

Jesus and Billy Joel

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I bet I know what some of you are thinking. And you may be right. I may be crazy. But sometimes it’s worthwhile to try crazy things. And setting Billy Joel beside Jesus is pretty crazy. As Billy Joel admits in his song, River of Dreams, “I’m not sure about a life after this. God knows I’ve never been a spiritual man.” In a recent biography, he identifies specifically as an atheist.

So why use Billy Joel’s songs to help us reflect on the life and work of Jesus? Because the sacred can be found in all places: under the Bodhi tree with the meditating Buddha, in the streets with the Black Lives Matter movement, onstage at Madison Square Garden. Whatever Billy Joel’s personal religion or lack thereof, his lyrics are theologically provocative.

I say this because Billy Joel often captures the complexity and richness of human relationships in lyrics that are surprisingly straightforward and accessible. Spirituality at its best is also about relationships: relationships between people and God as they understand God, relationships between people and other people who seem to reflect that which is good about God, relationships between people struggling together to live good lives. Most of the time we know whether a love song is intended for the singer’s earthly beloved or for the singer’s God, but there’s always room for a little slippage or Contemporary Christian music could never have crossed over into popular music. When CCM artist Susan Ashton sings, “You move me,” for example, the wise listener knows she’s singing about Jesus; when I heard the song play in a Boston-area restaurant on a pop station many years ago, she seemed to be singing about her boyfriend. (The song’s actual writer is a secular musician.) If we approach spirituality as a way of considering relationships both human and divine, Billy Joel, it turns out, may have something to say about those relationships.

So, here’s how I’ll proceed. For each of four Billy Joel songs, I’ll propose a word, consider what that word has to do with the life and work of Jesus as described in the Gospels, see how the idea is framed in the Billy Joel song, and then ask what any of this has to do with spirituality.

Before I attend to the songs, it’s important to note that even Mark, the earliest Gospel, was written more than 30 years after Jesus’ death. The Gospels are theological affirmations, not eyewitness journalistic accounts, and while I’ll be describing Gospel moments as though they actually happened, there’s a leap of faith involved in doing so. As with other mythic stories, the stories of Jesus may be useful whether or not they are truthful. Each of you can decide on the truthfulness part; today I’m only interested in the usefulness part.

I begin today with the experience of belonging as found in Billy Joel’s song “You’re My Home.” There is some irony in giving this song spiritual treatment as Billy Joel apparently wrote it while fleeing the East Coast for California with a good friend’s wife in tow; the good friend’s wife would soon become his own wife. The song suggests that Billy Joel found a sense of belonging in his relationship with Elizabeth Weber. Jesus also reportedly had something to say about belonging, and we may remember it from the Gospel of Matthew [8:20]: foxes have holes and

birds have nests but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. And here's a Billy Joel translation of the words of Jesus: "Home can be the Pennsylvania Turnpike, Indiana's early morning dew, high up in the hills of California – home is just another word for you." And it does seem that, for Jesus, home was just another word for God. The crazy things Jesus reportedly did and said make no sense without the context of his absolute and utter trust in God to care for human beings, feed and clothe us and respond with abundant generosity the moment we ask, search, or knock. This trust seems to have undergirded Jesus's experience of God, and it fueled his life, his work, and his death.

Billy Joel sings, "If I travel all my life and I never get to stop and settle down long as I have you by my side there's a roof above and good walls all around." And indeed, Jesus' ministry was clearly itinerant, whether in order to reach more people or to keep from getting caught by the Romans. But despite the lack of a fixed abode, Jesus seems to have been at home in God pretty close to the whole time. Spiritually, both Jesus and Billy Joel offer here an unusual model of belonging and of what counts as home. We don't need to be physically settled, either to belong or to be at home. We simply need to be in right relationship, whether that's with people, with the sacred as we understand the sacred, or both.

Once we have a deep enough sense of belonging, we are able to offer hospitality, which, in its most radical form means welcoming everyone without reservation or requirements, or, as Billy Joel sings, "Just the Way You Are." Radical hospitality is about a particular form of relationship in which we meet people where they are, without judgment, and invite them to become their best selves by working on becoming our best selves. Jesus appears to have offered hospitality in the form of healing people whose illnesses are now widely thought by progressive biblical scholars to have represented social devaluation as much as physical limitation. But more relevant to our Billy Joel analogy, Jesus provided hospitality through what is called an open table, meaning that he ate and drank with everyone from Roman centurions, the oppressors of his people, to the despised tax collectors, who collaborated with the Romans in oppressing the Jews, to prostitutes, about whom the Hebrew Bible has the occasional harsh word. Jesus did this in a time and place in which who you ate with was about tribe, status, and shame. And he threw that out the door and welcomed everyone.

Why did Jesus engage in this practice of hospitality? Almost surely because of his own experience of God, a God who proclaims, "I said I love you and that's forever and this I promise from the heart: I couldn't love you any better. I love you just the way you are." Well, Billy Joel said that, not God. But the lyric points directly to an open-hearted spirituality in which, having a sense of belonging and therefore feeling welcomed, we can invite others to belong and offer them radical hospitality. This need not be religious, even if it is spiritual. It might be about who we eat and drink with; I've often thought that if we imagine the people in our society that we would most like to avoid interacting with, and if we then invited exactly those people to Thanksgiving with our families, we would begin to have a sense of how deeply Jesus challenged the norms of his time. Radical hospitality can also be political, both in the sense of working for the well-being of the most devalued in our society and in the sense of crossing political borders to offer kindness and compassion to those with whom we disagree politically. That business about loving your neighbor? An open-hearted spirituality tells us to love them just the way they

are. And it reminds us that everyone is our neighbor; if that were not the case it would not be so hard to love them.

A deep sense of belonging and the experience of offering and experiencing hospitality can lead to a robust practice of ministry, walking alongside people in their lives of pain and beauty. We think of Jesus' entire work as a ministry, but we can also think of Billy Joel's six months at the now-defunct Executive Room bar in Los Angeles in 1972 as a kind of ministry to those in need of a healer, or at least a good musician. The song "Piano Man" is based on the true stories of a guy singing and playing in the city of angels, on the shores not of Galilee but of the Pacific Ocean. And how far a cry is it, really, from the fishermen casting their nets to Davy who's still in the navy and probably will be for life? Jesus heals people from their damaged social status and he eats and drinks with anyone who will join him. He teaches them and invites them to walk with him. Billy Joel helps people who are in the mood for a melody to feel alright, and he sits with them as they pour out their woes, as when John at the bar says his work is killing him. In the course of his six months, Billy Joel gets to know something of the people at the bar, who they are and what they need, and he offers it: a good ear, a memory that's sad and sweet, the ability to forget about life for a while.

We know that the ministry of Jesus was successful because it drew people, people who may have climbed up the hill or down into the valley to find out who this new guy was who was drawing so much attention but who then stayed because of what he offered them. I imagine there were also people who went to the Executive Room bar not just for the alcohol but for the piano man. After all, that pretty good crowd for a Saturday was there for the music.

Practicing ministry – as Jesus did it, as Billy Joel did it, as any of us can do it – brings us deeper into relationship with other people and enables us to affirm what is both broken and holy in them. There's a reason, after all, that the song Billy Joel dismissed as "just a waltz" remains so beloved. It is incredibly fun to sing, yes, and I love playing it. But it also speaks truth. It resonates with us. I would go so far as to say that it invites us into ministry. I've played piano in a gay bar and have offered pastoral care in a church and honestly, I'm not sure I can tell the two apart other than the lack of cigarettes in the church.

What does ministry have to do with spirituality, then? Everything. I think of ministry as applied spirituality, as how we "do God" in our daily lives. Again, this needn't be churchy. It can simply be valuing the dignity and worth of others enough to listen to them well. It can be laying aside our egos and making room for someone else's needs. And it can be using our skills, as both Jesus and Billy Joel did, to give people hope or self-respect or at least an evening of beauty.

But while it is all well and good to talk about the positive aspects of Jesus' ministry, or Billy Joel's ministry, or our potential ministries, the Jesus story eventually turns hard and troubling when Jesus is picked up by the Romans and summarily killed for political activism. We could approach this aspect of Jesus's life, namely its end, in many ways; I will opt for the word "vulnerability."

Vulnerability can be understood as the emotional and spiritual point we reach when we have been blessed with a sense of belonging, have encountered and shared hospitality, and have

offered and received ministry. For Billy Joel, vulnerability is at the core of the song “And So It Goes” with its resignation, pre-broken heart, and openness to the will of the other. In the Gospels, we see exactly this kind of vulnerability particularly clearly in the story of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane just before his arrest. Now, given the best biblical scholarship, we have to acknowledge that what probably really happened was that the Romans picked Jesus up right after what some progressive Christians call the Occupy the Temple action and simply crucified him, no involvement of the Jewish leaders, no trial, no nothing. So, the story of Jesus praying in Gethsemane almost certainly didn’t happen as we read it in the Gospels.

Even so, even if the story of Gethsemane is a later invention of the church it is one plausible type of conclusion to the love story begun with Jesus’ sense of home in God. In the Gospel of Mark, we notice that Jesus prays to God not as Father with a capital F but as Abba, or what we would translate from the Aramaic as “daddy.” In Gethsemane Jesus asks his daddy to take him off the path that leads to a sure encounter with death but then says, “yet not what I want but what you want.” Or as Billy Joel might say, “but you can make decisions too and you can have this heart to break.” Jesus concludes, “your will be done” and Billy Joel concludes, “and so it goes.” Billy Joel is writing about a romantic relationship that he already knows is not going to turn out for him. This could not sound more different from the four words that, arguably, play a crucial role in both the existence of the world’s largest religion and the key theological claim it makes; for life to triumph over death eventually, death must have its say for the moment. There’s metaphorical heartbreak and then there’s the stopping of an actual beating heart. But both plotlines pass through vulnerability on the way.

A spirituality of vulnerability says that love, which some people call God, involves being willing to hand over our hearts and get them broken as we engage in relationships, romantic and otherwise. Such a spirituality calls us to accept the reality that is beyond our control when we do open our hearts, and to learn to discern when pain is part of our healing as opposed to when it is the result of an abusive or dysfunctional relationship which we ought to leave. A spirituality of vulnerability is never about self-loathing. It is always about loving ourselves enough to allow another’s life to intertwine with our own, with all the risks that might involve.

Billy Joel and Jesus make for an odd couple indeed. And yet, if even Billy Joel’s lyrics can be drawn upon in the service of a progressive spirituality of relationship, then miracles may yet be possible. From belonging to hospitality, from ministry to vulnerability, from the Sermon on the Mount to the piano on the stage, our odd couple has something to teach us about ourselves, the lives we live now, and the lives we might yet live if we so choose.