

WAS JESUS A HIPPIE?

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Jesus said, *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”* (Matthew 22:37-40)

When I was growing up in the 1960s and 70s, my family adhered to an unwritten code of conduct that nearly every friend I had lived by as well. These rules of common sense promised to steer you through life, and in some cases help you avoid certain death. For example: when riding in the family car at night, never under any circumstance should the dome light be on. No matter how many times we asked from the back seat, my parents would always answer no in a tone that suggested we were foolish for even raising the possibility. Why not ever use the dome light? Because it would create a glare on the windshield making it impossible for the driver to see. Another law involved swimming. Every year we would rent a cottage on a lake. After any meal, the rule was that you had to wait one solid hour before going back in the water. Why? Because if you swam out to the middle of the lake with a full stomach, you’d cramp up, sink like a stone to the bottom, and drown.

So these were a first and a second commandment, but a third was the greatest of all and might even be a summary of the law of my childhood. The greatest commandment went something like this: whatever you become in life and wherever you go, do not do one thing. Do not be a hippie. This was a true saying, and worthy of all to believe. Hippies were bad. Hippies were known for their long hair, scraggly beards, and tie dye clothing. They were anti-establishment types who dropped out of society. They spent their time in groups, lounging in public parks, strumming guitars, and talking about love. They drove around in VW Buses – probably with the dome light on at night. Most likely they went swimming right after they ate. Hippies broke all the rules of decorum and shunned convention. Do not be a hippie. This was the greatest commandment. This was the summary of the law.

My father was an Episcopal priest: a clean-cut athlete of a guy who wanted the same for his three sons. He wanted us to be just the type Jesus would have chosen as disciples had the hairstyle back then been different: clean-cut athletes! At the time I didn’t have the theological wherewithal or personal gumption to ask, “Dad, by any chance have you looked at the pictures on the walls of the Sunday School rooms of this church you are leading? That man named Jesus – he looks like a hippie to me.” Long hair? Check. Beard? Check. No job? Check. Always talking about love? Check. So the great paradox of my upbringing was two truths that just didn’t seem to fit together. On the one hand, don’t be a hippie. On the other hand, when God chose to become a human in Jesus, he became a hippie. To me it was, as they say, a riddle wrapped inside a conundrum.

Full confession before we go on, and let me warn you that this may come as a surprise and even a disappointment to you. I am not a hippie. I never even went through a hippie phase. But what about Jesus? The great question of the ages I want to address this morning is this: Was Jesus a hippie? The Pharisees certainly would have thought so. The Pharisees were part of the establishment in Jesus’ day. Their mission was conservative. They were to conserve the people as God’s beloved nation. They were to keep the Jewish people alive in a time of Roman occupation and rebellious fervor. The code of conduct that would steer them through life was the Law of Moses. But the Pharisees understood the Commandments to be far more extensive than the

familiar big ten. They had discerned in the Torah over six-hundred commandments, and to these they added layer upon layer of clarifying laws that were to govern every aspect of life.

In today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew (22:34-46), we've heard how Jesus clashed with the Jewish establishment, including the Pharisees and Sadducees. The setting was the Jerusalem Temple, and the time was just a day or two after Palm Sunday. On Palm Sunday, a great multitude had welcomed Jesus to the city, shouting, "*Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!*" They believed him to be the Messiah – God's promised Savior – but when the establishment looked on Jesus, they didn't see the Messiah. They saw a hippie – and not just any hippie, but a dangerous hippie who shunned convention, played fast and loose with the laws of purity, and risked running the people straight into the wrath of God. It was time to expose him as a fraud.

Matthew tells us that a Pharisee came to Jesus with a question to test him. Some translations use the word trap instead of test. The Pharisee's question was simply this: "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" Jesus responded with words we know well – words we've come to call "the summary of the law:" *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.* What was original to Jesus was not the two commandments themselves, but linking the two together. The second commandment was not of secondary importance, but of equal prominence. Love God and love your neighbor: these twin poles support all the law and the prophets. "All you need is love," said Jesus, long before the Beatles would sing it. Love, love, love. It sounds like a hippie answer to me, yet no one could argue with it.

Jesus had silenced the Pharisees, but then he decided to press on and set a trap of his own. He asked them: "*What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?*" The Pharisees could see the snare in front of them, but they could do nothing to avoid stepping right into it. You see, everyone listening knew full well that the Messiah was to be a descendent of David. What is more, the Pharisees were entirely aware that the Palm Sunday crowds had welcomed Jesus with the words *Hosanna to the Son of David*. By giving the only answer they could – that the Messiah was David's son – the Pharisees would be on record as agreeing with the crowds that Jesus – this hippie guy – was the Messiah.

Jesus had more in mind than merely tripping up the Pharisees. He wanted to use the opportunity to broaden everyone's narrow notions about the nature of the Messiah. So he forged ahead with a question about one of the Psalms of David: "*How is it then that David, by the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet?'" If David calls him Lord, how can he be his son?*" Essentially, what Jesus was asking them was: How can the Messiah be both David's son and David's Lord? How can one person be two opposing things at once? How can one person be simultaneously subordinate and superior? It was a question not unlike the one that befuddled me as a child. How could Jesus be the hippie that every authority figure in my life warned against, and the Messiah whom I was supposed to follow as my Savior and Lord? For the Pharisees, it was an unanswerable question. They resolved that Jesus was a dangerous rebel who needed to be silenced, by any means necessary.

Why did Jesus challenge the establishment at the risk of his own life? It seems to me that Jesus thought the Pharisees and the crowds themselves desperately needed a new understanding of the Law, and a new paradigm for expecting the Messiah. The prophets had foretold the coming of the Messiah: a person from God who would vindicate the Jews and put their enemies under their feet. They were told the Messiah was to be an heir of David, so they figured he would be a king on the order of David, with a mighty military to accomplish his divine purposes. So whenever

they talked about the Messiah in terms of his being David's son, the implication was that the Messiah could only be a powerful king and warrior. Jesus was trying to teach that the "son of David" metaphor was inadequate to describe the Messiah. Not only was it incomplete, it was dangerous. It would lead to the downfall of the nation. Any attempt to take on Rome with brute force would be certain death. Thus, it was time for a new way to think about the Messiah, because the Messiah was now in their midst.

And so we return to the great question of the ages: was Jesus a hippie? I suppose the answer depends on how you define the term. The better question would be: how did Jesus want people to think about him? Ultimately, the way of being the Messiah that Jesus was acting out would explode all the preconceived ideas, then and now. The Messiah would establish the kingdom of God not through military might, not through politics red or blue, but through sacrificial love. Jesus wasn't playing fast and loose with the Commandments. The law of love was in the Torah all the time. We heard it this morning in the reading from Leviticus (19:1-2, 15-18). Neither was he shunning the prophets. His "new" paradigm for being the Messiah had always been right before their eyes in Isaiah. To be a Christian is to accept Jesus' reading of the Law the prophets, and to follow in his footsteps. It required then, and it requires today, what might be an ongoing overhaul of your world view.

Some time ago I heard a fable that I've since learned comes from the Hindu tradition. The story is about a frog who lived by the sea, and enjoyed all the riches of the great outdoors. Nearby was a deep, dark well, and at the bottom of the well was a kingdom of frogs who had been born there, and had never known anything else. They were fat and happy. One day the sea-frog called down to the well-frogs, asking if he might come for a visit. They agreed, and welcomed their guest from another world. They listened intently about the kingdom above that the sea-frog described. "Is it as big as this well," they asked? "No," said the sea-frog. You cannot imagine the beauty of the sea unless you come out of this well."

It's here that the fable veers off into a number of different endings. The most common is that the well-frogs become angry at the sea-frog. How dare he belittle their domain with his delusions of grandeur? They kick him out of their well and order him never to return. In a sharper ending along the same line, the king of the well-frogs realizes that the very existence of the sea frog, and his descriptions of a beautiful other world, threaten his crown. No one must ever speak of these things again! Therefore the king conspires with others to arrest the sea-frog and put him to death. Sound familiar?

Still other endings describe how the sea-frog invited any who would follow him on a journey to his native habitat. But the cost would be steep: leaving behind everything they believed was true about their existence. So the journey began to the top of the well, and when they finally arrived they hopped over a dune and saw for the first time the vast expanse of the unimaginable sparkling sea. Some of the well-frogs could not process what they were seeing. It was too bright, too big for them to comprehend. Fearing that they would go mad, they scurried back to the well as fast as they could, and dove to the bottom where they would be safe, where they would never again speak of the sea. But the vision would haunt their dreams. Others beheld the sea and knew that they could never again return to the narrow confines of their deep, dark little well.

I rather like that the fable has taken on multiple endings because it allows us to choose which it will be for us. Jesus came to show us the sea – the sea called the kingdom of heaven – and he bids us to follow him there. The way is love. All you need is love. *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, Love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.*