



**ST. COLUMBA'S  
EPISCOPAL CHURCH**

*“Tell Us Plainly”*

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St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
Washington, D.C.  
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*Easter 4, Year B  
[John 10:22-30](#)*

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A week ago after I left for church I drove two and a half hours south to St. Mary's Parish in Southern Maryland. I had been a seminarian at the Episcopal Church there and had gone back to see the Rector retire. It was a beautiful, joyful celebration of the community and their pastor's joint ministry of more than 28 years. On the way home I listened through a series of my weekly podcasts. A guilty pleasure of mine is Bill Maher's weekly show *Real Time*.

It's not a guilty pleasure because he goes out of his way to summarily dismiss religious belief – though he often, hilariously does so. It's a guilty pleasure because he says outrageous things. Guilty because I sometimes think, *I would never say something like that*. But also a pleasure because sometimes I think what he says is brilliant. I just do. It's just my thing. I listen alone in the car, okay.

Anyhow, at the end of the show Bill always says where he'll be that week on tour doing stand-up. And that's when I heard him say, *See you on May 1<sup>st</sup> in DC at the MGM Casino and Resort!* I heard that bit of news – last Sunday was May 1<sup>st</sup> -- when I was exactly five minutes away from the MGM. My path home took me directly past it.

I took this to be an unequivocal sign that the Spirit of God was telling me to go see Bill Maher's standup. She has a great sense of humor like that, in my estimation.

When the world opened back up last February I went on a bit of a cultural bender. I took Ruby to see ballet at the Kennedy Center, we bought tickets to see *Hamilton* this summer, and Jude and I went to all kinds of basketball games around the city. Jenna and I are painstakingly trying to hit every India restaurant in the DMV. And after about a

month or two of this we decided – as a family – that we needed a cultural budget for financial purposes.

Anyhow, that's a long way of saying that even though I believed the Spirit was calling me to go see Bill Maher, I had no money to support this venture. *Perfect* I thought *this really is a religious mission!*

So I careened the family minivan out of belt way traffic and pulled over at the Casino. *When was his show even scheduled to start*, I wondered? *Had it already happened – or would I have to wait a couple hours?* All good questions, I thought to myself.

As I took the elevator up from the parking deck, I saw my reflection and remembered for the first time since making the decision to stop that having just been at a Eucharist at St. Mary's I was still wearing my collar and in full priest regalia. Another bucket list item crossed off: walking through a casino outed to the world as a priest.

Anyhow, as luck would have it, when I got to the theater for Bill's show, the last hundred people were being let in -- the show having had just started 10 minutes earlier.

I decided to be play honesty. When I got to the front I told the ticketer that I simply didn't have a ticket but wondered if there was any way I could get in. *You don't have a ticket?* She said *Oh that's awful*. The concert venue holds 3k people and though it was nearly sold out there were still tickets to sell. But she noted almost absent mindedly that someone in the crowd had just offered to the people around him his extra tickets.

I jumped on that *Oh! Do you think there's anyway I could use his?* She said that she couldn't make that happen but, pointing over to a woman 30 feet away, her supervisor could.

So over I went and explained that I was just passing by and absent a ticket but love Bill Maher and is there anyway of getting in?

And here the collar really played an important role because I think she thought Bill Maher can't stand religion and wouldn't it be great to put a priest right in the middle of the show? And sure enough that's exactly what she did. *No problem* she said *follow me*. And in we walked, straight into the middle of the auditorium about twenty rows back.

No sooner had I sat down than Bill made his first of many cracks about how stupid religion is and I turned around to the people sitting next to me and shook my firsts like "Yes!". Several people around me laughed and shifted a bit uncomfortably in their seats.

The rest of the show was great. I spent two hours laughing almost continuously. Equal parts cathartic and insightful and wild.



All of that brings us to the Gospel this morning! No, really.

Jesus is in the temple in Jerusalem at the festival of the Dedication. A festival still celebrated in the Jewish community, known now as Hanukkah. A feast originally about celebrating the Maccabean revolt in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century BCE when the Judeans overthrew the foreign empire after they had desecrated the temple with images of idols.

The current day Judeans of Jesus' time wanted to know if Jesus was the messiah. Likely implicit here too is the question of whether Jesus would also lead a political, military revolt from the Roman occupiers.

Those who confront Jesus anticipate that Jesus does not answer questions directly. They know that he often answers in parables

and stories. So they preempt his obfuscation by asking him to speak plainly. *Tell us directly, are you the Messiah?*

Jesus will not take the bait. He answers elliptically. He answers that who he is, is shown in what he does. He refuses to take on a simple title. He refuses a word that would have gained him a considerable amount of political and religious capital.

Why? Why not speak plainly? We know that Jesus believes himself to be the messiah, why not tell his audience that directly?

There's a long story to tell here, I think. And it's a bit complicated. But to try and speak directly to you all, I think Jesus is trying to distinguish between true and false religion.

True and false religion can't be decided by appealing merely to a title. Those questioning Jesus wanted him to accept the title, Messiah. But Jesus pushes back as if to say, *Anyone could call themselves a Messiah. If you want to know whether I am you must look at what I actually do.*

False religion is interesting only in looking religious. As Jesus says in Matthew, they know the right prayers and they wear the right cloths, they love to be seen in church. But they – those interested in false religion – do not care about justice. They do not care for the widow and the orphan. And thus they make a mockery of God.

False religion is more interested in titles. In figuring out whether someone is in their religious tribe or their ethnic tribe, or their nationalistic tribe. Violent religious nationalism was just as potent a force in the time of Jesus as it is now.

But Jesus won't play that game. If you want to identify who Jesus is you must walk with him. Do you as he did. Be as sheep are members of the flock, knowing who Jesus is, requires knowing the voice of the Shepherd.

In this way Jesus's movement is inherently against the assumption and over use of convenient titles. Jesus' movement in this way is inherently anti-establishment. It is non-ideological.

True religion is about the actual carrying out of justice. Not the mere appearance of it. What does it mean to forgive your enemy today in our part of the world? That might take a very different form than it did during the day of Jesus. But Jesus wouldn't care about that. He would only care that forgiveness is something that actually roots our life and our way of being. He would not overly care that we call ourselves Christian. That we've got all of his titles neatly figured out and memorized.

Jesus knew that he if did just speak plainly then his movement might be corrupted into mere moralizing. The journey of faith corrupted into mere talk – instead of revolutionary action.



Here I think so much of what Bill Maher is interested in fits closely to the ethos of Jesus. Jesus and Bill Maher both attack the same kind of false, thoughtless religion. We can turn anything into an idol. We can turn anything – including atheism – into a religion.

We can turn Jesus into an idol by keeping the form of Jesus – the look of Jesus, the titles of Jesus – but not keeping to the hard demands of Jesus. In my mind the hard, clear demands of Jesus are that we care for the poor, that we forgive our enemies, that we welcome the outsider, that we love one another without preset conditions.

The challenge for what it means to Live God's Love this week is has hard as it's ever been. Some issues are so saturated with political vitriol – a visceral sense of hatred –

that touching it even with a ten foot pole can leave everyone feeling scorched.

I don't know the way forward in our society on the issue of women's rights and abortion – whatever the supreme court decides.

What I am sure of is the path that Jesus points us to. Jesus does not just challenge mere outsiders to reconsider whether they really care about justice or merely the appearance of justice. Jesus' challenge is most relevant to us. To those who carry on in his name.

We cannot stop merely at titles or political rhetoric. We have to push towards the true heart of the matter. What does it mean to pursue justice here? What does it mean to respect the dignity of all people? What does it mean to care and protect the outsider, the most vulnerable?

You can imagine how quickly some will be to feel confident in answering these questions, including myself. Might I suggest that Jesus' true religion would forcefully ask us to listen closely to the stories of those affected by this. To hit pause on our own quick search for the right titles – to make sure that we appear to be on the right side of the issue.

I'm not arguing for centrism here – that all sides could be right. The kind of controversy that Jesus' true religion got him in ended up killing him. For all the difficulty in knowing how to go forward, we should readily expect that the answers to our questions will be hard!

But the beginning of true religion is prayer. Quietness, stillness. Listening. Searching the mind of God not for appearance but truth. Searching for God's way of mercy, peace, and a love that knows no bounds. In the name of God, **Amen.**