

Who Would Jesus Deport?

You know how when you type something into a Google search, there is an auto-complete section? Well, I was researching a sermon, and when I began to type 'What Would Jesus...', Google helpfully auto-completed for me. The top five search options were: What Would Jesus: Buy, Do, Eat, Drive and finally, Do for a Klondike Bar.

Whenever an issue really gets heated, people on both sides tend to pull out what you might call the Jesus card: for example, with nuclear arms, 'Who Would Jesus Bomb?'

While posed as an open-ended question, it's really not a question at all – the correct answer is 'nobody,' according to whoever is posing it. The 'What Would Jesus Do, Say, Eat, Drive,' is not an invitation to dialogue, but rather a statement.

And yet, people keep on discussing it, or at least shouting about these sorts of questions. Most recently, the question has been, 'Who would Jesus Deport?'

It's been almost impossible to avoid the recent uproar over Arizona's new immigration legislation, sb1070. Proponents say that the legislation would give the government important tools to enforce immigration policy; opponents say that the new law will lead to racial profiling. What all people can agree upon is that Arizona's new law represents the toughest state immigration law active on the books today. What people can't agree about is where Jesus would stand on this – hence the previous question, 'Who Would Jesus Deport?'

We find Peter today in the Book of Acts asking a similar sort of question: 'Who was I that I could hinder God?' Standing in front of a group of fellow church leaders at Jerusalem, Peter is recounting a vision of God coming directly to the Gentiles, without the mediation of the church; God coming directly to the Gentiles, in addition to the Jews! This made everyone, even Peter, nervous; and yet, Peter poses his

question in a way that leaves no room for doubt that this was God at work in the world: 'Who was I that I could hinder God?' Not, 'Do you guys think that this is for real, that God would really welcome Gentiles?' But rather, 'God did this; who was I to stop him?'

The kinds of questions folks are asking around the immigration debate are just as rhetorical, but quite a bit more vitriolic; all claim to have Jesus all figured out. Yesterday, in Kiener Plaza, 2,000 people rallied against the legislation, calling it racist and inhuman. Monsignor Schuler of the Catholic Archdiocese stood alongside the Methodist Bishop, who stood with Rabbi Susan Talve of the Central Reform Congregation. Somewhere in the crowd, a person waved a sign that said, 'Jesus Was A Refugee.'

As I read about this in the Post-Dispatch, I thought, 'Hmm. Yes, I guess Jesus was a refugee – some believe that his family fled to Egypt after he was born.' Where I got into trouble, is when I began reading the online comments.

'Jesus was not a refugee! He was legal citizen of his country; his parents required to go forth for a census,' wrote one commentor.

Rather than focusing on Jesus' immigration status, The Episcopal Diocese of Arizona asks a different question: "According to this law, anyone giving food or even water to an undocumented person in need could be subject to arrest. What would Jesus say?" asks Bishop Kirk Smith.

In response, a commentor to Bishop Smith's letter claims Jesus' authority in a different way: 'We need to support the laws of our land, as Jesus said,' writes one Jim Stanley.

This uproar surrounding what God would or would not do in the world is not unfamiliar to the early church.

Much of the book of Acts recounts the struggle of the first Christians as to whether or not to accept Gentiles into the church. Gentiles – a common translation in scripture for ‘foreigner,’ came to apply to most non-Jews found in the Gospels: while most followers of Jesus had Jewish roots, observed kosher law and still followed regulations around circumcision, there were a few curious Gentiles sprinkled throughout the Gospel stories. For example, the story of the Gentile woman who seeks healing for her daughter from Jesus in Matthew 15. At first Jesus, seeing a foreigner asking for mercy, denies her request, saying ‘It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.’ The Gentile woman replies ‘Yes, but even the dogs eat the crumbs which fall from the master’s table.’ Jesus relents, and the Gentile woman’s daughter is healed.

This same debate continued after Jesus’ death: was the kingdom of God intended for all people? Or just for some, who followed certain table and purity restrictions?

This is the question that Peter confronts when he unexpectedly finds himself in Joppa, dreaming a strange dream. Three times, the Lord shows Peter in a dream a sort of heavenly banquet, wherein all things are clean and good to eat – all restrictions have been lifted, and Peter is made to reconsider God’s rules. Who would Jesus eat with? The answer has changed.

And so Peter, at the command of God, goes to Caesarea, and baptizes Cornelius the Gentile, and eats with him and his household. ‘The spirit did not make a distinction between them and us,’ recounts Peter to his friends at Jerusalem. These same friends question Peter, criticizing him and saying ‘Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?’ Peter’s response, ultimately, is to recall Jesus’ words to his critics: And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?

This, in a way, is Peter's way of asking, 'Who would Jesus baptize?' Apparently, the answer is, 'Everybody.'

The question in these kinds of cases, in which emotions run high and everybody would like to claim Jesus as an ally, is: 'How do we know that it is really God who is speaking? How do we know that it is not just our own pride, our own views, or own desire to coopt Jesus into supporting our argument?'

This is what we can learn from Acts, and from Peter, today. How did Peter know what Jesus was saying? How did he know what Jesus was doing in the world? How did Peter know that God was sending his dream, rather than thinking that it was just that – a dream?

The book of Acts leading up to the conversion of Cornelius gives us a few clues: Peter is depicted as being connected to Jesus and his legacy through the miracles of healing that Peter effects. In the first chapters of Acts, we see Peter healing a lame man, using the words, 'In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk!' Later, Peter raises the girl Tabitha to life, mirroring Jesus' earlier miracle in which he raises a girl to life. And so, despite Jesus' physical absence in the Christian community, Jesus is depicted as being very much present through Peter's connection with him in service to others. What Peter does, is drawn from the answer not to the question of 'What would Jesus do?' but rather, 'What did Jesus do?' and, 'How do we follow him?'

Finally, while Peter responded to God's call as best as he could in the moment, he returned to his community in order to check in. Returning to the community that had also borne witness to God; returning to the community which fostered the life of Christ in the word, Peter sought to hear God's voice not merely in his own dreams, but also in the larger dream of the community.

As the immigration debate continues, and as various voices claim the voice of Jesus as their own, we will have to work hard to discern what is the voice of God, and what is the voice of pride and anger. How did Jesus treat the stranger? Not an easy question to answer. What was the early church's attitude towards Gentiles? Again, not an easy question to answer. Whether the issue is immigration, or poverty, or hunger, the question we often ask is the same, 'What would Jesus do?' Instead, let us together be about the business of looking for the voice of God, forever asking us, demanding of us, 'What are my people doing?'

Amen.