CHAPTER ONE

Sweet Jesus

Talking His Melancholy Madness

When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind."
—MARK 3:21

Of all the words we associate with Jesus, surely the word *insane* is nowhere to be found on the list. Son of God, Precious Savior, Good Shepherd, King of Kings, Lamb of God, Lord of Lords, Messiah, Prince of Peace, and Redeemer—they all fall from the lips of adoring believers. When was the last time that anyone dared to use words like *schizophrenic, delusional*, or *fanatic* in the same sentence with *Jesus*?

In Paul's letter to the Philippians, we find the remnants of an ancient hymn whose lyrics praise the name given by God "that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess" *that he has lost his mind*? Well, that's not quite how it goes. But the writer of Mark's gospel, the earliest in the New Testament, makes it clear that even his family is worried about his mental health. Yet nowhere in the liturgies of the church does a Christian promise to "be crazy like Jesus was crazy."

That's why we owe so much to poets like Mary Oliver. Without her, I would never have heard the phrase "melancholy madness" to describe the holy fool of God. Without her, and others like her, the world could get away with adoring Jesus instead of actually trying

to follow him and risk looking crazy too. He was a homeless single man, after all. He was a wandering teacher, healer, and teller of strange and subversive parables about the reign of God. If his contemporaries thought he was possessed by a demon, what would we think about him today? Only the poets can tell us. Thank God for poets.

Without them, we sink so deeply into the quicksand of sentimentality that Jesus remains frozen in stained glass or stuck in the sticky syrup of personal devotion. He hovers weightless above the ground in medieval art like the blue man in the Chagall painting—radiant, antiseptic, hairless, and perfumed. Without the poets, we begin to sleepwalk through the life of faith. We forget that being a prophet cannot be divorced from the pain of being prophetic. That is the path of *most* resistance. Prophets do not tell us what we want to hear, but what we *need* to hear. When they walk among us, unkempt and fiery-eyed, they are pitied by their peers. They are despised and mocked for calling so rudely for the end to the unjust status quo. Good and decent people avoid them on the street. Parents tell their children to look away. They are the last people we invite to a dinner party.

Indeed, prophets and poets have a lot in common. They are related through the blood of metaphor. For some reason, both find it impossible not to describe one thing as if it were another, instead of just calling something what it is. This habit of *seeing as* is deep in their DNA. Both see with the eyes of the heart, to save our souls from drying up. Both know that all our arguments about "taking the Bible literally" are literally foolish, considering that Jesus is often called the Lamb of God when in fact Mary did not have a little lamb!

Unfortunately, in this age of never-ending polemics, both conservatives and liberals miss the power of metaphor. Conservatives, on the one hand, are nervous about nonliteral meaning, insisting that the Bible says what it says and means what it means. Liberals, on the other hand, are so busy apologizing for metaphors as

nonverifiable or superstitious that metaphors become harmless appendages to accessorize the unvarnished "facts."

Since the Enlightenment we have believed, as esteemed scholar John Dominic Crossan tells us, "that the ancients took their religious stories literally, but that we are now sophisticated enough to recognize their delusions. What, however, if those ancients intended and accepted their stories as metaphors or parables, and we are the mistaken ones? . . . It is only poets who know that metaphor is destiny and that literalism has sapped our metaphorical imagination."[1]

That is why I thank God for poets. Without them the world becomes a benign parade of disconnected and meaningless objects and events that we process but do not reflect on. We calculate but we do not conjure. We know *how*, but we do not know *why*. Without poets, language becomes a bag of Snap-on tools. Everything reads like a recipe or an owner's manual. Life is lived entirely in prose, which is, after all, the root of the word *prosaic*.

Consider this rather strange metaphor as it relates to what poets can do for us. A child attends a Mexican birthday party and enjoys the familiar sport of swatting open a piñata and scooping up the candy that falls to the floor. It is a familiar and harmless game, played by blindfolded children who delight in the violent disemboweling of this papier-mâché figure hanging by a rope from the ceiling. On the surface, it would appear to be nothing more than just another way to get candy and then get sick.

But the poet knows the history and symbolism of the piñata. How it was once used before Christmas as an allegory to evangelize the native people of the region. The original piñata was shaped like a star with seven points, each representing the seven deadly sins. The bright colors symbolized temptation, the blindfold represented faith, and the stick was meant to stand as a weapon for overcoming sin. The candy that fell out represented the riches of the kingdom of heaven that one would receive who did battle with temptation and prevailed.

The poet knows that once the context is lost, the meaning is lost. So the poet walks back into the empty room and stares in silence at the papier-mâché carcass still dangling from the ceiling. What was once a spiritual metaphor is now just a curious container for what the children covet. What was once a parable of spiritual struggle is now just a party favor. What was once a simple scene in a one-act spiritual drama is now just a mindless, selfish game.

Only the poet can see the sadness in that limp, empty foil. Only the poet can make the connection between those frenzied children, the piñata, and the church. In other words, only the poets can tell us about Jesus.

Sweet Jesus, talking
  His melancholy madness,
    stood up in the boat
      and the sea lay down,

silky and sorry.
  So everybody was saved
    that night.
      But you know how it is

when something
  different crosses
    the threshold—the uncles
      mutter together,

the women walk away,
  the younger brother begins
    to sharpen his knife.
      Nobody knows what the soul is.

So begins Mary Oliver's remarkable poem "Maybe." My wife read it to me one morning over coffee, and I couldn't get the phrase

"melancholy madness" out of my mind. We'll get to the rest of the poem in a moment. But first we need to begin this book with confession, because confession is good for the soul. You, dear reader, need to confess it. So must I, your audacious author, confess it. We should probably do it on our knees, as this ancient posture of humility might make us think twice about lying. This is the gospel truth: *when it comes to Jesus, we know practically nothing.*

That's right—no matter how sanctified our particular community, how grounded in scriptural proof-texting and doctrinal purity, how clever in finding all the missing pieces to the Jesus puzzle, we are all in the same boat, perpetually adrift in the dead calm of what can't be found. Even though we are divided into a thousand ecclesiastical camps of certain self-righteousness (right and left, foursquare and new age, anti-intellectual and hyperintellectual, people who raise their hands in worship and people who sit on them), we all share this vast *ignorance*. When it comes to the life of a man who is arguably the central figure in human history, we know so little that can be verified, so little that resembles history, so little that would be admitted as evidence in a courtroom that the best thing we can do is listen to the poets. They hold the trump card of metaphor.

Poet laureate W. S. Merwin explained why we need poetry to understand the things in life that really matter:

> Prose is about something, but poetry is about what can't be said. Why do people turn to poetry when all of a sudden the Twin Towers get hit, or when their marriage breaks up, or when the person they love most in the world drops dead in the same room? Because they can't say it. They can't say it at all, and they want something that addresses what can't be said.[2]

Speaking of what can't be said, consider the task that faced those four gospel poets who wrote under more famous pen names in order to be taken seriously: Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John (in

chronological order of composition here). These were the unnamed poets, the scribal elites, who took apostolic names and wrote decades after the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. They wrote so that we would not forget the divine insanity of this man. They wrote as an act of faith. Their gospels are acts of devotion, not attempts at biography.

Yet these gospel poets still tell us more than mere journalists could ever tell us about Jesus' melancholy madness. These four portraits, these "sketches," were written by believers to encourage fellow believers and convert nonbelievers. These are love songs. It always helps to remember that no one who wrote a single word of the Bible thought at the time that they were writing a single word of the Bible, because it didn't exist yet.

Ultimately it all got chosen as part of what we now refer to as sacred writ. Thereafter it was read and interpreted by the somber and the serious, with mortal souls hanging in the balance. The gospel poets remember when Jesus stopped to talk to a wayside beggar, and now that spontaneous moment is the subject of exhaustive exegesis and countless books. He draws in the sand while pondering what to do with a woman caught in adultery. Ever since, we have debated over what he may have written, whether he merely doodled because he could not write, or whether he was just stalling for time until he figured out what to say. In the meantime, we lose the story, especially the sound of rocks falling to the ground. We squeeze exegetical blood out of the text until the story no longer has a pulse.

Something similar has happened in our search for the "historical Jesus." We have been looking for the "real" Jesus, the human Jesus. This is important and valuable work. But what the gospel poets seem to be telling us is that our concern for history was not their concern. The difference between the pre-Easter Jesus and the post-Easter Christ is helpful, but all we have is the post-Easter community's response to the risen Christ. We can glimpse the human

Jesus using the tools of higher criticism, but everything is seen through the prism of a body of believers who are writing (and please excuse the usual negative connotation here) *propaganda*. They are writing to "propagate" the faith.

Likewise the process by which the four gospels were chosen and sanctified by their inclusion in the canon doesn't mean that other known gospels are fictitious or inferior. But just like every book that must finally go to press, the canon had to be closed. In the language of the art world, someone had to jury and then hang the show. Whether it is opening night or the end of the age, there is a due date.

This has not kept us from having endless arguments over the historical Jesus, of course. Liberals search for the sake of veracity and a clearer picture of Jesus as radical teacher. Conservatives push back against what they see as a scholarly masquerade for debunking the divinity of Christ. This has been going on for two hundred years, and scholars have expended enormous academic and intellectual energy in a search that Albert Schweitzer concluded is futile. "He comes to us as one unknown," he wrote, "without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, He came to those men who knew Him not."[3]

Perhaps we should call for a truce in our search for the historical Jesus and turn our attention instead to something at least as important but often neglected: the search for the historical *community*. Asking, What would Jesus do? (WWJD) has become very popular these days. (Although the question seems mostly rhetorical, the answer might be truly frightening.) But there is another question that we need to be asking, one that is at least as important as questions about the historical Jesus: What did the historical *community* do?

After all, one of the ways that historians uncover the authentic message of a teacher is to study the behavior of his or her first students. Their questions were not our questions, of course, because they were not engaged in a search for true identity. Rather they were

engaged in the politics of true discipleship. Their *actions* were their answers. What we have forgotten, much to the detriment of the church, is how strange and radical they really were—how truly subversive.

A New Search for a New Church

Schweitzer did not mean to diminish the importance of Jesus by his exhaustive critical work. To the contrary, he wanted to remind us of his essential finding: that we can only know who Jesus is by *following* him. He will never be met on the road and identified. The curtain will never rise to reveal a solitary figure on stage, his face bathed in a spotlight. Indeed, he will never be a figure of history because he was never the subject of biography. His face is the composite work of his followers, sketched by the hands of believers. His voice is a remembered voice, not a recorded one.

The gospels are part memorial, part testimonial. They are breathless tales copied and woven together from the storied scraps of his life, shaped and reshaped by changing circumstances. As each Jesus community faced new challenges (not the least of which was his failure to return as soon as expected), these four gospel portraits were needed to preserve and spread the message. In the midst of a painful divorce from Judaism and increasing skepticism about the second coming, the Jesus People needed their own text, their own Torah.

Of course, this makes Christianity considerably more complicated. Why? Because his voice *changes* with each representation. Do we follow Mark's Jesus (the first portrait), who is reported to have said with self-effacing humility, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone" (10:18)? Or do we follow the self-proclaimed exclusive messiah of John's Jesus (the last portrait), where Jesus seems to be a kind of self-illuminated figure in a world

where nobody seemed to notice that he glows in the dark. Now instead of a man who is humble and nervous about too much adoration, he has become a self-identifying messiah: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (14:6). How could the same man have said both these things?

Even the nature of faith changes, from the radical first-century ethic of the Sermon on the Mount, in which there is not a single word about what to believe, only words about what to do—to the fourth-century Nicene Creed, in which there's not a single word about what to do, only words about what to believe.

What then is a modern Christian to think? Are we "doers" after the example of Jesus, or are we "believers" in the mission of Jesus, as interpreted and packaged by Christendom? If the voice of Jesus changes, as well as the very essence of what it means to "believe" in him, are we not left to pick and choose our favorite passage, or recite with certain fervor our favorite creeds?

Liberals prefer the human Jesus, of course, the voice of the teacher of wisdom. They gravitate to the parables while turning up their noses at John's vision of the "I am" Jesus. They know that preaching from John is how conservatives support the idea that no one can be saved except through Jesus. My experience in listening to the sermons of evangelicals and fundamentalists is that they choose a text from John far more often than from the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). Here is a "real" messiah, a more muscular, impatient savior—one who is more interested in being recognized and understood than he is in telling a baffling parable. This fits the fundamentalist view that the world is hopeless and must be escaped. John's theology confirms the notion that Christianity is a kind of rope let down from heaven, even though most people don't recognize the exit sign when they see it.

In his book *The Great Awakening*, Jim Wallis describes how as a young man growing up in an evangelical church, he never heard

a sermon on the Sermon on the Mount. All that the preacher ever talked about were the salvation passages from John and Paul. Think how very different the gospel sounds when one sings Mary's radical song, the *Magnificat*? It's no wonder that the body of Christ is splintered into a thousand pieces. Like those blindfolded children and the piñata, *everyone claims a different piece of Jesus, and then, in separate rooms, they gorge themselves on it*.

To understand why, and to begin to imagine a different future, we need only read the rest of Mary Oliver's poem.

It comes and goes
Like the wind over the water—
Sometimes, for days,
You don't think of it

Maybe, after the sermon,
After the multitude was fed,
One or two of them felt
The soul slip forth

like a tremor of pure sunlight
before exhaustion,
that wants to swallow everything,
gripped their bones and left them

miserable and sleepy,
as they are now, forgetting
how the wind tore at the sails
before he rose and talked to it—

tender and luminous and demanding
as he always was—
a thousand times more frightening
than the killer sea.[4]

Let's be honest. When it comes to Jesus, "tender and luminous" we like. But "demanding"? Not so much. Most of all, however, we run from Oliver's last line: *a thousand times more frightening than the killer sea*. Frightening? Is that how anyone thinks of Jesus? Do we not seek him out for comfort? Is he not the good shepherd wandering in search of one lost lamb? Did he not promise rest for the weary and food for the hungry? Isn't our whole approach to faith based on a simple transaction: *what we lack and need he has in abundance and can provide?*

This is, at one level, a poem about a well-known story in the gospels—the story of Jesus and his disciples crossing the Sea of Galilee when a sudden storm arises. It threatens to swamp their little boat and take them all to the bottom. But Jesus, who is fast asleep while his men are terrified, is awakened just in time to talk down the storm. In the church, we refer to what he did as "calming." Oliver almost suggests that the water has been reprimanded: "the sea lay down, silky and sorry."

Preachers in search of their pulpit lesson have never agreed on exactly what this story means. We so often read the Bible as if it were a collection of arguments that we fail to simply listen to the story. After all, we have an argument to make, so we sprinkle lines from the text over our closing statements to persuade the jury (the congregation) that we are biblical preachers. But there are no "proofs" in scripture. Just ordinary people, like us, reporting on what they have seen that both amazed and frightened them.

Liberals are very uncomfortable with miracles, so they carefully explain how these sudden storms blow up and then just as suddenly dissipate, creating the illusion of a miracle in the minds of adoring but sadly prescientific disciples. Once our enlightened minds have defended natural law, genuflected to reason, and apologized for foolish superstitions, liberals conclude that the text is really about the psychology of fear in a general sort of way, followed by the response of faith in a general sort of way. Any questions?

Conservatives, in contrast, find exactly the miraculous proof they go looking for. This is Jesus, after all, and he can do anything. In this text, he is "doing weather." He is not asleep in the boat because he is indifferent, but because nothing worries God. The disciples are frightened only because they don't get it. He probably ordered up the storm to begin with, as a test. Relax, says the preacher, the storms of life blow up suddenly—but when you've "got Jesus" you've got the ultimate lifeboat. In other words, here is the great divide in the church: *conservatives confuse certainty with faith, whereas liberals insist that knowledge alone is redemptive.*

If only the church had more preachers who were poets. They read between the lines, where the marrow of the meaning lies. In this story, for example, Jesus invites his disciples to "go across to the other side," which is Bible-speak for where the Gentiles live. This boat is headed to enemy territory. What's more, according to the writer of Mark's gospel, they "took him with them in the boat, just as he was"—meaning perhaps that he is still in the same boat where he began teaching that morning (as the first line of the fourth chapter indicates). The crowd was huge, and he tells parable after parable. By the end of the day, he is undoubtedly exhausted.

There is also a line in this story that is often overlooked: "Other boats were with him." To hear the preachers tell it, the disciples are out there all by themselves with nobody to rescue them. Also, how odd that we are told that Jesus is fast asleep "on the cushion"—this English translation is so misleading. It was no soft pillow. We're not talking goose down or memory foam here. Rather it was a hard mat for the steersman, part of a low bench at the back of the boat. The gospel poets may be trying to tell us something here about just how "dead to the world" Jesus was. Out like a light.

To test the waters in my own church, I once asked my congregation in a sermon to consider something—just for fun. "Do you think that Jesus might have been snoring?" The room fell silent. "Well, men do snore," I continued awkwardly, "especially when

they fall asleep quickly. Come on now, we can do it," I implored my listeners. "Imagine this scene. The disciples are in a sorry, leaky, barely seaworthy little dinghy as darkness falls at the end of a long day. They have been doing crowd control all day while Jesus talked until he was hoarse.

"Now they are headed to the Land of the Unclean. Surely the disciples thought to themselves, *Who added this trip to the itinerary?* A storm blows up, and their Teacher is out like a light, snoring. Perhaps his mouth is half open and on his chin lay a bead of drool. Dark clouds are gathering on the horizon. Then an argument breaks out over who should wake him up. The skies grow darker, and they are passing the point of no return. 'You wake him up.' 'No, *you* wake him up.' Meanwhile he goes right on snoring. Just then the first bolt of lightning arcs into the water 'on the other side.'"

A woman came up to me after the service and said she would prefer not to be asked to consider whether Jesus ever snored. I get it. So does Mary Oliver. She knows that *when something different crosses the threshold—the uncles mutter together, the women walk away, the younger brother begins to sharpen the knife. Nobody knows what the soul is.*

There is a lesson here. There is hope for the future of the church here. The poets are not trying to help us *identify* Jesus. They are trying to place those of us who never met him alongside those who did—to see if we too might be amazed and frightened. The Bible is not a dictionary where one looks up answers about God. It is a twice-told tale, and so are our sermons. Instead of training our searchlight down another dark alley in search of his true face, we might want to consider a different kind of search. Instead of preparing for the next round in the never-ending quest for the historical Jesus, why don't we consider a quest for the historical *follower*?

Why were those first Jesus People so strange, so peculiar despite all their differences? Why were they both bewildering and threatening to the status quo? Why haven't we worked just as hard to identify those who were first given the derogatory title of "little Christs"

(Christ-ians) as we have to define the inviolate nature of their Lord? The noble effort to separate the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith has been helpful, but now we need a quest to separate the followers of history from the believers of faith.

What are those uncles of Oliver's poem muttering about, if not this "peculiar" troublemaker? Why do the women walk away, if not to keep the peace, as women so often feel called to do? As for that young brother sharpening his knife, surely he knows that all this talk of love will only last so long. Then real men will have to do what real men do. And while we're at it, what *is* the soul anyway?

Poets know that most people spend their lives tired, frightened, and clueless. They know that fatigue is the enemy of faith. *It comes and goes like the wind over water—sometimes, for days, you don't think about it.* Think about what? Perhaps that our lives would be radically different if we were fully awake—not just in moments of ecstasy, *after the sermon, after the multitude was fed,* but in between those moments when we feel *the soul slip forth like a tremor of pure sunlight?*

So many Christians today are so intoxicated by the idea of being "right" about Jesus that when it comes to following him, we forget to do something much more important. We forget to *warn* people. We neglect to tell them not to get into the boat to begin with and then expect smooth sailing. We fail to be honest with them about how little difference the creeds and doctrines make compared to setting out on a journey with someone whose claim upon their lives will turn out to be *a thousand times more frightening than the killer sea.*

Crazy Is as Crazy Does

Dear reader, I hope that you do not find the word *crazy* to be offensive when used to describe Jesus of Nazareth. It is not meant to be

irreverent or dismissive or even shocking in the service of selling a book. It is meant to be true—as in *real*. The writer of Mark's first portrait of Jesus is believed to have invented the gospel as a literary form. What's more, he probably did so in the aftermath of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 CE. This means that for about four decades, the church had no distinctively Christian reading material.

The authentic letters of Paul had been circulating, of course, if you could get your hands on one or if you could read. The Jesus People had several decades of accumulated oral tradition, as followers remembered and told stories. They may also have had fragments of the earliest collections of "sayings" sources that would become Thomas and Q.[5] But who was going to preserve the *story* of Jesus, shaped as a compelling narrative argument that both the Greek mind could appreciate and skeptical Jews would find persuasive?

The gospels filled that void by fusing logos and pathos, reason and passion. Ethos came from writing under apostolic names and by insisting that Jesus was the one the prophets had predicted. And because all meaning is contextual, it is good to remember that the gospel poets composed their portraits at a time of smoldering apocalyptic passion. The Good News could only be heard and considered "good" if someone, somehow, someday could get Rome off their backs.

Now that the Temple lay in ruins, was this a sign that the one who had attacked it had been vindicated? Did the writer of Mark's gospel think that this traumatic event signaled the end of the age, or just the beginning of a new one? We will never know, but this much is certain. The very first attempt to shape the life of Jesus into a cohesive persuasive narrative includes the "land mine" text of Mark 3:21 about his family going out to "restrain" him because people were saying that he had lost his mind. The Greek word *existemi*, translated *beside himself*, actually means insane and witless.

Scholars rightly surmise that when something is preserved about Jesus in the gospels that is not a compliment (or is counter-intuitive), then it is more likely to be authentic. Take the example of the disciples abandoning Jesus to his enemies, fleeing in fear right after sharing with him the cup of fellowship that was supposed to be stronger than death. Or consider the baffling story of the cursing of the barren little fig tree, even though it was not the season for figs. Then of course there is the single most memorable episode of all, the so-called cleansing of the Temple, which was really an *attack* on the Temple. That single act alone would have been sufficient grounds for crucifixion.

These stories survived in part because they are vivid, strange, or violent—they don't fit our preconceived images of Jesus—just like the rumors that he was insane. What's more, this accusation of madness is not just included in the first gospel, but remains present in the last gospel as well. In other words, it has staying power across multiple communities. In John, when Jesus asks a crowd why some sought to kill him, they responded, "You have a demon! Who is trying to kill you?" (7:20). Later, in a heated debate that reveals the seeds of anti-Semitism, the "Jews" add insult to injury by asking, "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?" (8:48).

So what was Jesus doing that caused people to wonder if he had lost his mind or was possessed by a demon? In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was a veritable outbreak of research into the mental health of Jesus. Granted, the new discipline of psychiatry was full of itself and its potential. A modernist zeal prevailed that promised explanations for all the mysteries of human behavior. Just study the brain more carefully, we were told. Explore the patient's childhood more fearlessly, and the diagnosis will emerge.

Perhaps the most well known critic of Jesus was David Friedrich Strauss. In his first book on the life of Jesus, published in 1864, he

opined that Jesus was simply a religious "fanatic." In his second book, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, he revised the diagnosis to "close to madness." This was disturbing enough to have been noted by Albert Schweitzer, who sought to blunt such irreverent analysis by reminding readers that much of the New Testament is mythological, especially John, and therefore beyond the reach of definitive conclusions about the mental health of Jesus.[6]

This did not stop a whole gaggle of authors from engaging in such speculation, however. They referred to Jesus as "ecstatic" (euphemism for out of touch with reality), a "degenerate" with a "fixed delusional system," "demented," a "religious paranoid," a "megalomaniac," and, of course, a "paranoid schizophrenic," just to name a few. One Danish author went so far as to conclude that Jesus was an epileptic who had a *petit mal* in Gethsemane and a *grand mal* at the cleansing of the Temple.[7]

Did Jesus hear voices because he was schizophrenic? Was this a messiah complex before we had a name for it? Lord knows there is enough arguing in the church already. Rather, such investigations into the mental health of Jesus remind us that although our investigations are often aimed at finding the *answers* to the identity of Jesus, we can easily forget how strange, how countercultural, even how threatening was the *behavior* of Jesus.

For twenty centuries we have argued about who can identify the "real" Jesus and who is the keeper of his "real" mission. What if we stopped arguing over whose prognosis is correct long enough to consider something much closer to home and *a thousand times more frightening that the killer sea*, namely, whether following Jesus today in ways consistent with the practice of his first followers would make us susceptible to exactly the same charge—that we have lost our minds?

It's true, of course, that many of those who questioned the mental health of Jesus did it to render claims about him suspect and thus dismiss the gospel as nonsense. But this may be far from

the most frightening conclusion. The evidence offered is exactly what you would expect: he has hallucinations and hears voices; his cleansing of the Temple was the act of an unstable man with anger management issues; his cursing of a poor little fig tree for not bearing fruit out of season is irrational and cruel; his vituperative verbal explosions against Pharisees are really a call for violence; his apparently estranged relationship with his own family is the result of their failure to recognize him as messiah; he displays an exalted messianic self-consciousness that he insists on keeping a secret; and finally (for selective literalists), there is his call for self-mutilation, as in his prescription for castration "for heaven's sake" and his counsel to get rid of certain body parts that offend (Matt. 19:12; 5:29–30).

These are more disturbing, of course, if we forget the power of hyperbole and metaphor. This is exactly what happens when theology gets done without a poet in the room. Whether we call ourselves liberals or conservatives, there remains a fatal flaw in the human species, a sin that clings to us as tribal creatures afflicted with a seemingly incurable disease: *we would rather be right than loving.* We would rather be correct than compassionate. We would rather be saved than seek justice. This is why it is so much easier to reach a verdict than to become a disciple. This is why the church is dying.

If you ask a Christian today about his faith, his response will be to tell you what he *believes.* If you ask a Christian today about her witness, she will describe her efforts to persuade others to believe what she *already* believes—as if the gospel were a numbers game. Giving intellectual assent to theological propositions is easy and intoxicating. But it changes nothing. Becoming a visible disciple, in contrast, can be dangerous. To put this in the language of the academy: defending your thesis can get you tenure, but becoming a disciple can get you dismissed. The former comes with a wink and a nod from your peers, whereas the latter comes with a motion, and a second, that someone call security.

In Defense of Insanity

Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk, writer, and poet who stood in the tradition of radical Roman Catholic clergy, once composed a critique of "sanity" as it applied to nuclear strategic planning by the military-industrial complex. He called it "A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann." The capture and trial of Eichmann, a Nazi official directly responsible for the Holocaust, is the setting for Merton's opening lines and is relevant to our consideration of the "sanity" of Jesus.

"One of the most disturbing facts that came out in the Eichmann trial was that a psychiatrist examined him and pronounced him *perfectly sane*. I do not doubt it at all, and that is precisely why I find it disturbing." He continues:

> If all the Nazis had been psychotics, as some of their leaders probably were, their appalling cruelty would have been in some sense easier to understand. It is much worse to consider this calm, "well-balanced," unperturbed official conscientiously going about his desk work, his administrative job which happened to be the supervision of mass murder. He was thoughtful, orderly, unimaginative. He had a profound respect for system, for law and order. He was obedient, loyal, a faithful officer of a great state. He served his government very well.[8]

Merton goes on to note that apparently Eichmann slept well, had a good appetite, and only seemed "disturbed" when he actually visited Auschwitz, where even Himmler had gone "weak at the knees" at viewing the very human results of his work. But apparently not a single Nazi believed that any of his comrades had lost their minds. They were proud of their jobs and deeply patriotic. "We equate sanity with a sense of justice, with humaneness, with prudence, with the capacity to love and understand other people," Merton says and goes on, "We rely on the sane people of the world to preserve it from barbarism, madness, destruction. And now it

begins to dawn on us that it is precisely the *sane* ones who are the most dangerous."[9]

The sane ones? That would be you and me and most of the church, defending as it does the morality of Christian men and women who have helped bring the human race to the edge of extinction. We are the world's largest religion, yet we are primarily passive when it comes to the dangers we face. Do we no longer care about the massive inequities between rich and poor? Are we content to "shop until we drop" in a culture of greed and conspicuous consumption? Do we prefer to ignore or merely delude ourselves about the mindless destruction of the only planet we have because we expect the return of Jesus at any moment?

When sinners convert to Christianity, we rejoice because they have "come to their senses" or have "seen the light." We regard "getting religion" as a move away from unconventional or questionable behavior and toward decent living, predictable conformity, and a life that "would make a mother proud." Whether it is "accepting Jesus as your personal lord and savior," as conservatives put it, or becoming enlightened enough to know that Jesus would vote Democratic and prefer Chardonnay with fish, as liberals might assume, no one thinks of going to church as a dangerous bargain that leads to antisocial behavior. To the contrary, we become as predictable (and often as dull), as any group in society. *Avant-garde* is seldom the term used to describe the "church lady."

In literature and film, not to mention in the continuing verdict of the young, Christians are seen as frightened, judgmental, often anti-intellectual conformists. We appear to have traded original thinking for the comfort of belonging to a community of creeds and doctrines meant to protect us from both our true selves and the real world. It's not that the next generation thinks we have lost our minds in order to be crazy like Jesus was crazy. Rather, that the insanity of the church crowd involves delusional thinking—that we

believe things that are not really true in order to get rewards that are not really available.

Week after week we sit in the pews and listen to the words of the man of "melancholy madness" joined to a sermon that is often about positive thinking and wealth management. We are often told that we "need Jesus," but never warned to "avoid Jesus." When we sing "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," it never occurs to anyone that with friends like this, who needs enemies!

Whether we allow adoration to compromise critical thinking, or mistake hyperintellectual apologetics for faith, both conservatives and liberals miss the real demands of taking up the cross. Whatever threatens the status quo must be either domesticated or assassinated. What can't be tamed must be eliminated, especially if it threatens wealth and power. If more Christians saw the gospel as more dangerous than comforting, the church could get back to its real business, which is holy foolishness in the service of love.

Instead, we are now seen as the "sane" ones who go out to "restrain" him by marginalizing the very people who are foolish enough to take his teaching seriously. As Merton put it, "We can no longer assume that because a man is 'sane' he is therefore in his 'right mind.' The whole concept of sanity in a society where spiritual values have lost their meaning is itself meaningless."[10]

Apparently it takes a Christian mystic like Merton to recognize that if the world itself has gone insane, then the last thing we need is the kind of Christianity that we equate with sanity! If such sanity means that we have lost our "capacity to love other human beings, to respond to their needs and their suffering, to recognize them also as persons, to apprehend their pain as one's own," then we are the ones who have gone mad.[11] We are the ones who have lost touch with reality by justifying torture, by stockpiling enough nuclear weapons to make the world's rubble bounce ten times. We are the ones who not only fail to recognize our face in the face of the enemy but also pronounce them "evildoers" in the name of Jesus.

Meanwhile, Christians cling to their precious theological formulas, certain that there is a personal payoff regardless of what happens to God's creation. They "coolly estimate," as Merton put it, "how many victims can be considered expendable in a nuclear war." Why then do we consider the doomsday planners to be "normal," while we insist that the pacifists and the "peaceniks" are the ones who have lost touch with reality?

Perhaps we have forgotten the poet's lesson, that everything gains its meaning from context. Take, for example, the list of reasons why Jesus was once considered psychotic. Perhaps we only see it that way because we are the ones who have lost our minds. *He has hallucinations and hears voices.* How else can one describe that "inner life" which we value as a sign of genuine spirituality except to speak of what we "hear" and "see"? When Martin Luther King Jr. said, "I have *seen* the promised land," we did not question either his eyesight or his sanity. We call it wisdom when the writer in Proverbs claims that "without a vision the people perish." But considering that they see what is not obvious to everyone, isn't that, by definition, a hallucination?

His cleansing of the Temple was the act of an unstable man with anger management issues. Or perhaps it was his enraged final act of dissent against the corruption of religion at its epicenter. Perhaps today he would attack the prosperity gospel or the notion that the more you give, the more God loves you (and the more attention you get from the preacher). Perhaps his target today would be the enormous edifices we build to honor a penniless rabbi. Perhaps in a country with the best stadiums and the worst schools in the developed world, he might go ballistic on us—wondering why we know the cost of everything and the value of nothing. Perhaps he would "go off" one Sunday morning in the narthex of one of our churches and start turning over the tables of the trinket sellers, the prayer cloth charlatans, or the hawkers of shallow, narcissistic books. Perhaps a straitjacket would calm him down.

His cursing of a poor little fig tree for not bearing fruit out of season is irrational and cruel. Or perhaps it *was* the season for figs, and it was the gospel poets who moved the triumphal entry from fall to early spring so that it would coincide with Passover, as some scholars believe. If this is indeed a barren fig tree and the man of "melancholy madness" is on his way to his own execution, then who can blame him for dealing out one more metaphor about the barrenness of religion? If that tree stands in for all that was corrupt in a system that "brokered" access to God according to rank, privilege, and purity, then to curse it is to curse the system. This is a prophet at work, and he is running out of time.

His vituperative verbal explosions against Pharisees are really calls for violence. Or perhaps he had very particular Pharisees in mind, just as today he would have very particular ministers in mind. As for Jesus and violence, the case is closed—he rejects it at every turn. The oft-quoted line about not bringing peace on earth but a sword and division is surely about higher loyalties, about *choosing*, even within your own family, whether you will be a sane foot soldier for the principalities and powers, or a crazy disciple.

His apparently estranged relationship with his own family is the result of their failure to recognize him as messiah. Or perhaps what is true now was true then: that all families are dysfunctional. Besides, what kind of bargain is it for a mother to lose her son instead of collecting grandchildren? What kind of father handles gossip well about a son who seems to have traded honest work for the life of a wandering rabbi, teaching in parables and eating with sinners? "We hear that boy of yours is a Gentile lover."

He displays an exalted messianic self-consciousness that he insists on keeping a secret. Or perhaps the later gospel writers added such messianic self-consciousness to an otherwise humble man who warned his disciples in the earliest layers of the tradition not to seek a sign—to worship the God he revealed, not the revealer. And most of all, he warned them not to argue about who would be the greatest in the

Jesus Administration. As for keeping it a secret, especially in Mark, perhaps this is the writer's effort to explain why so many people who actually met Jesus did not believe he was the messiah. Or perhaps he is simply being cautious (wise as a serpent, harmless as a dove) in a world where he seems to be constantly under surveillance and leaves no forwarding address.

He calls for self-mutilation, and counsels those who sin to get rid of the offending body part. Or perhaps he knows the power of hyperbole. Surely, the same teacher who introduced us to a God he called *Abba* (papa), the unconditional lover of all humanity who has the hairs of our heads numbered and sees a single sparrow fall, does not really want mutilated people walking around with stumps for hands and bloody sockets for eyes. Religion has always been a rather predictable and boring business, and people have always argued over how many angels could dance on the head of a pin. Jesus taught people who thought they had heard it all before. To get their attention must have been like putting a hypodermic needle in a tombstone.

Ask a room full of pastors today if that doesn't describe much of the church. We still argue endlessly over our precious doctrines in a perishing world. We fuss over music and flowers and whether the minister should drive a red car. So here is how we fiddle while Rome burns: Is it justification by works or by faith? Should baptism be by dunking, sprinkling, or dry cleaning? Should we use one communion cup or many? Should we speak in tongues or not speak at all? Should we use real wine for communion or grape juice? Can there be an American flag in a sanctuary that is a house of prayer for all people? Should women wear skirts or slacks, makeup or no makeup?

While we're at it, what about the role of women in church leadership? What about gays and lesbians? What about politics from the pulpit? Not to worry. We know the answer, and if we don't, the church council will meet next Tuesday to discuss all this and take a vote. Meanwhile, in the time it takes to talk another

problem to death, a thousand children will actually starve to death.

In the meantime (which the poet W. H. Auden reminded us is the most important time), we are running out of time. The painful but urgent question that must be answered at this Good Friday moment for the church is this: *What kind of community would bring us back from the dead?* What would transform the Chamber of Commerce at Prayer or the Church of What's Happening Now into a beloved community of certifiably insane people? What would make us irresistibly crazy in a world where more and more people find "sanity" itself to be insane?

What would make this American Empire realize that we are not called to be its compliant acolyte? What would make people stop using terms like the "social gospel," as if there were any other kind? What would turn Christians from cartoons of hypocrisy into an irresistible force for justice? What would bring all the warring camps together, from the most devout Baptists to the most erudite Episcopalians, from the most traditional Roman Catholics to the most nontraditional members of the emergent community? What could persuade us, in the twilight of our relevance and power, to stop fighting over abortion and gay marriage long enough to save ourselves through shared mission?

The answer lies in an odd and unexpected place. It will require us to explore some of the most formative myths that we learned about our ancestors in Sunday school. It will require an archeological dig of sorts, but not through earthly sediment. Rather we must unearth our own true identity buried underneath layers of ecclesiastical *sentiment*.

Our journey forward will require a fearless look *backwards* at the original character of the Jesus movement—from its inception as an underground movement born in the winds of Pentecost to its corruption as a belief system at Nicaea. Nothing will give us a clearer picture of the risks and rewards of discipleship than a fearless look

at the first disciples. But be warned: they will seem like strangers to us. They will seem more than odd. They may even seem slightly insane. If "melancholy madness" best describes the man from Nazareth, then how would we describe a modern disciple who is as countercultural and anti-imperial as those first followers of The Way? In Oklahoma, we have a word for such people. We call them "peculiar."

This will not be a ride for the faint of heart. Let's take it anyway.