

## Who Gets to Narrate the World?<sup>i</sup>

Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28, 38-42, 43-45

### Introduction

Back when I was in high school, I loved Saturday Night Live. Now...I'm not saying that I actually got to watch it. My parents decided that the late hour and the sometimes-questionable content made that a show that would not be viewed in our house...and so I had to satisfy myself with hearing about the show's highlights from my friends on Monday morning.

- Over the years, however, I've seen enough repeats to get to know the show on a first-hand basis...and I think I can say without hesitation that my favorite sketches are the commercial parodies—and among those, one of the classics is for a product called “Bad Idea Jeans.”

The commercial opens with a group of young, white, “yuppie executive-types” getting ready to play a little pick-up basketball...and as they warm up and change into their gear, one guy says:

- “We finally got our apartment. We ripped up the floors & pipes & wiring...and we're having everything redone.” One of the others asks, “You're renting, right?” “Yeah.” Cut to the logo on the jeans: Bad Idea.
- Another guy pipes up: “Well, he's an ex-cocaine addict...and he's trying to turn things around, so he only needs a place to stay for a couple of months.” There's that logo again: Bad Idea.
- “I don't know the guy...but I've got 2 kidneys and he needs one. So I figured, ‘Hey, why not!?’” Bad Idea.
- And finally, as they trot off onto the court to face a team of tough-looking black guys that are at least twice as big as they are, we hear one of the group yell, “You guys ready? Let's bet on it—100 bucks. No, make that 200 bucks!” And as the commercial ends, we return to the logo: Bad Idea Jeans.

Now if I personally were re-writing that commercial today, I might add a line of dialogue that goes something like this. One especially un-athletic-looking guy would say, “Well...I haven't finished researching it yet...but even though it will start on the Sunday after I get back from vacation, I think I'll kick-off the New Year with a sermon series called ‘Letters to the Next President’.” And there would be that logo—Bad Idea.

If you were here in December, you may recall that this is how I announced I was going to begin 2009. But I've got to confess—that over the holidays—I started to have some second thoughts.

- For starters, I realized that it would be hard to do sermons like this without them sounding overtly political...which has never been my intention.
- In addition, I didn't want to sound like I was claiming some special expertise in the economic, political and foreign policy challenges that face our nation...because I'm not.
- And finally, it occurred to me—that on this Sunday, at least—many of us might still be too groggy from New Year's Eve to focus on anything too deep...and so maybe this topic would be best left for another time.

However, I've also realized that—especially in terms of this message series—there's no time like the present.

- After all, in just a little more than 2 weeks, Barak Obama will be sworn in as the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. And regardless of how you felt about his candidacy or his election, the fact is that scripture calls us to pray for our leaders...and so it might be useful to reflect on some of the specific ways in which we need to be praying.
- Also, it just so happens that this Sunday is the beginning of a season in the church year called Epiphany. Now that word—“Epiphany”—means “to show or reveal”...and the season of Epiphany invites us to consider how God's grace, power and purpose are revealed in Jesus, and—as a result—how they need to continue to be revealed in us.
- And since one of the ways that God's grace, power and purpose get revealed is through our response to the challenges of our time...perhaps some sermons like this are actually a pretty good idea.

So in the end—throwing caution to the wind—I decided to forge ahead with “Letters to the Next President,” and in my first letter, I think I’d like to ask: “Mr. President, who gets to narrate the world?”

### The Challenges

I don’t think any of us would question the notion that when Barak Obama takes up his new duties on the 20<sup>th</sup> of this month, he’s going to face some pretty significant challenges.

- Our economy is in the midst of its worst downturn since the Great Depression.
- We continue to fight global terrorism with active wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.
- There’s widespread distrust of the people who ought to be guiding us...including leaders of government, business and religion.
- And...even though gas prices may be down at the moment...there remain challenges to our energy supply and our environment that are almost inevitably going to require huge changes in the way we do things.

But if you probe just a little deeper, it’s not just that Obama has a lot on his plate. In the view of many people who have far more insight into these issues than I do, the new President faces more than a world that needs some fixing. He faces a world in which the basic systems in which we live are threatening to collapse.

When it comes to our economy, we’re finding that our consumer-driven culture (with its insatiable demand for more stuff made with more speed and always producing more profit) is simply unsustainable. Even if we could manage it from a “business” perspective—which our current economic crisis calls into question—there’s no way we can manage it from an environmental perspective.

- Just imagine the strains on our supplies of air, water, food and energy if billions of new consumers in developing nations like India and China begin to demand the same kind of lifestyle that we have.
- Ray Anderson is the CEO of Interface Global, the world’s largest manufacturer of modular carpet...and he says that our civilization is like a man going off a very high cliff in an airplane: “The poor fool thinks he’s flying, but in fact he’s in free fall and just doesn’t know it yet...because the ground is so far away. Every living system of earth is in decline. Every life support system of earth is in decline. We’re leaving a terrible legacy of poisoning and diminishment of the environment for our grandchildren’s grandchildren.”<sup>ii</sup>

When it comes to our efforts to protect our security and promote our values through military means, we find that all our investments seem to have reached a point of diminishing returns.

- In 2003, the US defense budget was larger than that of the next 15 nations combined, with us spending \$2 billion per day on our military. However, in 2004—with global military expenditures exceeding \$1 trillion dollars, international terrorist attacks actually rose from 175 to 655.<sup>iii</sup>
- Of course, the challenge isn’t just that we spend a lot on defense and security. The challenge is that our level of expense in these areas prevents us from pursuing other priorities. In 2006, our military expenditures were 21 times larger than what we spent on diplomacy and foreign aid combined. Some experts estimate that if 10% of our defense budget was re-invested in foreign aid and development, it could care for the basic needs of the entire world’s poor.<sup>iv</sup>
- Finally, we shouldn’t overlook the fact that at least some of our defense expenditures are made necessary because we’ve been so successful in arming other nations. The US currently produces more than 53% of the world’s weapons...and in 2003, 80% of the top buyers of US weapons were countries that our own State Dept. labeled as undemocratic or that were known for their failure to uphold human rights.
- Former President Jimmy Carter once said, “We cannot have it both ways. We can’t be both the world’s leading champion of peace and the world’s leading supplier of arms.”

Even hopes that the systems of our culture will somehow work together to produce fairness and equity are being eroded...because the gaps between the have’s and the have-not’s just keep getting larger.

- Today, richest 1% of the world's population owns 40% of the world's wealth...and the assets of the world's 3 richest people exceed the combined Gross Domestic Product of the world's 48 poorest countries.
- In 1960, the average American CEO earned 12 times as much as the average American worker. Today, the average CEO earns 300 times as much as the average worker.

### Does Jesus Speak?

Of course, at this point...in addition to thinking that all of this is terribly depressing for the first Sunday in a New Year...you might be wondering, "Pastor—what does any of this have to do with the gospel!? After all, Jesus had disciples, not a council of economic advisors...and even though he talked about loving your enemies, he never had to manage modern military threats and technologies. Does the message of Jesus even speak to the pressing global issues of our time?"

- And I want you to understand that this is an absolutely vital question, because it cuts to the heart of how we understand the gospel and why we think it's 'good news.'
  - Is the message of Jesus only that we can go to heaven when we die? And that—if we pay more attention to God and the Bible we can live more personally fulfilling lives?
- OR...when Jesus spoke about the kingdom of God...was he suggesting a way in which God's will could be done on earth as it is in heaven...a way in which dividing walls of hostility could be broken down and in which justice would flow down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream?
  - And if the latter, then how does the gospel speak to our most pressing global challenges?

### The Power of the Story

Well let me suggest to you that our world—with its billions of inhabitants and its complex economic, military and legal systems—lives by the power of its story...by the power of a narrative framework that helps us understand who we are, how we're meant to live together, and where we're headed as individuals and as a people. And as a result, it matters a lot what that story says. It is essential how we answer the question: Who gets to narrate the world?

- If our story tells us that the purpose of life is for individuals and nations to accumulate possessions and to get as much pleasure as we can as quickly as we can...then we'll have little reason to care if our consumption is equitable—or if it harms the environment.
- If our story says that we're in a life-and-death competition with each other—and that only the fittest will survive...then we'll have little reason to work together and to seek peace and to find non-violent solutions to our conflicts.
- But if—on the other hand—our story teaches that we are free and responsible creatures...in a creation made by a good and loving God...and that our Creator wants us to pursue holiness peace and love for one another and all living creatures...and that if we align ourselves with God's wisdom and God's dreams for us our lives have unbelievable purpose and joy...then our world will become a very different place.

So what I believe...and what I hope our next President understands...is that Jesus came to give us a new story.

- That's why (as you heard in our scripture lesson) Jesus is so often found saying, "You have heard it said... but I say unto you..."
- That's why he preaches, "Repent (which literally means, "Change your mind" and adopt a new way of looking at life) for kingdom of God is at hand."
- That's why scripture calls out to us: "Don't be conformed any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed—by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will." (Rom. 12:2)

Now let me be clear: Jesus died for our sins...and through his resurrection he opened the door to a life with God that we can enjoy forever. But through his teaching about the Kingdom of God, he also offered us a way of thinking about this world—and about our place in this world—that changes completely what we pursue and how we pursue it.

- To a world that says, “You are what you own” and “The one with the most toys wins”...the story of Jesus declares, “Do not store up treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up treasures in heaven.” (Mt. 6:19)
- To a world that demands, “Look out for #1” and “Do unto others before they do unto you...the story of Jesus says, “Look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Phil. 2:3) and “the greatest among you will be the servant of all.” (Mt. 23:11)
- To a world that seeks security through military dominance...the story of Jesus says, “Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God,” (Ps. 20:7) and “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” (Mt. 5:44)
- To a world that believes, “To the victor go the spoils”...the story of Jesus says, “Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.” (Is. 1:17)
- To a world that says, “Drill, baby, drill,” the story of Jesus says, “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof” (Ps. 24:1) and “creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.” (Rom. 8:21)

Of course, I admit—that in a world like ours—the story of Jesus seems like a mighty hard sell. I can’t say I’d blame you if you listen to me and say, “Preacher, that’s nothin’ but hippie talk! It may sound good when you’re talkin’ Bible in the church...but in the real world—it’s unwise; it’s dangerous and it just don’t work!” In a world of terrorism and corruption and multi-national corporations...trying to narrate the world by the story of Jesus can seem an exercise in futility...unless:

- Unless—God really does so love the world that He sent His only Son...
- Unless—someday—the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ...
- Unless we have faith that God knows better than we do how life is meant to be lived...and believe that “This is my Father’s world. Oh let us ne’er forget—that though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.”

### Conclusion

And so, in my “Letter to the Next President,” I think I’d want to ask: Who gets to narrate the world, Mr. President? Who gets to narrate the world? Of course, if I ask that question of the next President, then I also need to ask it of us. First Baptist Church...who gets to narrate our world? Because it’s not just a matter of the story by which the world lives or our President lives. It’s a matter of the story by which you and I and we live.

- Will we spend the next year worrying about our economic situation and trying to protect ourselves with more ‘stuff’? Or will we seek first God’s kingdom and his righteousness, trusting that our heavenly Father knows what we need and will provide for us?
- Will 2009 be robbed of joy because we focus on our differences and the wrongs that others have committed against us...or will we be reconciled and offer forgiveness, just as we have been forgiven?
- Will we look out for ourselves—our wants, our families, our church—or will we remember that we have been blessed to be a blessing?
- Will we read our community and read our world through the story of Jesus, who—though he was in very nature God—didn’t consider equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself and took on the very nature of a servant. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death...even death on a cross”?

You know—on the night that Jesus went to that cross—he took bread...and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” And then he took a cup and said “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; whenever you drink it, do this in remembrance of me.” Because whenever we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

- We celebrate the story that saves us...the story by which we’re called to live our lives...the story that—one day—will be fulfilled when God’s kingdom comes and God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

Whose story are you living by today? As we gather around this table, why don’t you trade your story—with its fears and regrets and uncertainties—for a story that will make you new, because (in the end) it is THE STORY that endures?

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<sup>i</sup> First of three in a series: *Letters to the Next President*. Preached at the First Baptist Church of Marshville on Sunday, January 4, 2009.

<sup>ii</sup> McLaren, Brian. *Everything Must Change*, (Thomas Nelson, 2007), pp. 200-201.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 161-163.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.