

BLESSED ARE THE POOR

I gather that some of you think I get really “picky” about being FOLLOWERS OF JESUS. Doubtless you are right. But I keep getting surprised by what Jesus really thought and taught, and by the kind of life He really lived. Our records are not perfect, I know; no tape recorder was running to help Mark, Luke, Matthew, or John with their accounts of Jesus’ sayings and encounters. But when all the detractors are finished trying to tear things down, the records are pretty amazing. What they reveal about Jesus is incredible. A possible misunderstanding or mistake here or there cannot undo the fact that Jesus thought, spoke, and acted in ways that match His stated purpose: to invite people into God’s Kingdom – a Kingdom that starts right now. He saw His purpose with a focus and a clarity never before demonstrated on earth – a purpose so different that it ended up creating a new world religion, one different from all the other religions. That makes it highly unlikely that anybody else could have been making up very much of it or shaping very much of it. How would they get to be as new and brilliant as Jesus was?

When parts of the Christian record begin to sound too much like what was already believed and assumed *before* Jesus came, I start to get suspicious. Were people still tracking what Jesus was teaching, or had they gone back to former assumptions and prejudices that were familiar to them? I know that Jesus was Jewish; that He honored His heritage; that He learned from the heroes and prophets of Judaism. *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.”* (Luke 10:27) But Jesus always seemed to add a new freshness and a new dimension to it: *“It was said to the men of old ... but I say unto you”* In His life, love meant more and obedience to God meant more than what we were usually seeing, even to this day.

To be sure, many of *us* have been trying to tame it down and make Jesus’ life and teachings more comfortable – more in line with what we already believe. Some of the earliest followers were no doubt doing some of this too, though perhaps not intentionally. It’s just very difficult to track Jesus as He really is. We are constantly going from Grace back to Law; from love back to little moralisms; from a spiritual Kingdom back to our own versions of what we want life on earth to be like or think it *should* be like. But our records and our memories of Jesus’ life among us continue to startle and amaze us. He is always

the *unexpected* Messiah. Nothing about His story matches what we thought would, should, or could happen.

Chief among the efforts in our time to turn Christianity back into something familiar and insignificant is the huge and growing insistence that the heart and core of the Christian WAY – of the Christian Message – is the commandment to “love your neighbor” and, by that, to help the poor and feed the hungry. As an aside, that is a Jewish teaching from the Book of Leviticus: “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself...*” (Leviticus 19:18) Nobody needs Jesus to come and die on a cross to tell us that. Every Jew, Muslim, Buddhist, Boy Scout, Rotarian, man or woman, gay or straight, knows that “love your neighbor” would be a good thing, and that if more of us did that, the world would be a better place.

Nevertheless, over the years (and not just in this church) people who are most annoyed and angry toward me – people who oppose my leadership and work to undo my influence – are angry because I do not agree with them that “love your neighbor” means feed the hungry and help the poor, or that this is the heart and soul of the Christian Life and Message. Most of them have never come on a prayer retreat or participated in a Disciple Band. They do not study the Scriptures because they assume they already know everything anybody needs to know. And they know, or think they know, that feeding the hungry and helping the poor are what the Christian Life and the Christian church is all about, or should be.

And they suppose that because I insist that Jesus is God’s Messiah and our Savior, I do not believe in feeding the hungry or helping the poor. Why or how they have concluded this I do not know. Over time I frequently discover that I give far more and spend far more time and energy than *they* do trying to love some neighbor. Just because I know that helping the poor is not the heart and core of the Christian Life, it does not follow that I think we should never try to help anybody. Somehow my reputation bleeds over onto this church and into our reputation in the Conference of the United Church of Christ. The UCC talks all the time about justice and peace and helping the poor. In this church, we do not say much in public about our efforts to help people. Jesus taught us not to do that. But among one hundred and thirty-five churches in our Conference, do you know how many give more to OCWM (Our Church’s Wider Mission) than we do? Two. Two churches give more than we do. And in our case, OCWM is only the tip of the iceberg.

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This is just me trying to remind you that I do not speak *against* helping the poor. I simply know that this is not our central Message. It is not our main reason for being the church. And so I have prepared this little litany in the hope that more of you will join with me in insisting that “love your neighbor” is not the heart and core of the Christian Message or of the Christian Life.

Someone asked me recently if I would baptize them. They missed the recent celebration at the Christianos, but they wanted to be baptized as a Christian before they got married in a few days. Of course I said, “Yes. I would love to.” But I should have told them just to give more money to the poor. That’s all Jesus really cares about. Never mind about baptism; just give money to the poor.

A young person recently asked me about the Cross and the Resurrection. They were starting to realize that these events have a lot more significance to our lives today than they had ever realized before. Of course I told them, “Never mind the old fables; just feed the hungry. That’s what it’s all about.”

Recently a person came to visit with me, and they were troubled about their marriage. “It seems like there is no love left between us,” they said. “I am willing to do most anything to move our relationship out of this dead space, but my husband is not willing.” I said, “Just give a donation to the poor, and everything will come out all right.”

“I never used to spend much time in prayer,” a person told me recently. “But lately it seems like the Spirit wants to communicate with me. I get more and more excited by some of the thoughts that are pouring into my head every time I get calm and quiet for a little while. What should I do?” “Just find a homeless person,” I said, “and offer to buy them a meal every day for the next two weeks.”

The list goes on and on:

I am troubled by some of my dreams.

I am thinking I may need to make a career change.

My best friend does not want to talk to me anymore.

My business partner is cutting more and more corners,
and it’s costing us a lot of money and getting worse
all the time. When I try to talk with him, he just says
I should forgive him and move on.

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One of my children is getting more and more into drugs and spending all his evenings with other friends who have no jobs and no plans, but they drink and carouse most every night. I am worried sick.

We have this beautiful old church building, but parts of it are in bad shape. It would take many thousands of dollars to catch up with deferred maintenance, but we cannot seem to agree on what needs to be done first or how to raise enough money to take care of most of it.

Our Church School has only a handful of children coming now. It used to be overflowing.

Our Choir used to be fabulous, but nobody wants to sing in it anymore. No matter what kind of music we try, it sounds terrible, and fewer and fewer come.

Our sanctuary used to be beautiful, but now it is threadbare and dingy-looking.

How nice that to all these and many other issues, I can simply reply: "Feed the hungry – help the poor. That's what it's all about." No need to pray or study the Bible or wonder about Jesus' life or ministry. And never mind your own vocation, or taking care of your own family or your own children. Just give more money to the poor. That's the total secret of life.

Am I the only one who thinks we cannot be true FOLLOWERS if we keep making things up instead of paying attention to our Leader? So if we are FOLLOWERS OF JESUS, is it fair to ask you how much emphasis Jesus Himself put on feeding the hungry and helping the poor? Was this the heart and core of *His* own life or of His own ministry? What was Jesus' own attitude toward the poor and hungry? He cared about them, but no more or less than He cared about any of the other lost souls that He found wherever He went.

Jesus heals a blind beggar on the way into Jericho. (Luke 18:35-43) But one verse later, now in Jericho, Jesus runs into one of the richest men in town. And Jesus spends the night at this man's house. His name, of course, is Zacchaeus. So does Jesus only care about the poor? In Jesus' eyes, is Zacchaeus just another *kind* of poor?

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We just read about the needle's eye and the rich ruler. (Matthew 19; Mark 10; Luke 18) Does Jesus tell this man, "And come follow me, so we can help more poor people"? He tells the man how to get past his personal hang-up. But Jesus Himself is declaring the presence of the Kingdom and inviting people to give up whatever attachments they have to this world in order to come be part of the Kingdom. Change; repent; you must be born anew; forsake you own fear; trust God. But the ministry of Jesus Himself is not filled with instances showing His own efforts to give money to the poor or food to the hungry. Do you ever wonder about that? Does it ever bother you that this was not His focus?

Paul says that each of us has been given a special gift to help build up the body of Christ. Are poor people included in this? How would we know unless we found some way to include them in our faith families as legitimate and full-fledged members?

I can find no indication in the Gospel accounts that Jesus was making help for the poor or feeding the hungry a significant part of His ministry. The temple in Jerusalem was the center for distributing the alms of the Jewish nation to people in need. It was the center and source for feeding the hungry and helping the poor. Why did Jesus not back this purpose by backing the temple? "*Look! There is your temple, forsaken by God and laid waste,*" He said. (Matthew 23:38; Luke 13:35) How is it possible that Jesus was not more involved with efforts to give to the poor? He did preach Good News to the poor, but that was an entirely different approach, and one most people in our time greatly scorn.

"Six days before the Passover festival, Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. They gave a supper in his honor, at which Martha served, and Lazarus was among the guests with Jesus. Then Mary brought a pound of very costly perfume, pure oil of nard, and anointed Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair, till the house was filled with the fragrance. At this, Judas ... protested, 'Could not this perfume have been sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor? [What a waste, to pour it onto Jesus' feet! That's a very handsome sum of money.]'" (John 12:1-5) How many of you think that Jesus agreed with Judas? Don't we think that Jesus *should have* agreed with him? I frequently hear comments to that effect, even all these generations later.

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Only, that is not how the story goes. “*Leave her alone,*’ Jesus said. *‘The poor you always have with you, but you will not always have me.’*” How selfish of Him! How self-centered! Do we know Jesus as well as we think we do? And if we do not know Him, how will we ever FOLLOW Him?

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It’s interesting that in many places, religion has become the only area of human endeavor where we get extra points for being mindless. How neat and tidy, now that everything is clear. No errors in the Scriptures; no errors in our belief systems; no errors in our explanations of what happened and what it all means. Isn’t that wonderful? No more need to pray, to study the Scriptures, or to ponder what Jesus teaches or does or what He *wants* from us. Just feed the hungry and give more money to the poor. Life is about nothing else, and nothing else matters – nothing else pleases God. I know I am caricaturing, but not very much.

We no longer have to wonder about our own gifts or purposes or to listen for the Spirit’s calling. We do not even have to worry about who to help or how much. Just love everybody, everywhere, all the time. “A just world for all.” I do not know any passage in the New Testament where Jesus said such a thing, or anything close to it. “*Lose your life for my sake.*” That I do remember. But generic, nonpersonal love for the poor or hungry? I search the Gospels in vain for that kind of counterfeit caring.

People *do* remember Jesus saying, “*This is the New Covenant in my blood.*” And saying, “*I will be with you always, to the close of the age.*” People remember Jesus saying, “*You must be born anew, or you will never see the Kingdom of Heaven.*” But those are more the battle cries of a dynamic new spiritual Life – not the warmed-over sentiments of an outward humanist optimism that is content to go on whistling in the dark.

Most of us would agree that it is good to help the poor. But that is not the only thing we are about, and I do not think it is even the most *important* thing we are about. Christianity is about fullness of LIFE and putting God-given gifts and talents to good use. Most of us think God is pleased when we love those whom God brings into special relationships with us in our own lives. That is never automatic, and so

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we keep trying to love them constantly and continually – all under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Many of us still believe that Jesus came to call into being true churches – groups of Christians in covenant with each other and with Jesus – to live in the ways of His Kingdom: a Kingdom which He kept describing for us and setting before us.

The poor are also invited, of course, like everybody else. But like everybody else, they are called to repent: to change their lives. And like all the rest of us, they are invited to become productive members of Christ's body. And yes, we should love them if they are willing to belong to our faith family – just as they are called to love us. I do not very often wish that I was younger, but I wish I could live long enough to see some things like this happening far more than I have seen so far.