

Jesus: Redistributionist-in-Chief

If Christian conservatives truly understood and accepted the teachings of Jesus, they would not be at the Tea Party barricades fighting to protect the money, power and privileges of the rich; they would be demanding what Jesus wanted, a radical redistribution of wealth and decent treatment of all, as the Rev. Howard Bess notes.

By the Rev. Howard Bess

According to Luke's gospel, the beginning of the ministry of Jesus as a reputational rabbi was marked by his public reading of a passage from the Isaiah scroll. His declaration was that a year special to God had arrived, a Jubilee Year that would redistribute wealth and end the economic persecution of the poor.

A key part of the understanding of Jesus involves his understanding of this Year of Jubilee. According to Levitical Law, all land was owned by God. So, the people who controlled the land and farmed it were stewards/servants, but according to Leviticus, they never really owned the land.

Land could be bought and sold but only for a limited time. Plus, the holders of land were under some strict rules. Every seventh year the land could not be farmed, meaning the land had a Sabbath year when it rested.

At the end of the seventh seven-year cycle (i.e. 49 years), the Levitical Law required that all the people start over. Land was to be completely redistributed. This 50th year was called the Year of Jubilee.

Other important things took place. All slaves were set free and all debts were canceled. The Levitical Law envisioned a new day for everyone.

Over the years the Israelites found ways of reinterpreting the law and avoided the keeping of the Year of Jubilee. People who had gained control of large land holdings were closely allied with the priests who ran the Jerusalem Temple.

The prophet Isaiah (who lived in the Eighth Century BC) despised the rich and the powerful. A recurring theme in Isaiah is a call to celebrate the Year of Jubilee honestly. Many today would call him the ultimate socialist. As far as anyone can tell, the Year of Jubilee has never been celebrated.

Jesus lived at a time of a concentration of wealth when working farmers had completely lost control of their land, which was owned by very wealthy men who lived in large cities some miles away. Under the prevailing economic system, the

farmers became poorer and poorer.

Often, the farmers had to leave the farm and became day-laborers who worked at the mercy of absentee owners and their local enforcers. The greed of absentee land owners and the plight of poverty-stricken farmers form the backdrop of the entire ministry of Jesus.

When Jesus at the beginning of his public ministry as a reputational rabbi read the particular passage from Isaiah, his entire audience understood what he was saying. He was calling for the celebration of the Year of Jubilee.

Jesus made his statement in a minor village to a group of people who had become powerless under the economic onslaught of the rich. Jesus was declaring that the new day had arrived. At last justice would be established.

It was a brash statement partly because Jesus was not a trained rabbi. His position as rabbi would not have been accepted outside of a small area in northern Palestine. According to the passage, he made his statement in the town (Nazareth) in which he grew up.

Jesus had spent his early manhood attending the local synagogue meetings as an active participant. A small village such as Nazareth had too few people to merit a trained rabbi, so the regular Sabbath meetings were led by lay people.

At Sabbath meetings, the Scriptures (Old Testament) were read, discussed and argued. Jesus was the leader that emerged from the group. His reputation grew as he became their "reputational" rabbi.

Jesus embraced the Isaiah writings, and the Isaiah perspective had become the eyes with which he read and understood the Law and will of God.

(This understanding of Jesus's radical message – challenging the power structure on behalf of the poor – puts into context his fateful decision to take his protests to Jerusalem where the scriptures describe him riding in on a humble donkey and confronting the money changers at the Temple. It also helps explain the determination of the religious and political elites of Jerusalem to have him crucified.)

Other Injustices

At this point readers are probably jumping to the conclusion that this column is about Labor Day. Not so. At least it is not specifically about Labor Day. It is about the arrival of new days as an intrinsic part of the Christian message. Jubilee is any and every day when justice triumphs.

And the message of justice is not restricted to issues of economic injustice or

the excessive power of the rich. It also applies to social justice.

It has been nearly 42 years since the Stonewall riots started the revolution for gay acceptance in America. The Stonewall Inn was a gay bar in New York City that was regularly raided by the police. On June 28, 1969, the men at the Stonewall Inn had had enough. The resulting riots lasted several days and inspired the emergence of gay rights organizations across the country.

Within seven years, I felt it necessary to face the issue of gay acceptance in our churches, writing my first essay about acceptance of gay people in our congregation. I shared my call for acceptance with my congregation. A new day had arrived. It was a day that demanded justice for a persecuted and down-trodden group of people. The old ways were unacceptable.

I believed it was and is the calling of our churches to declare the arrival of the new day. But I have been sorrowed that so many Christian churches have chosen darkness rather than light. I am chagrined by my fellow Christian clergy who have kept silent about justice for our gay friends when they should have been witnessing to the new day of Jubilee.

However, I am also pleased with the large number of churches and clergy who have been declaring the arrival of the new day of acceptance for gay people in the family of God. We have come a long way in the past 42 years.

Jesus had the courage to apply Torah (the will of God) to the vicious economic injustice that had developed in his own day. He challenged injustice and declared a new day. Challenging injustice and claiming a new day for everyone are the calling of every person who calls Jesus "Lord."

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