

The Other Dimensions of Jesus2 Matthew 23:1-4 Philip Gulley

Several years ago, we vacationed at a house that had a couch on the porch. It was at the beach, or so Joan told me. I didn't personally see the beach because I spent the week on the couch, reading and taking naps.

Driving home, I said to Joan, "Wouldn't it be nice to have a couch on our porch?"

She said, "I don't think that's a good idea."

I asked her why not, and she said, "If we put a couch on our porch, you'll never get any work done during the summer."

I reminded her how disciplined I was and assured her I would continue to be my usual industrious, hard-working, and virtuous self.

Not long afterwards there was a newspaper advertisement for wicker porch furniture, so I drove to the store and bought a wicker couch for our porch. It was a great decision. Each morning that summer, I began my day on the couch reading the newspaper, which made me sleepy, so I took a little nap until lunchtime. Of course, it's not wise to work on a full stomach, so I rested until six or so, when it was time for dinner. After that, our neighbors Brian and Jennifer would walk over and sit on the porch and visit. I like Brian and Jennifer, but I've not gotten a thing done since they moved in next door.

Isn't it interesting how we create our environment, and it, in turn, creates us? This is a sociological principle. It actually has a name, but I've forgotten it, college was a long time ago. But the principle is true—we humans create environments, which in turn create us.

That isn't how we customarily understand life. We tend to think things are the way they are due to factors other than human agency. Maybe we think things happen a certain way because God made them happen that way. Or perhaps we believe forces beyond our control, customs and circumstances set in motion long ago, determine our present world and there is little we can do to change them. Consequently, we might feel powerless, believing conditions are beyond our ability to change. While some circumstances are beyond our ability to alter—we can't change the course of a tornado so it doesn't strike our homes, for instance—we still create our environments, and they in turn create us.

We often deny this when it comes to religion. Who created the church? Most Christians believe God created the church. This is why it is profoundly difficult to change religious systems. Because those who participate in the religion believe God created it, so consequently are reluctant to see it altered.

But God doesn't create religions. We do. We create our environments, which in turn create us. Often the religious environments we create take on our priorities, patterns, and even our prejudices. This is what happened in the gospel story we just read. Jesus is warning his followers about Pharisaism, saying, "They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with their finger."

It would be a mistake to interpret this as a specific attack on Judaism, for it is a general danger in all religions—our tendency to take an initial transcendent experience that was beautiful and helpful and transformative and to pile regulations and rules upon it until the initial experience is smothered and eventually stilled.

We Quakers did that, you know. George Fox had this soul-shaking, liberating vision of a Christ who was directly present to all, who was available to all, and within a short time, Quakers were saying, "You must dress this way. You must speak this way. You must marry this person and not that person. You must worship this way."

When challenged, they said the same thing the Pharisees had said, "God wants it that way. That is the way God created things to be."

No, no, we humans create our environments, and in turn are created by them.

Notice the words of Jesus, “*They* bind heavy burdens and lay them on men’s shoulders...” Not God. God doesn’t bind heavy burdens and lay them on men’s shoulders. We do that. There is nothing sacred about them. Because there is nothing sacred about them, they can be challenged, which Jesus apparently felt free to do when he healed on the Sabbath, befriended the outcast, and violated religious codes to serve what he perceived to be a higher good.

The genius of Jesus, and you’ll recall we’ve been talking about the dimensions of his personality, was his healthy skepticism of religious institutions. He wasn’t one to fall on his knees and worship custom. Rather, he understood some things came from God, and some things came from humans, so he obeyed the former, but felt quite free to question the latter. If you’re going to participate in religious community, as Jesus did, it behooves you to regularly ask, “Is this from God or is this a human preference?” Look closely at religious claims. If they call you to love deeply, if they help you become more mature, if they challenge you to expand your periphery of concern, if they inspire you to forgive and work for healing and peace, they are from God, they are from our better angels. If the religious claims are petty, if they are legalistic, if their aim is to even the score, perpetuate a prejudice, or stoke a hatred, they aren’t from God. Healthy skepticism helps us discern whether a religious principle is authentically from God or whether it arises from the ego.

For there are rogues in our world, dressed as saints, who would weigh down our lives with burdens and troubles, then make us believe they came from the very God who is our Light and our Rest and our Joy.

I got a couch and the couch made me lazy, and because I'm lazy I like the couch, so I will perpetuate my couch environment. You see how that works— one creates the other. I will keep being lazy in the summer until Joan sells my couch and replaces it with a lawn mower, at which point I will change in response to my changed environment. So we have the power to change our environment, and when we do that, we change ourselves. This is a basic sociological principle. We create our environments, which in turn create us.

What does this have to do with Jesus? We've been thinking about the other dimensions of Jesus and today we're talking about Jesus's healthy skepticism of religious and societal institutions.