

Commentary

Gays Help Reclaim Jesus' Words

By FENTON JOHNSON

At its general convention starting Thursday in Minneapolis, the Episcopal Church of America will ratify or reject the Diocese of New Hampshire's election of the Rev. Canon V. Gene Robinson, an openly gay man, as bishop. Opponents of Robinson's election are threatening to leave the global Anglican Communion if the convention approves his election. Conservatives are also threatening schism over a resolution endorsing "blessing ceremonies" for same-gender unions.

The Christian right has so monopolized the terms in these debates that to suggest alternative definitions is — according to conservatives — to place oneself outside the Christian fold. Still, what does it mean to be a Christian? If a Buddhist is someone who follows the teachings of Buddha, then a Christian is someone who follows the teachings of Jesus Christ — but in the conservatives' free and easy invocation of the label, what teachings are being invoked?

When I turn to the Christian Bible to address the question, I find no evidence of the flaxen-haired favorite of the political right. Instead I find a portrait — remarkably consistent across all accounts — of a renegade anti-establishment proto-feminist communist-anarchist bachelor Jew. Jesus never comes closer to endorsing orthodoxy than the ambiguous "render . . . unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's," even as he frequently advocates inarguably radical behavior. What is this business with letting the dead bury their dead? What about his teaching to leave behind parents and family to follow his way? Not to mention the famous directive to give up everything I own to become what a more cynical writer might call a

I began my return to Bible study with the notion that the liberal left had allowed the term "Christian" to be hijacked. I believed that the word ought properly to describe someone who was more like — well — me. Then I actually reread the Gospels, only to discover that they made me squirm.

The fact is that for the most part I am reluctant to follow Jesus' example. In the comfort of my office, I was willing to contemplate turning the other cheek but later that same day I tailed a rude driver for blocks, hoping to cut him off exactly as he'd cut me off — I gave up the chase less because I was willing to turn the other cheek than because my ice cream was melting in the back seat. Far from leaving the dead to bury the dead, I'm writing now from my childhood home, where I've come to help my aged mother in her increasing infirmity.

Regarding the issues that threaten Episcopalian schism, the presumed challenge to marriage is the more easily addressed. The convention is being asked only to ratify blessing of same-gender unions, a rite distinct from its official marriage ceremony. In addition, the Gospels refer only obliquely to marriage, which in Jesus' time was generally a private transaction arranged between families and individuals. Western Christianity did not institutionalize marriage until more than 1,000 years after Jesus' death, at which point it defined marriage as a sacrament consummated by the couple, with sex as its *signature non*. Technically, the Christian church does not marry anyone; rather it officiates at marriages that the couples themselves create. To do so, it employs rites that emerged for reasons that had as much to do with enhancing ecclesiastical power as encouraging stable households.

Homosexuality presents a greater challenge, since here the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament are explicit in their prohibitions.

Prominent Christians, notably Harvard Memorial Church minister Peter J. Gomes, have constructed elaborate arguments that these passages have been mistranslated or misinterpreted, but their arguments miss the point. Once the Bible passed from oral tradition into writing, religion faced the task of keeping its traditions alive, rather than treating them as preserved in stone at some date shortly before Jesus (for Jews) or in the late Roman era (for Christians).

The Jews developed the Talmud and, later, ongoing rabbinic commentaries that in effect keep the Hebrew Bible alive. Christians have no equivalent and must work instead to keep Jesus' teachings alive by seeking to recognize how each generation challenges their reinterpretation. In the 19th and 20th centuries, Christians struggled with and rejected the Bible's condoning of slavery. Now we are struggling to reinterpret pronouncements about sexual behavior.

The struggles of Robinson in New Hampshire and of gays and lesbians everywhere turn out to be less religious than political, which is both troubling and inspiring. Troubling because the far right has so successfully appropriated Jesus' story and the label "Christian" that these are in danger of losing altogether their connections to their roots. But inspiring because they present us with the challenge to reclaim Jesus and his message. Knowing the history, maybe we can perceive this struggle as another step in the liberation of human beings from cowering before warrior sly gods to embracing, in their stead, a wisdom tradition founded not in define-and-reject but in acceptance and love.

Fenton Johnson is the author of "Keeping Faith: A Skeptic's Journey" (Houghton Mifflin, 2003).