

Century Marks

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David Fitzsimmons, the Arizona Star

Defiant Jesus: The miracles of Jesus weren't so much demonstrations of power as acts of protest, says Toby Jones (*The Way of Jesus*, Resource Publications). Many of Jesus' miracles were performed in defiance of the Levitical holiness code: a person with leprous skin should be declared ceremonially unclean and live outside the camp (Lev. 13), yet Jesus touched a man with leprosy and made him whole (Luke 5). Anyone who has a physical defect was disqualified from coming to make an offering to God (Lev. 21), yet Jesus welcomed such people and healed many of them. The holiness code convinced people "that the only way to please God was to separate and remove themselves from whatever was dirty, common, undesirable, or sinful. Jesus came to set *them* and to set *us* straight."

Stop the wedding music: Athalya Brenner wonders why the biblical story of Ruth is so often romanticized. Ruth was a foreigner, a female and a migrant worker—which put her on the margins of society. "There is nothing romantic about being a fugitive, or about seeking economic asylum." What Ruth needed is what aliens and immigrants need today—human rights. Unlike civil rights, human rights are "primarily matters of physicalities" like "eating, sheltering, multiplying, speaking, and breathing" (*Interpretation*, April).

Rules rule: Sheena Iyengar assumed that people with strict religious beliefs and practices must, compared to other people, be more pessimistic and feel they don't have control over their lives. But when she surveyed 600 people, ranging from fundamentalists to liberals, she found that "members of more fundamentalist faiths experienced greater hope, were more optimistic when faced with adversity and were less likely to be depressed than their counterparts." It turns out that "the people most susceptible to pessimism and depression were the Unitarians, especially those who were atheists. The presence of so many rules didn't debilitate people; instead, it seemed to empower them" (review of Iyengar's *The Art of Choosing* in the *New York Times Book Review*, April 18).

Grassroots justice: Developing countries need not only laws protecting human rights but police and justice systems that enforce the laws. Local police are often inadequately trained and are corrupt, so people in crisis tend to avoid them. In most developing countries there are few lawyers, and the poor can't afford their services anyway. Human rights and development agencies must focus on building public justice systems that work for poor people (*Foreign Affairs*, May/June).

Can't buy me love: Parker J. Palmer was baffled by every job he had until age 45. He gave the institutions he worked for his love, but they didn't love him back. "I discovered institutions don't do love, they do jobs," said Palmer. In Palmer's view, the biggest enemy of any profession is the institutions that employ professionals. All professional education should teach students how to be change agents in the very institutions they will work in. Think what it would be like, said Palmer, for a seminarian who takes a church to think not just like a pastor and a theologian, but also like a community organizer (Calvin College Festival of Faith and Writing, April 15).

All the lonely people: The pain of loneliness isn't caused by being alone as much as by feeling alone. Researchers are discovering that loneliness has a physical as well as an emotional effect. Lonely people tend to have weaker immune systems, and their blood pressure is higher. There is even a genetic effect: in lonely people, genes that promote inflammation are more active and those that reduce inflammation less so. (*USA Today*, April 8).

Boundary crossing: *Century* senior editor Richard Kauffman traveled to Iran in 2008 and talked to a range of Iranians—from government officials to university professors to Muslim seminarians to people in the street. Moved by their stories, he

felt compelled to tell them for a wider audience. His just-released book, *An American in Persia* (Cascadia), is about people moving across cultural and religious barriers to enter each other's worlds.

Fishing in Galilee: Israel has imposed a two-year ban on fishing in the Sea of Galilee to help preserve fish stocks which have plummeted dramatically. The agriculture ministry blames the drop on overfishing and the use of illegal nets that trap young fish and prevent stocks from maturing. Migratory birds that feed on the fish have also been on the rise. The most popular fish in the lake is commonly known as the St. Peter's Fish (AFP).

Wrong menu: Tashima Crudup of Baltimore says her application to be a foster parent was rejected because she is a Muslim and will not serve pork at her home. She said she is especially well suited to be a foster parent because she herself cycled through the foster-care system. Crudup said she is willing to care for children from other faith traditions and would have no problem with children eating pork outside her home (UPI).

Fault line: A senior cleric in Tehran has warned that "many women who do not dress modestly lead young men astray and spread adultery in society which increases earthquakes." Young Iranians sometimes push the boundaries of acceptable garb, with women showing hair under headscarves or wearing tightly fitting clothes. Earthquakes are a real threat in Iran: over 25,000 people died in the city of Bam in a 2003 earthquake. Seismologists warn that Tehran sits on a large number of tectonic fault lines and could be hit by a devastating earthquake (BBC News, April 20).

Free the press: A number of American universities have established journalism schools in Arab countries, teaching Western-style reporting skills. While these countries have officially welcomed the U.S. programs, their own record on freedom of the press remains dismal. In Qatar, where Northwestern has a program, reporters are forbidden to criticize Islam, the national government or the royal family. The United Arab Emirates, home to programs run by New York University and Michigan State, has fined, punished or closed media outlets for criticizing the government. According to Freedom House, a civil-liberty advocacy group, the Middle East and North Africa are the only regions in the world where there is no media without government restrictions (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 28).