions are important to us and they are often valid, but they are not what define us as followers of Christ. The litmus test for a Christ-follower is simply "love." If you can love, you can know God...and the writer of 1st John argues, that only those who love can know God. Don't worry about getting it wrong...just love work on being more loving.

And so, the Elder reminds his community, and ours: *Let us love one another because love is of God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.* This is the Good News. Amen.

THE AFFIRMING WORD

**God is love.
When I love, I express God.
Because I love I am part of God.
And because I am part of God...
Miracles are possible in my life.
I am blessed.
And I lovingly share my blessings.
Amen.**

THE FINAL WORD

We collect the "noisy" offering to support *Spirit & Truth*.

[\[1\]](#) I first heard a version of this story at an MCC conference about six years ago. I have obviously adapted it.