

WDJS?
First Presbyterian Church, Columbus, IN
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Deuteronomy 15:1-11

Matthew 20:1-15

By now I imagine that most if not all of you know about the letters, WWJD? “What would Jesus do?” That’s actually a very difficult question to answer, since Jesus lived in a very different time, under very different circumstances from our own. Political life was dominated by Roman occupation. Economic life was much simpler. There was no gasoline, electricity, or digital technology. A year or so ago there was a movement among some environmentally-conscious evangelical Christians that asked the question, WWJD? “What would Jesus drive?” They were trying to make a case against SUVs and for more fuel-efficient cars. It was not a frivolous question, but the media never took it very seriously, and so it fizzled. Now, a week after Katrina, with gasoline prices soaring, there are probably lots of folks who wish they’d traded in their SUVs. But it’s a complicated question to answer, What would Jesus drive? Maybe he would just walk, or ride a bicycle, or take the bus.

Anyway, I’m thinking that maybe we need to start with a slightly less difficult question. WDJS? What did Jesus say? This is not such an easy question to answer, either. To start with, we have only three Gospels where we can really look for answers—Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The Gospel of John is a highly theological work, with very little in the way of historical biography. If there is anything at all in John that comes directly from Jesus, it’s probably the teaching about the woman taken in adultery, and that passage was not originally part of the Gospel. And a lot of what we have in Matthew, Mark, and Luke is probably not very historical, either. But there is an important core of teachings in these three “synoptic” Gospels that many critical scholars accept as either authentic teaching of Jesus, or teaching that is very much like what we think Jesus must have said. This teaching is found in a number of the parables and familiar sayings of Jesus, including much of the teaching in Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount. My text this morning, the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, belongs to this core of what is judged to be authentic teaching of Jesus.

Why is it important to talk about what Jesus said? Let me share my answer to that question. We live in a day and age when there are all kinds of churches out there that call themselves Christian. But they teach all sorts and different kinds of things. The members of these churches have all sorts of views about moral issues, economic issues, social issues, political issues, and theological matters as well. So what is true? What is authentically Christian? Is it what the church teaches? Which church, then? Is it what the creed says? Which creed? Is it what the Bible says? Which part of the Bible?

Do you remember the uproar in Colorado last year over the sentencing to death of a man convicted of murder? It got out that someone on the jury had consulted an “outside authority”—namely the Bible—in coming to the conclusion to impose the death sentence. The biblical passage that was cited came from Leviticus 24, which calls for an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. The jury’s

decision was overturned. But not once did the press or anybody else that I heard or read say anything about the fact that Jesus takes on that teaching about “an eye for an eye” in the Sermon on the Mount and rejects it. As Jesus observes, we’ve all heard this saying, “an eye for an eye,” but, he says, “Do not retaliate in this way” [Matt. 6:38-39]. So don’t accept everything you read in the Bible as “Gospel” truth! Or at least keep in mind that it might not all fit with the teaching of Jesus.

So my answer to the question about what is authentically Christian comes down to whether something seems to be consistent or congruent with the teaching of Jesus—as best we can know that teaching. It’s important to qualify this definition, because there is a lot we don’t know, and there’s a good bit of biblical teaching that speaks to situations about which we have no word from Jesus, and there’s a lot about which we should remain pretty humble in our judgments and opinions. But don’t let that trouble you too much. As Mark Twain once put it, “Most people are bothered by those passages in Scripture which they cannot understand; but as for me, I always noticed that the passages in Scripture which trouble me most are those which I do understand.” What could be more troubling than the biblical teaching, underscored by Jesus, to “love your neighbor as yourself”?

Now, if you want to know what really got this sermon started, it was not the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, about which I’ll say more later. It was an article I read the week before in the August issue of *Harper’s Magazine*. Perhaps some of you have heard of the environmentalist author, Bill McKibben. Perhaps some of you have read one of his many books. *The End of Nature* is his best known. In any case, here is Bill McKibben, writing in a secular magazine, on “The Christian Paradox.” He starts about by noting how biblically illiterate most Americans are, and yet we think of ourselves as a Christian nation. But that is not his main point. His main point is the radical disjuncture between who we think we are and how we act. “America is simultaneously the most professedly Christian of the developed nations and the least Christian in its behavior.” This strange anomaly, or paradox, says McKibben, “illuminates the hollow at the core of our boastful, careening culture” [32].

It seems both unnecessarily painful, and trite, but let me rehearse some of the facts that give rise to this judgment. Last year we ranked 2nd to last among developed countries in the percentage of our economic output going to foreign aid. We don’t treat our own citizens any better. Last year 18% of American children lived in poverty. We also ranked near the bottom in childhood nutrition, infant mortality, and access to preschool. Overall, the nation’s poverty rate rose to 12.7% of the population last year. 37 million people—over a million more than the year before—and close to a third of them children, living in poverty in the richest country in human history! Almost 46 million Americans have no health insurance. These are moral issues, though often not perceived as such.

On the more obvious morality front, despite Jesus’ teaching, we are the only Western democracy left that executes its citizens, mostly in those states where Christianity is supposedly strongest. We have more people in jails and prisons than any other country on earth, having surpassed Russia some time back. We have a higher divorce rate than the nations of the European Union, with our

divorce rates running lower in places like Massachusetts and higher in regions where anti-gay sentiment runs high. Our teenage pregnancy rates top the charts. We are the only nation on earth that has ever dropped an atomic bomb—2 of them, actually--on the citizens of another country. We are the biggest arms dealer to the world. The violent crime rate here far exceeds that of other developed countries, including our neighbors to the north in Canada. And yet we—not necessarily we in this sanctuary, but we as a people—continue to think of ourselves as a Christian nation!

I've jumped ahead of myself here. I've pointed out all these failings, without actually making the case that they are contrary to the teaching of Jesus. But do I really need to make that case? Maybe not here, but what about in our society at large?

Here's what Bill McKibben says:

The gospel is too radical for any culture larger than the Amish to ever come close to realizing; in demanding a departure from selfishness it conflicts with all our current desires. Even the first time around, judging by the reaction, the Gospels were pretty unwelcome news to an awful lot of people. There is not going to be a modern-day return to the church of the early believers, holding all things in common—that's not what I'm talking about. Taking seriously the actual message of Jesus, though, should serve at least to moderate the greed and violence that mark this culture. It's hard to image a con much more audacious than making Christ the front man for a program of tax cuts for the rich or war in Iraq. If some modest part of the 85 percent of us who are Christians woke up to that fact, then the world might change.

Yes, McKibben has hope that things might yet change. But, sadly, he does not put much stock in us mainline Christians. In his words, “the mainline Protestant churches that supported civil rights and opposed the war in Vietnam are mostly locked in a dreary decline as their congregations dwindle and their elders argue endlessly about gay clergy and same-sex unions. . . . Plenty of vital congregations are doing great good works—they're the ones that have nurtured me—but they aren't where the challenge will arise; they've grown shy about talking about Jesus, more comfortable with the language of sociology and politics. More and more it's Bible-quoting Christians, like [Jim] Wallis's *Sojourners* movement and that Baptist seminary graduate, Bill Moyers, who are carrying the fight” [37].

I'm not sure I agree with everything McKibben is saying here. I certainly don't want to trivialize the issues of gay clergy and same-sex unions, which I support, but I do believe our churches have given unconscionably too little attention to other matters, like poverty and violence. And I'm not sure that Bible-quoting evangelical Christians who take Jesus seriously are the only hope we have for an authentic Christian witness that will turn things around. But I am particularly struck by McKibben's observation that mainline Christians have grown shy about talking about Jesus. That is surely true, and that is a shame! Whatever your theology, whatever your creed or lack thereof, whatever denomination you prefer, whether you like high-church or low-church or traditional or contemporary—I'm not sure any of this matters much if Jesus is not the touchstone of your faith. And I don't mean the Jesus of stained-glass windows, or the Jesus of contemporary Christian rock

music, or the Jesus of the Jesus-prayer, or the Jesus of the Purpose-Driven Life, or any of the other Jesuses that people use to pretty up their lives. I mean Jesus of Nazareth, the Palestinian Jew, who lived and died in the first century of the Common Era. We don't know what he looked like. Most of the details about his life have been lost. Much that has been attributed to him has been the work of the religious imagination. But as best we can know, he was an extraordinary teacher and healer, prophet and person of spiritual depth and integrity. Let's not forget, it was his life and teaching that gave rise to the Christian movement in the first place.

So my challenge to us all is to take this Jesus and what he said seriously, so seriously that we really cannot think about any of the important issues and actions of our lives without thinking about what it means to live as his disciple. So what did this Jesus say?

Since it is Labor Day weekend, I chose the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard as one of my texts this morning. I've also found that this parable really gets us right to the heart of the radical message that Jesus proclaimed. Briefly, this is a parable about the kingdom. Now, the kingdom is not the hereafter. It's the way things would be if God's rule were to come "on earth as it is in heaven." So Jesus tells us about this landowner who needs laborers for his vineyard. He goes out to the marketplace and hires some early in the morning, and agrees to pay them the usual daily wage. He also goes out later in the day and, finding some idle workers, hires them, telling them he will pay "whatever is right." He does this four times, at 9 in the morning, at noon, and at 3 and even 5 in the afternoon. At the end of the day, he has his manager pay all of them their wages, beginning with those most recently hired. Why begin with those most recently hired? Matthew apparently thought it was to make the point that the first shall be last, and the last shall be first. But I think it was simply so those who had been there all day could see what others were getting paid.

Now, when those who had been hired late in the day came, they were paid the usual daily wage. Presumably the same for those hired at other times of the day. Then comes the real kicker. Those who were there for the whole day, working and sweating in the hot sun, get no more for their labors than anybody else. It just doesn't seem right. They protest! But the landowner reminds them that they got what was their due. They haven't been cheated in any way. So what gives? Don't I have the right to disburse my money as I see fit? Or are you envious because I am generous? Well, yes, they are envious because he is generous. And no, they don't think the landowner should be giving others as much as they.

Well, there is no doubt an important spiritual lesson here that God's benefactions are not limited to what we deserve. Some of us, at least, get much better than we deserve. We could talk about this as God's marvelous grace. But I think there is a much more worldly message as well. Notice, how much does the landowner give each of the other workers? Just the usual daily wage. There is nothing capricious about what each laborer receives. Each receives only what he needs, no less, and no more. The landowner had said that he would pay each worker "what is right," and "what is right" happens to be what each one of them needs. What it comes down to is that each laborer receives a living wage. The way I read this parable, in Jesus' view that is what is right and just.

For people to receive only what they deserve, if it is less than what they need, would not be right!

It may not be easy to translate this into an economic or social policy, but the basic principle is that everybody who is willing to work, regardless of the extent of their labors, should at least receive a living wage. That is only right. Nobody should receive less than they need to live on. That is what social justice requires.

There's not time to deal with our text from Deuteronomy, except to note that it spells out an important feature of the anti-poverty program of God's people back in ancient times. In the first place, it is a program that calls for loaning the needy neighbor whatever is needed. Do not be hard-hearted, or tight-fisted, but give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, says this text. What's more, every 7th year, all debts are to be forgiven. Whatever is owed you that your neighbor has been unable to repay, let it go. Everybody gets a fresh start. Great economic disparities cannot be permanently institutionalized. There can be no permanent class of the poor. Remember what Jesus supposedly taught his disciples to pray? "Forgive us our debts"—not trespasses, not sins, but debts—"as we forgive our debtors"! The Lord's Prayer isn't primarily about spirituality. Of course forgiveness of sins is a good thing, but forgiveness of debts really gets us to the point, that we should pray for a world—a generous world—that looks like God is in charge.

I wish there were more time to spell out what such a world might look like. It would certainly be a more humane, compassionate, and peaceful world. But it would also be a world more just, a world without institutionalized poverty, without institutionalized racism, a world where everyone who could work would have a job, and everyone—whether they have a job or not—would have access to the resources they need for daily living. It might be a world where hurricanes like Katrina still happened, but the tragic disaster that followed would not. In the first place, there would not be cities where over a quarter of the people live in poverty. And there would not be communities where resources needed for health, safety, and welfare are systematically diverted, withheld, or denied, so that bogus wars can be fought and the already wealthy can be further enriched. The tragedy of Katrina did not need to happen, for all kinds of reasons. It is a human-made disaster. And once it started to happen, why did it take so long for help to arrive? The problem is more than one of logistics. It reflects a massive failure of moral and political will, and the responsibility for that lies with all of us.

All I mean to say is that we have our job cut out for us, if we want to continue to claim the name "Christian". McKibben concludes his essay with these words:

Admittedly, this is hope against hope; more likely the money changers and powers brokers will remain ascendant in our "spiritual" life. Since the days of Constantine, emperors and rich men have sought to co-opt the teachings of Jesus. As in so many areas of our increasingly market-tested lives, the co-opters—the TV men, the politicians, the Christian "interest groups"—have found a way to make each of us complicit in that travesty, too. They have invited us to subvert the church of Jesus even as we celebrate it. With their help we have made golden calves of ourselves—become a nation of terrified, self-obsessed idols. It works, and it may well keep working for a long time to come. When Americans hunger

for selfless love and are fed only love of self, they will remain hungry, and too often hungry people just come back for more of the same.

Perhaps the best thing that could come out of the tragedy of Katrina would be that more Americans wake up to the fact that we are a people caught in a terrible web of self-deception about how good and how great we are, and that we must all do what we can to set a different course. God's kingdom come! AMEN.