

Mark 8: 22-26

Today's Saints- Robin Meyers

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This summer we are examining the lives of modern people whose faith is changing the world. This week I will be preaching about Robin Meyers. Robin is the Senior Minister of Mayflower Congregational Church in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. He went to the Mayflower Church 25 years ago when it had less than 100 members and now it has over 3000. Mayflower has been the fastest growing UCC Church in the Kansas/Oklahoma conference for almost 50 years. *But that is not why I chose Rev. Meyers as one of today's saints.*

Robin Meyers is a tenured professor who teaches in the philosophy department of Oklahoma University. He is also a syndicated columnist who writes for Christian Century; he has been a guest on Dateline NBC, The News Hour with Jim Lehrer, and ABC World News. *But that is not why I chose him for this series on Today's Saints.* He has written books on the sacraments and the Seven Deadly Sins, a controversial book about Jesus and a new book about the Church. *But that is not why I chose him as one of today's saints.* He is the son of a preacher and I always have a soft spot for preacher's kids, being one myself. *But that is not why I chose him as one of today's saints.*

No, the reason that I wanted to preach about him today was because I was so impressed with him last month at the UCC Massachusetts Conference's Annual Meeting, where he gave the key note address and preached at worship. I thought this man was so refreshingly honest, so articulate and so original that I wanted to share his ideas with all of you. Two weeks ago the modern saint I decided to preach about was Roger Shinn one of a handful of men who was instrumental in founding our denomination in 1957. Today, I want to talk about someone who I believe is currently one of the

brightest lights in our denomination. I want to share his ideas with you and talk about how he is shaking up the church, and helping us all to re-consider what we believe. But you should know that I did not go to a big conference to find this man or his book. I read [Saving Jesus from the Church](#) several years ago because one of you recommended it to me, for which I am very grateful. It was your recommendation that helped me find him and then know enough to attend the meeting when I could hear him, myself.

His book- (which is in our bookstore) [Saving Jesus from the Church](#) starts with a dream. Every Sunday Robin Meyers has a pattern to his day. He rises before dawn to edit his sermon. He preaches his heart out every week, greets his parishioners, before coming home to lunch and an afternoon nap. He never skips his nap. But one Sunday while napping he dreamed something that shook him up. It was at the time that Mel Gibson's movie- the Passion of the Christ" was enjoying box office success, and Meyers remembers being disturbed by the violence in the movie and the way it depicted God condoning Christ's violent death. So he drifted off to sleep worrying. While he was taking his nap he dreamed about a right-wing talk show hosts who was scaring his people by talking incessantly about how they were all sinners and would be condemned to hell. When Robin Meyers woke up from his dream, he sat up on the couch and shook his head and said out loud, "If this is Christianity, then I must not be a Christian, because I don't want any part of this."

That was the start of an important journey for Robin Meyers. Though he lives in an area where Christian fundamentalism exerts enormous influence, he refused go along with the fear mongering he saw in other Protestant churches. That was the context for writing [Saving Jesus from the Church](#).

What can we learn from Robin Meyers that will have an impact on our faith today?

For starters, Meyers believe that the first thing we need to know about Jesus was that he was a human being. Let's begin to think about Jesus's humanity by re-examining today's scripture lesson in Mark 8 – the healing of a blind man at Bethsaida. If you remember a blind man came to Jesus and asked to be

healed. Jesus agreed and took him out of the village. Then Jesus put saliva on the man's eyes and laid his hands on the man. Then Jesus asked him if he could see. The man opened his eyes and said that he could see a little bit, but things were blurry and nothing was clear. People looked like trees walking. So Jesus realized that he had achieved partial success, and decided to try again. Jesus put his hands on the man, and the Bible says he looked intently. Maybe that means Jesus tried harder this time. Whatever he did, this time, it worked and the man's sight was restored. Robin Meyers points to this story as demonstration that Jesus was not perfect. It took several tries to heal the blind man.

There is other evidence that Jesus was human, but most of us overlook it. Look across the page in the 7<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark where we find a story about a Greek woman, a stranger from Syrophenica, who comes to Jesus to ask for his daughter to be healed. Now Jesus was very busy that day, and had little patience with this woman, a foreigner at that. Stressed and tired, Jesus calls the woman a dog and refuses to help her. It is an ethnic slur, but this woman proves to be every bit Christ's match. She stands her ground and reminds Jesus that even the dogs get crumbs from the table. In that moment, Jesus realizes he has made a mistake. Touched and contrite he replies- "For saying that you are healed." Such a human response, and so much more impressive to me than perfection. Jesus gives evidence that he is affected by the people he heals. He re-thinks his responses. He makes mistakes but he acknowledges his mistakes.

In another story, this one in John's gospel, chapter, Jesus attends a wedding with his mother. When the wine runs out Mary volunteers that Jesus can fix the problem by turning water into wine. Jesus is furious at her. There in front of other guests he rips into her, calling her "woman" a term you would use for a stranger, not your own flesh and blood, and then refuses to do what she wants. He is rude, and contemptuous, and human. If you look closely at these stories you see a man who struggles, as we all do with temper, and flares of emotion. Jesus is not perfect; he is human.

But somehow we think he should be perfect. We put him on a pedestal. We make him unreachable. We tell ourselves he is not like us. Virgilio Elizondo is a Mexican theologian who has written a book about Jesus of Nazareth. His first chapter is entitled “so human he must be divine”. That chapter points to some wisdom we often overlook. Most people assume being perfect and getting life right will be the very thing that will make folks admire you or love you. But honestly, think about it. Isn't the opposite true? What is it that you treasure most about your friends, your family, or your spouse? It is the mistakes that they can laugh at that are most endearing. It is those times that they try hard but don't quite get it right that engenders our deepest love. It is the human side that holds a sacred edge to it.

We see it here. Jesus was determined to heal this man, even though it took two tries. Jesus was committed to his blind man's health, and determined to get this right. He cared more about the man than about his own reputation. He was willing to try again, to risk failure, to be vulnerable for this man. Jesus was willing to be human in order that the blind man might be whole. In that moment his humanity was all tied up with his divinity.

In the UCC we try not to make Jesus into Superman- someone from another planet who puts on a Clark Kent costume to fit in with us, and ducks into a phone booth when a miracle is needed. Our New Testament is not an earlier version of “Touched by an Angel”, where Jesus zooms into the village and carries out a mission for God. We know that in the way that the Bible keeps referring to Jesus by his hometown – Jesus of Nazareth. It reminds us that he lived in a specific place and time. He is not other-worldly; he is not a legend, but he is human, and we see Jesus's divinity from the ground up. Jesus revealed the fullness of God in human form.

In the second place, Robin Meyers sees Jesus as our teacher more than our savior. When some Christians say that Jesus is their savior, and he washed their sins away, and paid the price for their

salvation, in the UCC we are more likely to say that Jesus' teachings through words and actions offers us saving grace. Let me try to explain.

1. When we hear the story of the Samaritan Woman at the well, we see how the woman who had a checkered past she was ashamed of- this woman with five husbands who was currently living with another man trusted Jesus with her secrets and the truth she was ashamed to tell others. This story teaches us that we can trust Jesus with all our secrets too. We learn he will accept us. There is saving grace in that knowledge.
2. When we see how Jesus took the lunch of a little boy and used it to feed 5000 hungry people we learn that our small gifts can be more significant in his hands than we ever realized. We learn that our little offerings can make miracles too. When we entrust what we have to Jesus he can magnify what seems paltry or unimportant, and use it to feed others. There is saving grace in that knowledge.
3. When we hear that Jesus rose from the dead and was so real to his followers that they believed in him all over again, we learn to trust that life is stronger than death. We learn that good is stronger than evil. We learn that no cruelty imposed by any empire can stop God, or thwart God's purposes, because God can work through all things for good. There is saving grace in that knowledge.

Most Christians think the best thing about Jesus was his death but in the UCC we find strength and courage and hope in his life.

Finally God is still speaking. Now Robin Meyers did not say that in his book exactly, but all of his books and his life's work is a living example of the fact that God is still speaking through us. Robin Meyers says, "if we study the Bible carefully we discover it is this library of books, this far-flung diverse collection of

books which is neither infallible or inerrant.”<sup>1</sup> The fact that God spoke to all these various people whose lives spanned many centuries demonstrates the way God works, over time. It is not proof that God was lively long ago, and has recused God’s self today, but just the opposite. It demonstrates that God is always talking, if we can listen and hear it.

Meyers starts his book with a quote from Albert Schweitzer. You may remember that Schweitzer was a physician, gifted organist, and biblical scholar. His faith led him to give up a promising medical career in Germany to start a clinic in Africa in the Congo in a town called Lamborene. There he treated people suffering from leprosy and other infectious diseases. He was fascinated by Jesus and wrote one of the greatest books about him in the modern era- The Quest for the Historical Jesus . Schweitzer experienced God’s immediate presence. He saw God in the here and now, and believed God was calling us into the future. He thought religion was always changing, and we were on the brink of new ideas, new discoveries, new inspiration from God.

Robin Meyers begins his book quoting Albert Schweitzer- “What has been passing for Christianity during these nineteen centuries is merely a beginning, full of weaknesses and mistakes, not yet a full-grown Christianity springing from the spirit of Jesus.

When we decided to do this series of sermons on Today’s Saints we wondered if we would find enough examples of modern people who qualified. Not halfway through I wish we have more time because we have found so many interesting people whose faith has changed them, and the world.

**God is still speaking. Thanks be to God.**

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<sup>1</sup> Meyer, Robin, Saving Jesus from the Church: How to Stop Worshipping Christ and Start Following Jesus. New York: Harper One, 2009 p. 29.