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Date: September 16, 2012  
Sermon Title: Reverend Moon and I  
Scripture: Matthew 21:23-27  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

## **Matthew 21:23-27**

*When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?' Jesus said to them, 'I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?' And they argued with one another, 'If we say, "From heaven", he will say to us, "Why then did you not believe him?" But if we say, "Of human origin", we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.' So they answered Jesus, 'We do not know.' And he said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.*

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A little background for today's sermon, "Reverend Moon and I." Rev. Moon believed he was the Messiah, the successor to Jesus Christ. He started a worldwide movement called the Unification Church, and his followers are popularly called "Moonies." Of local interest is that about 20 years ago, when the University of Bridgeport was bankrupt, Rev. Moon and his organization stepped in to buy it.

Through the years I've had a lot of encounters with Rev. Moon's movement and followers, and today I'll share lessons from those encounters, lessons about cults and faith and Christ.

"Who the heck is he?" or, more likely, "Who the heck does he think he is?" This is an ancient question, asked about every newcomer, every upstart, every provocateur, every heretic, every Messiah, every messenger, every prophet, every rabble-rouser.

For Jesus it was almost immediate. Early on in his ministry, authorities started to plot against him. Even his mother showed up one day and tried to drag him back home. When he started choosing disciples, people criticized him. One day he went back to his own hometown synagogue, and when he finished speaking, people mocked him, threatened him. Even when he healed people, other people said out loud, "Who the heck do you think you are?"

I'm sure the same was true for Buddha. He was a prince, after all. He lived a life of power and privilege and luxury and gave it all up. I'm sure plenty of folks in the palace and in the kingdom and in the villages of India wondered, "Who the heck is he?" when he began to teach.

Believe me, I am not comparing Rev. Moon with Jesus or Buddha. Rev. Moon did. He clearly saw himself on an equal plane, even a superior plane to Jesus, Buddha, Moses, Mohammed.

I once bought a book called *World Scripture: A Comparative Anthology of Sacred Texts*. I'm a student of world religions. I very much want to know how people around the world, down through the ages, have come to understand God. Some may have the full picture or part of the picture or a sliver or a smidgen. But all throughout the world, throughout history, God has been revealing and interacting and confronting and inspiring. And so it's not surprising that every religion grasps part of the reality of God.

The Muslims have the "oneness" of God down pat. They never waver on that. They get it.

The Jews have God's laws down pat, God's dos and don'ts. God has standards and expectations. The Jews get that.

Christianity has God's love down pat. We know it. We treasure it. It's our trademark, our Gospel. We get it.

So I read this *World Scripture: A Comparative Anthology of Sacred Texts* because it contains Scriptures for all the world's great religions, neatly divided into topics. I could pick a topic and find out what Jesus said or Confucius or Buddha or Isaiah. And pretty soon, I noticed the Rev. Moon was quoted regularly and often right in there with God. This "holy book" and that "holy book," and Rev. Moon. This religious leader and that religious leader, and Rev. Moon. This Messiah and that prophet, and Rev. Moon. You get the picture. Subtle, huh? And guess who published the book. One of Rev. Moon's front organizations.

Rev. Moon died last week. Another in a long line of "Messiahs," people who claimed to be God or God's chosen, or God's son or God's special.

Back in the '70s I was a pastor in Forest Hills, Queens. We had a brilliant young woman who followed a would-be "Messiah" in Manhattan. He actually claimed to be Jesus. He even made his followers observe Christmas on his own birthday. When one of his followers died, he wouldn't let anyone take the body. He promised the young man would be raised from the dead. So for two months, his followers gathered around the dead body, waiting, while the body decayed. For two months.

So Rev. Moon wasn't new. But he was audacious. His particular wrinkle was that Jesus failed, Jesus got himself killed too quickly, too young, never got a chance to marry, never had kids, never got to produce the kind of divine children he was supposed to. So God plucked Rev. Moon out of North Korea, made him the new, better Jesus, and told him to start producing divine children.

Some of you may remember when Reverend Moon came on the scene. It was right at the point when President Nixon was in big trouble — Watergate and all that. Suddenly, there were Rev. Moon and his followers in front of the White House, defending Nixon, declaring that Nixon was God's man.

Over the next 20 years or so, Rev. Moon built a religious and political and business empire. He started the *Washington Times* newspaper, funded the University of Bridgeport, had a car company in North Korea. He used to take out two full pages in *The New York Times* to print his sermons (come to think of it, why don't we do that?).

Of course, he's probably most remembered for his mass weddings. On one occasion, he married 75,000 couples at one time, around the world. On another occasion, he filled Madison Square Garden for huge mass wedding. I was there, really!

This is how it happened: when I was president of Habitat for Humanity International, I used to go all over the country talking to people about Habitat, starting new projects, or strengthening ongoing projects. One time, after I finished my speech, a young woman raised her hand and asked me, "When you raise money for Habitat, how much of that do you keep for yourself?" Being flip, I said, "I'm not a Moonie!" To which she responded, "I am." That began an interesting friendship, as she rose through the ranks of Rev. Moon's Unification Church, eventually becoming a college chaplain.

One afternoon, she called me and told me she was getting married in a mass wedding at Madison Square Garden in an arranged marriage, presided over by Rev. Moon himself. Her family refused to attend. She wanted me to be there for her. It was 1982; my son was 7 at the time. So I took him out of school, we took the subway to 34th St. and watched 5,000 couples get married. Each couple was given a little midtown hotel room for a reception and honeymoon, Coca-Cola, and Cheetos, literally, and we went to that.

The groom's father was there, a college professor from California. As we talked, I congratulated him for coming, since most parents clearly had boycotted the event. "Of course I'm here," the father said, "I made my son into a Moonie. I raised him with no religion, no God, no church. Just a huge vacuum. Rev. Moon just stepped into the vacuum." I appreciated his honesty.

Whenever some new religious group comes along, it gets called a cult, and everybody assumes the people in it are brainwashed. But in my experience, most people walk right into it of their own volition. They're missing something, they're looking for something, and the first one there with simplistic answers, rigid doctrine, strict discipline, and the promise of friendship wins. There are enough people who want to be told what to do, what to say, all with a smiley face, to fill all the cults on earth. No brainwashing required!

Through the years, I met a lot of Moonies, Rev. Moon's followers. They tried everything to ingratiate, to seduce, to attract. They came to my office and brought roses for my secretary, chocolates for me. They invited me on all-expense paid junkets to the Caribbean, to Korea, to Europe, if I would agree to give a speech and let my name be used for publicity. They tried subterfuge, deceit, coming to church, not telling people who were, getting involved, wanting to join, trying to take over from within. And, they tried honesty. The longer they were around, the more they tried to fit into the religious landscape of America. Like the Mormons, they just want to convince everybody else that they're just like everybody else, but more right than the rest of us, more correct, more true.

Some cults eventually implode: Jonestown, the Branch Davidians of Waco, Texas. Some cults mature and enter the mainstream, co-opted by acceptance and popularity. Many mainstream religious groups began as cults and sects, much maligned and persecuted, including us, Congregationalists. And Lutherans, Protestantism, and even Christianity itself! And since most cults are driven by a personality, the real test is what happens when the cult leader, the founder, dies.

The same is true in business, with the founding entrepreneur. How will Apple do after Steve Jobs? How did Ford do after Ford? How will Facebook do after Zuckerberg? How will Robert Schuller's Crystal Cathedral do after Robert Schuller? How will the Moonies do after Rev. Moon?

One of my most telling experiences with the Moonies, one of my most troubling experiences, occurred one afternoon. A couple of Rev. Moon's followers requested a meeting with me. They'd given up on all the inducements, the flowers and chocolates and Caribbean vacations. At last, they were willing to just talk. They were willing to hear from me, to hear my story, my faith, my God, and they were willing to tell their story. As we pushed and probed each other, I discovered that one of the Moonies was a former Roman Catholic priest from Ireland. This was in the '80s, when the "troubles" in Ireland were still big troubles. Decades of religious violence had torn Ireland apart. I said to him, "How on earth does a Catholic priest from Ireland become a Moonie?" He took a deep breath and told me straight on, "If you are a Christian in Ireland, you'd become a Moonie, too."

What he was saying was exactly what I have observed all my life, as I've experienced one cult after another, one new religious movement after another. I've been to communes and churches and shrines and study groups and retreat centers of every kind, all over kingdom come. And generally speaking, they're made up of people who started out in plain old American Christianity. And somehow we failed them. I visited one group in Boston. I talked to the folks. All the people were young, white, from Iowa, Kansas, New England, the South, bedrocks of plain old American Christianity. But somehow, we had failed to connect. We had our chance. I've tested this time and time again.

I remember once I was preaching in a prison. I asked the prisoners, "How many of you grew up in a church? How many of you went to Sunday School? Youth group?" Almost every hand went up. We had our chance, and we blew it. Plain old American Christianity. We blew it. Maybe boring. Irrelevant. Uncaring. Out of touch. No commitment. No follow-through. Some people drift. They leave, they look elsewhere. Because people are hungry, spiritually. People really do want to be nourished, spiritually. People want to believe. People want to transcend. People want to belong.

Psalm 42 says: *"As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God."*

The Prophet Isaiah declared, *"My soul yearns for you in the night, my spirit within me earnestly seeks you."* (Isaiah 26:9)

That's my experience all over America, all over the world. People's thirst, yearn, for the living God. Yes, I know, atheism is supposed to be on the rise. It's the new movement. But even there, I don't think most atheists have proven there is no God. I think it's the follies and failures of religion that have turned them off. The same emptiness, blandness, silliness that drove some into the arms of Rev. Moon drive some into the arms of Christopher Hitchens and atheism. Christopher Hitchens grew up in England and moved to America. Can you find more steeples per square inch, more churches, more clergy, more Bibles that in those two countries? But we left him cold.

So what is the purpose of this sermon? I started off by saying that every religious leader who shakes things up comes under suspicion and attack. The status quo never likes the non-status of the non-quo, but at some point, genuine, sincere, people have to make a judgment. Is this new movement, this new wrinkle, this new idea, this new leader, worthy? Now, that question is applicable to anything — business, politics, entertainment — but this morning, we're sitting here in the world of religion, specifically the world of Christianity. We have Christ's life and teaching, what we call in our church "Christlikeness." When something new comes down the pike, I want to know how it reflects Christ. Where is its point of contact with Christ? That's my measuring stick.

And then, I have to tell you I don't like religion that uses secrets, deceit, subterfuge. We don't need secret handshakes and exclusionary policies and closed doors or closed Communion or seductive inducements. If you see that in a religion, if you see that in a movement, walk away. We don't need megalomania, vanity, hubris, threats, or empire. If you see that, walk away.

In this church, at least — I can't speak for all of Christianity or even all of Congregationalism — but in this church, at least, our standard is Christ. Whatever echoes Christ, what ever radiates or illuminates or emulates Christ, we'll give it a try.

I'll close with this story. I was in India once, representing Habitat for Humanity, trying to "build the brand," expand the mission. One day I was taken to meet a big Christian leader. He had started his own movement, his own churches, his own special teachings. He was very cordial. Sat me down, served me tea, invited me to tell him about Habitat. I told him we were building "simple, decent houses, for God's people in need," sort of faith in action, a living proof of God's love meeting human need. That sort of thing.

At the end, he had us kneel on the floor while he led us in prayer. His prayer was simple and to the point, he said in effect, "Dear God, stop these idiots.

Defeat them. Don't let them succeed. Don't let poor people get distracted and take their eyes off of heaven. Amen.”

He didn't want us helping people because then people might think life could be better, and that was contrary to his teaching. He needed people to be needy. Well, not long after, he died, and he may well be in the same heaven I hope to be in some day. But if he is, I'll bet he's learned a thing or two about Christ.

People keep trying to improve on Christ, fix him, correct him. Truth is, the original Christ looks better every day.