

“Jesus Unbolted”
Christmas Eve Meditation
24 December 2003

Last Saturday, our youth ed. director, Donna Greene, called our home and said that baby Jesus had gone missing from the manger, and the kids’ Christmas pageant was the next morning. Well, you can imagine the problems when Jesus goes missing.

Donna’s call reminded me of an article I’d read recently by John Thomas, the United Church’s general minister and president. When John was serving a UCC congregation near Bethlehem, Pennsylvania (a city that goes fairly wild at this time of year, on account of its namesake) local wags kept stealing baby Jesus out of the nativity scene near the town hall. Well, they found the missing figure of Jesus nearby, and in their infinite wisdom, the city council decided to bolt down baby Jesus.

And that’s a fitting was to describe what many in the church have been doing to Jesus for the last 2000 years: keeping him as the sweet baby in the manger, infantilized, bolted down, watered down. We love the warm, glowing image of a child surrounded by loving parents and gentle animals in a stable, the angel-inspired shepherds coming in from the fields to adore the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes.

Those images are the images of Christmas: the birth of the messiah. We can enjoy and cherish those images, but we cannot confine our faith to the stuff of Christmas pageants and creches alone: **the baby grew up!** We have to take the whole of Jesus’ life and teachings into account, even the parts of Jesus’ life that make us squirm, that push us outside our comfort zones, that rattle our cages.

The babe of Bethlehem is also the young prophet of the Galilee who told his listeners that it was the poor who would inherit the kingdom of God, the oppressed who would receive great reward, and who challenged them – and us to love our enemies, to do good to those people who hate us, and to bless those who curse us. This radical Jesus – the Judean peasant, the purveyor of alternative wisdom, the sage and healer – seems hardly like the sweet little Jesus, born in a stable.

We need to be open to his message, unless we’re determined like the city council in Bethlehem, PA, to bolt down Jesus. We come tonight to celebrate the ancient mystery of the incarnation: of God taking on human form. We celebrate it through Christmas – literally Christ-Mass – eating and drinking at Christ’s Eucharistic table.

We celebrate and emulate the Jesus who **ate** with the untouchables of his day: the sinners and tax collectors and prostitutes and Gentiles. Jesus, who replaced the system of ritual purity with the system of universal compassion, is a Jesus whom we must take into account, if we are going to follow his way.

The open table of Jesus is the open table of the church: a banquet where all are welcome, where no one is a stranger or an outcast, where all God’s children are welcomed as members of the family. On this holy night when we celebrate the meal that Jesus initiated, let us remember that there are still those who do not feel welcomed at the table, because of their race, their class, their language, their orientation, or their ethnicity. Let us all be mindful that when we accept the gifts of bread and wine, we also accept the challenge of spreading the good news, of welcoming the outcast, of taking up the cross, and of sharing in not only the birth, but the life, the death, and the resurrection of the unbolted Jesus.

Amen.