

Was Jesus a Socialist?
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
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May 2, 2010

Meditation

We begin in our own hearts...
 Seeking communion with others.

We begin with our own thoughts...
 Seeking to understand others.

Within this shared quiet time of meditation and prayer,
 May we re-discover the communion of souls always present
 would we but notice.
 May we discover a deeper understanding of one another...
 understanding which transcends differences of opinion
 even on matters of great weight.

Within this shared quiet time of meditation and prayer... may the yearning of our hearts and minds reach out to all those who suffer from the injustices of life, who are hungry or without a home, who are caught in the crossfire of violence, of war. May we hold them all, even as we hold one another... with love, with kindness, with enduring compassion.

Reading

The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others. Once felt, it inspires us to act for justice.

It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community. The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed.

--Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed

Sermon

As our annual Unitarian Universalist "Justice Sunday" approached, my first thought for a sermon title was "Give Life the Shape of Justice," which was the theme of "Justice Sunday" several years ago. But though a more than laudable aspiration, it seemed a little bland for a sermon title.

Then, one recent evening this other, more provocative title came to mind, which also had to do with justice: "Was Jesus a Socialist?"

So this week I did a web search using the words “Jesus” and “socialist.” Try it. You will discover, as I did, about 411,000 hits. I browsed through the first twenty or so (life is short!), and discovered a lively and not infrequently vituperative “conversation”:

Those on the political right asserting that socialism is a kind of theft from the deserving rich to the undeserving poor (and Jesus would certainly not condone theft) and that Jesus was in any case teaching us personal generosity and charity, not political transformation... and those on the political left asserting just as confidently that of course Jesus was a socialist – if not by that name, then certainly by implication, declaring as he did that a rich man would find it close to impossible to enter the kingdom of heaven, and enjoining us to serve the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the imprisoned, not to mention sharing meals with all kinds of social outcasts.

As one stand-up comedian put it in terms of today’s political context, “Obama is not a brown-skinned anti-war socialist who gives away free healthcare. You’re thinking of Jesus.” (John Fugelsand)

But does it matter whether the teachings and example of Jesus support one or another political point of view when it comes to the quest for a fair and just society, a quest actually shared across much of the political spectrum – the differences having more to do with means than ends?

Certainly the challenge of at least moving in the direction of such a society, such a world, is huge....

When in our own nation someone like army veteran Dawn Eubanks working a seven-dollar-an-hour job at a call center in Florida, is told to clock in only two or three hours during an eight-hour shift, and told as well that if workers went home, even if not allowed to clock-in to begin with, they’d be viewed as having quit.

...or that hotel workers here in Boston are told as they were last year that they were being laid off... but would first have to train their outsourced replacements.

...or that three-fourths of American low-wage workers in the private sector do not receive any paid sick days.

And on it goes. (Examples, taken from the recent book *The Big Squeeze: Tough Times for the American Worker*, by New York Times reporter Steven Greenhouse.)

And of course we know that in many other nations the economic lives of individuals and families are far worse, and the economic disparity between the very poor and the very rich even more pronounced than in our country – where this disparity is now greater than at any time since the late nineteenth century.

Yes, the challenges are huge. And surely when it comes to such challenges, doesn’t it make sense to affirm that it matters what we *believe* about the nature of human beings and human societies and the place of humanity within the family of life? Since what we believe about such things will say everything about the nature of our responsibilities to one another, and what shape those responsibilities should take in our town, nations, and world?

Who are we anyway? Just individuals bumping up against one another on the billiard table of life? Or more intimately interconnected than that? Are we individuals first? Or are we in community first? What – if anything – do we owe one another?

And if we *do* owe something to one another – if we *are* our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers – how should that be manifest? Through individual and private voluntary charity

and help only? Or, especially in a democracy, can we (and *should* we) decide that at least some forms of injustice and suffering should be collectively addressed through our government, which is after all a government “of the people, by the people, and for the people”?

So, yes, of course our religious or spiritual beliefs and understandings neither cannot nor should not be restricted only to the private realm of our lives. The question isn’t whether our religious beliefs affect our lives in community, but *how* they affect our lives in community, our political lives.

I will soon get back to the question of what more specifically Jesus’ teachings and life might teach us about the quest for a more just society – but, interestingly to me as perhaps it will be to you, it is a thought from a contemporary Zen Buddhist teacher that will get me back to Jesus.

In her chapter on justice in her book *Nothing Special: Living Zen* (from a passage excerpted in “Parabola” magazine, winter 2008), Charlotte Joko Beck first reminds us of how much of our suffering arises from anger, and next how much of our anger arises from perceived – and real! – injustice, whether personal or societal. Then she goes on to observe that in response, many efforts to “eliminate injustice and create justice... are handled by counter-aggression... full of anger and self-righteousness” as we *fight* for justice.

Well, I don’t know about you, but on the one hand I don’t want to be an angry, self-righteous person, nor do I want to sit idly by in a world too-filled with the sorts of economic and social injustices I just barely touched on a few moments ago.

Here, then, is what Charlotte Joko Beck suggests:

In spiritual maturity, the opposite of injustice is not justice, but compassion. Not me against you, not me straightening out the present ill, fighting to gain a just result for myself and others, but compassion, a life that goes against nothing and fulfills everything.

How might this translate into practical terms? What should we *do*? With what might we replace a “fight for justice” if we believe that *fighting* for anything just continues this cycle of aggression and counter-aggression. Here’s what Beck says next:

Perhaps we must go through agonized weeks or months of sitting. But the resolution will come. No person can provide this resolution for us; it can be provided only by our true self – if we open wide the gates of practice.

“Our true self.” That, to me, is the key.

So – echoing one of my own earlier questions: Who are we... really... and truly?

Who we are *not*, I believe, is individuals first and only. Quite the contrary. Think of it: There is in fact no such thing as one human being only. We *are* first in interrelated community, in a network of mutuality as Martin Luther King, Jr., described our human reality, actually the reality of all life. We *are* one body, as Saint Paul vividly described us.

So compassion is, or ought to be, a response much more closely aligned to our “true self” than is “*fighting* for justice” or *fighting* for anything else. I don’t know if compassion is precisely the *opposite* of justice, but it is surely a worthy response to injustice which can take us in the direction of justice.

Which, finally, brings us back to Jesus.

Marcus Borg, in his fine book *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, asserts not that Jesus was a “socialist” (which the more I think about it is an unnecessarily divisive category anyway, certainly these days), but that his teachings and the example of his life did have political consequences – and that it begins with (maybe you can guess) *compassion*.

Borg tells us that when Jesus said “Be merciful as God is merciful,” a better translation would be “Be compassionate as God is compassionate.” And compassion for Jesus, Borg asserts, was quite clearly not just an individual virtue, but “a core value for life in community.” In short, Borg says, “compassion for Jesus was political.”

Jesus, for example, echoing the rhetoric of the ancient Hebrew prophets before him, directly accuses the Pharisees of neglecting justice. Jesus shares meals equally with everyone, including all kinds of outcasts. He offers his healing ministry to anyone in need, with no charge! He famously got everyone to *share* the loaves and fishes – the only miracle perhaps not a magic trick, but that too-often selfish human beings would open their hearts and their bags of food to one another.

Still, of course, many, perhaps particularly on the political and religious right, would likely continue to affirm that all this is indeed only about learning in our personal lives to be more compassionate and generous.

But for me this feels like an incomplete or unfulfilled compassion, a compassion that stops short of seeking society-wide, planet-wide redress for or even transformation of the obviously unjust political and corporate systems which damage millions of lives and souls.

I believe we *do* have collective responsibility for one another.

This said, having made clear my own sense of where Jesus’ teachings and life example leads... it is even so a sign of just how challenging were his teachings, just how challenging was the example of the way he *lived* his teachings, that good-hearted people across the *political* spectrum can disagree so dramatically about the implications of his teachings and his life.

So, paying scant attention to those on left or right who simply use and sometimes abuse selective words or stories from Jesus’ life and his followers’ writings, what would happen if we simply allowed ourselves to *sit* with some of his stories and teachings about compassion and love, just contemplate some of his compassionate deeds – and then see if our own understanding, even our own lives, are *changed*... and in what ways we are changed.

Among other things, we might find ourselves contemplating a few more questions a little more deeply:

Who would we invite to *our* table?

Who on this earth we call home is *our* neighbor, and what do we owe – *individually and/or collectively* – to our neighbors?

Our answers might differ, but there is room – and need – in our communities and in our world for compassion to be manifest in many ways, from personal generosity to shared and even governmental responsibility.

And – here, in our community of Old Ship – I am in the meantime grateful to have you and to have the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee as companions as we respond not only with our words, but more essentially *with our lives* to such questions as the questions I've raised today, questions which go to the heart of what it means to be a human being giving life the shape of justice in this home we share with six or seven billion others... along with the birds and beasts too.

Benediction

Be ours a religion which like sunshine goes everywhere,
Its temple all space,
Its shrine the good heart,
Its creed all truth,
Its ritual works of love,
Its profession of faith, divine living.
(Theodore Parker)

So may it be.