

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

“Jesus is For Losers”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore March 28, 2010

Readings from the Gospels (Jesus Seminar translations)

Congratulations you poor!
 God's domain belongs to you.
 Congratulations you hungry!
 You will have a feast.
 Congratulations you who weep now!
 You will laugh...

Damn you rich!
 You already have your consolation.
 Damn you who are well-fed now!
 You will know hunger.
 Damn you who laugh now!
 You will learn to weep and grieve.

That's why I tell you: Don't fret about your life – what you're going to eat and drink—or about your body – what you're going to wear. There is more to living than food and clothing, isn't there? Take a look at the birds of the sky: they don't plant or harvest, or gather into barns. Yet your heavenly Father feeds them. You're worth more than they, aren't you? Can any of you add an hour to life by fretting about it? Why worry about clothes? Notice how the wild lillies grow: they don't slave and they never spin. Yet, let me tell you, even Solomon at the height of his glory was never decked out like one of them.

(After the rich young man asked Jesus how to have eternal life, and Jesus responded that he should keep the commandments, the young man replied, “I have observed all these, what am I missing?”)

Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be perfect, make your move, sell your belongings and give (the proceeds) to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. And then come, follow me!”

When the young man heard his advice, he went away dejected since he possessed a fortune.

Jesus said to his disciples, "I swear to you, it is very difficult for the rich to enter Heaven's domain. And again I tell you, it's easier for a camel to squeeze through a needle's eye than for a wealthy person to get into God's domain."

Sermon

I should have been getting ready for bed, but I was a little restless, channel scanning for something interesting on cable TV. Suddenly, I landed on a channel with a face I recognized – it was Pastor Buddy from the Northway Church. Have any of you seen him? I was a little amazed to look at him. He doesn't have that slick look so many televangelists have with expensive suits and coiffure. Pastor Buddy was wearing jeans and a pull-over. His receding hair was a mess! He rambled from one topic to another, speaking a vernacular that didn't sound very professional. Yet he talked about his three satellite churches and television ministry. The growth of Northway Church since 2002 has been significant and seems to be continuing. But to look at him, with his sloppy clothing and spreading waistline, it would be easy, at first glance, to call him a loser.

Pastor Buddy's look is so different from what you'd see going to the Catholic Church and the Episcopal Church with their flowing robes and vestments. His image is far different than what you'd see at the Presbyterian, Methodist, or Congregational churches. I'm always impressed with the dignified dress of my Missionary Baptist colleagues. Yet, I'm sure, Pastor Buddy's image is not an accident. If you want to appeal to the working class person who maybe doesn't own any Sunday clothes, you don't really want to out-dress them.

I suspect part of Pastor Buddy's success is his ability to identify with those who are losing out in today's increasingly stratified economy. I'd suggest that the image he projects is consistent with the message I read in scripture. Jesus didn't come to help those who could help themselves. He came specifically for those at the bottom of the economic heap – society's losers.

The historical, literary and archeological Biblical study of the last two hundred years has helped scholars re-discover the cultural and political context in which Jesus lived. So much more understanding can be extracted from Jesus' words by placing him in the context of his times.

Nazareth, the place Jesus grew up and probably spent most of his life before beginning his ministry, was an insignificant little town of between 200 and 400 people. There is no historical record of it before he arrives on the scene. It had only been settled for 150 or so years. Archeological digs suggest there were no public buildings, just the simple homes of the

people who farmed the surrounding land, tended the olive trees and grew grapes on the hillside. Nazareth was representative of many small villages in Galilee.

Life for the Nazarene family had two purposes, production and reproduction. Agriculture was the foundation of production. They weren't sitting on prime real estate. The soil was of poor quality, much of the land hilly and rocky. It didn't rain much with droughts three years out of ten. No rivers were near by for irrigation.

To survive, they needed to work hard and smart. They prayed for God's help and for good luck. They diversified what they grew for trade including grain, wine, raisins, olive oil, and cheese and yogurt from sheep and goats. They survived on little meat, lentils, peas, dates, figs, pomegranates, melons and leeks from vegetable gardens.

Without the small plots of farmed and grazed land, these Nazarenes had no source of income. Galilee didn't have large land owners who hired day laborers as in other parts of Palestine. Owning land was essential to any kind of security. Thus, there was no sense, as we have today, of buying and selling land. The land was a sacred gift of God to be tended faithfully for God forever. (This is one of the factors that makes finding peace in the Middle-East so difficult.)

So the farmers in Galilee lived pretty close to the edge of survival. And what made their situation far worse was the tax burden they endured. As part of the Roman Empire, they had to give 25% tribute of their harvest every other year. Next in line for taxes were the high priests in Jerusalem who wanted 20% of their yield every year. The third in line for taxes was the local client king who extracted another 30-40%. This translated to a heavy tax burden ranging from 50% to as much as 85% of their yearly production.

And the Romans wanted their taxes in silver, which meant converting the harvest to currency. If the farmer suffered a drought, the taxes were still due. The only way to pay was to borrow - at usurious interest rates of 20 to 50% interest. As we see today with credit cards, once the debt exceeds the ability to pay the interest, it is next to impossible to escape foreclosure. During Jesus' time, more and more Galilean farmers were losing their land because they couldn't generate enough income to get out of debt. And that was causing a lot of anxiety and anger.

When Jesus spoke publicly, he probably had a large audience of these folks. Jesus deeply understood the suffering of these farmers. They, like peasants everywhere, were at the bottom of the economy. They couldn't raise an army that could match the Roman Centurions. The Zealots, started by Judas the Galilean, did fight a guerrilla war but were eventually crushed. These peasants had little recourse but to pay or suffer the consequences.

To really understand Jesus, we need to imagine ourselves standing with these peasants listening to Jesus as he offered congratulations to the poor, the hungry and those who weep. I imagine his audience was right there with him emotionally.

I don't know if this is the same audience Pastor Buddy is reaching out to or not, but he definitely doesn't set himself apart visually from those who are losing in this economy. And yet, he does seem to be building an empire of his own. In fact, there are many contemporary, prosperity centered, Christian Churches distancing themselves from the poor. Economic success, they say, echoing the Puritans, is a validation of holiness rather than an indictment. As Dick Dana said in the Call to Celebration, there is aberrant Christianity centered in Revelations that ignores Jesus ministry to the poor.

None of this sounds like the Jesus who returns home to Nazareth:

...he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18)

I've been homeless, and hungry, and broke, but I've never experienced first century rural poverty. I've always had relatives I could rely on, an education in my head, and middle class connections. I don't know the despair of the Latin American campesino, the diamond miner in South America, the poor rice farmer in India, the villager in Moldovia, one of the poorest countries of the former Soviet Union. Most of us in this room are rich beyond the wildest dreams of these people even though all of us struggle with economic limitations.

When Jesus says, "Damn you rich!" or "it is very difficult for the rich to enter Heaven's domain" I want to say, "ouch!" It feels like he is taking aim at the developed world, the modern day equivalent of Rome. When the rich young man went away dejected after Jesus challenged him to sell all his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor, I identify with his struggle. I don't know what I'd do if Jesus came back today and challenged me to do the same, particularly as we marshal our resources to send our son off to college.

As I read the Gospels, I wonder how a follower of Jesus lives in our society. The lifestyle we enjoy, the one some prominent conservative, and no doubt Jesus loving, politicians say is non-negotiable, is fueling a war in the Congo, that has cost five million people their lives, so we can have the rare metals needed to make parts for our electronic devices at bargain prices.

That lifestyle threatens potentially catastrophic climate change from the emissions of green house gases. That lifestyle demands unsustainable production practices in agriculture, manufacturing, and energy. If Jesus came back tomorrow, I think he would throw up his hands in despair. The rich continue to get richer and the poor keep losing more and more, not so different from his day.

Even so, I don't think Jesus writes us out of his story. There is room for us in the Realm of God he foresees. His message, for those of us with resources, however, points to a different way to be his follower than his advice to the rich young man.

The Samaritan story you saw enacted during Kid's Time points toward that difference. The priest and the Levite pass by the wounded traveler. The Samaritan stops, tends his wounds, and takes him to the inn. The Samaritan is not of the same tribe as the wounded traveler. The Jews and the Samaritans broke over religious differences. Being separate sects of Judaism, there was much enmity between them. Yet the Samaritan is touched. He feels compassion. As the Samaritan cares for the wounded traveler, he becomes a model for what we can be, an ally.

We've been talking about being allies in the fight against systemic racism and oppression in our Building the World We Dream About class led by Jacqui Williams and Chris Antal. An ally is different from the ones supported, but makes common cause with them through shared purpose, a shared sense of justice and equity, and through a feeling of compassion and a willingness to risk and to sacrifice for the other.

Though many of us may not be losing out, at least not yet, in today's economy, we can be allies with those who are.

Biblical scholar John Dominick Crossan sees a kind of radical egalitarianism at the heart of Jesus' message. Using the common experience of eating and drinking together at a common table, he sought to foster an egalitarian sharing of spiritual and material power at the most grass-roots level. Common table fellowship, or commensality, was one of his strategies for building or rebuilding peasant community on radically different principles from those of honor and shame, patronage and clientage.

This image of being an ally to the losers comes through loud and clear in the gospel of Matthew toward the end of Chapter 25 in the words:

'You may remember, I was hungry and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a foreigner and you showed me hospitality; I was naked and you clothed me; I was ill and you visited me; I was in prison and you

came to see me.'

The virtuous [said] to him, 'Master, when did we see you hungry and feed you or thirsty and give you drink? When did we notice that you were a foreigner and extend hospitality to you? Or naked and clothe you? When did we find you ill or in prison and come to visit you?

And Jesus responded, 'I swear to you, whatever you did for the most inconspicuous members of my family, you did for me as well.'

Victim-hood isn't the source of congratulations here, as in the beatitudes. It is the guileless, heartfelt response of the ally Jesus praises. The virtuous act without expectation of future reward.

Whether we are winners or losers today, the roles may be reversed tomorrow. Jesus may have come for the losers at the bottom of the economic heap, but those of us who have resources can play a role in this drama as Jesus' allies. As Christians begin this holy week leading up to Easter, may we reflect on ways we can be allies, and thus follow the example Jesus left for us for virtuous action, as we strive to build the world we dream about.

Yes, Jesus IS for losers, and we can be too.

Benediction

The Roman soldiers treated Jesus like a loser
 then executed him on a cross between two thieves.
 And we're still talking about him.
 Over two billion people follow him.

If Jesus was, and still is for losers,
 then so am I, and I hope you are too,
 even if we choose not to worship him as a God.

May we take inspiration from Jesus
 and be allies in the struggle
 to relieve poverty, injustice and oppression.