

Sunday, September 20, 2020
Sermon: Do Not Overly Spiritualize Jesus
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One of the big problems with American Christianity is that we have overly spiritualized Jesus. From his teachings about the Kingdom of God, to his parables, to his miracles, American Christianity has trained us to believe Jesus was talking about a place you go after you die.

Today is Just Peace Sunday throughout the United Church of Christ. Today we will explore a parable that Jesus told in Matthew 20:1-16 (The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard). It's primarily about economics and politics and justice.

Sermon:

Friends, I want to tell you that today is Just Peace Sunday here in the United Church of Christ, so churches throughout the nation in the UCC are celebrating this Sunday as Just Peace Sunday. As I mentioned in the beginning of our worship service we were one of the first churches in the nation to become a Just Peace Church. What that means is that we believe that without justice there will be no peace. And so we need to work for a more just world for all people so that we can have true peace.

True peace is not the absence of conflict. It's not the absence of war. True peace will come when we actively seek a more just and loving world for all people, but especially for those who are marginalized, those who are suffering, those for whom the economic and political systems are not helping, and, as Jeff said in his prayer, those systems that are actively hurting folks in unjust ways.

We have seen that through our prayers this morning as we lift up all of the injustices that we are witnessing in the world. It is our job as Christians to work for a more just world because that is what Jesus calls us to do. This is why I wanted to title this sermon Do Not Overly Spiritualize Jesus. We get in really dangerous territory when we overly spiritualize Jesus. What do I mean by that? There is a way of interpreting Jesus and his parables, like the one that we have today, where Jesus talks about a landowner who goes out to find workers to work his land and he finds them over different hours of the day. And he brings them all in and at the end he pays them all the same wage. A living wage. A wage that will get them by for another day. Many people, in fact, much of American Christianity has trained us to interpret these parables in a way that is overly spiritual. And here's what I mean. This parable, they will say, has nothing to do with economics. It has nothing to do with politics. It's all about the Kingdom of Heaven, which is the place that you go to after you die. Have you heard this kind of interpretation before?

So what they will do with this parable is say that when you get into Heaven and somebody else is there who was only a Christian at the end of their life, just be grateful that they're there because God is going to treat them the same way that God treats you when you get into Heaven. I'm not saying that that interpretation is wrong. I'm saying that it is incomplete. It is so dramatically incomplete and those interpretations, when that's all we have, lead to injustice. Because overly spiritualizing Jesus is a way of saying that he doesn't really care about your life now, all he really cares about is your life after you die. That is a wrong interpretation of the life of Jesus.

Jesus was concerned about the here and now. When Jesus talks about the Kingdom of Heaven or the Kingdom of God, he is not primarily talking about where you go after you die. He is primarily talking about the way we live our lives together now. And here's how this works with this parable.

In the historical context that Jesus is talking about here, those who were with him, his disciples, and those who were listening to him tell this parable would have known the political and economic situation that they lived in. And here's what it was. The Roman Empire came into Israel and conquered the nation. The Roman Empire took away land from landowners, people who had been living in that land for generations, and they worked the land. They were subsistence farmers. They could farm for themselves and maybe farm for others and make a little bit of money, but then the Roman Empire came in and they kicked all those people out of the land. They put in landowners who were often absent. They put in their own landowners who would go out and hire people, often people who had the shame that Rome put them through of kicking them out of their own generational land, and saying - you can't work this anymore. You can't live here anymore, but you can come back and work the land and we will tax you. You can work the land that you used to own and we will tax you, so that you can give more money to the Roman Empire, so that we can make our armies bigger and conquer more lands and do to more people what we just did to you.

That is the situation that Jesus is talking about. So when he says that the landowner in this parable goes out to find people to work the land, people would have heard - oh my gosh, Rome just conquered us and has taken us away from our land and kicked us out of our own land. This is a horrible injustice! And then these landowners are nowhere to be found. Who's going to hire us? Who's going to make sure that we have enough food to eat? The landowners don't care.

So Jesus comes in with this parable and he's trying to shift it. He's trying to shift what the landowner/God is all about. God is the one who comes in as the landowner and is the one who doesn't leave, but stays with us. God is the landowner who isn't somewhere way out in the Kingdom of Heaven. Somewhere way out there. No, the Kingdom of Heaven is here along with us. And you see, Rome only wanted to hire people who would not stand up to the injustice that Rome had. So a lot of people were left out of the economic system. You

had to play by the economic system in order to get any benefit from Rome. And there were some people who said - no, we're not going to play by your economic system. One of those people was Jesus. Jesus didn't want to play by the economic system and so he tells this story that subverts the Roman historical system of what they were doing. What is the true landowner like? The true landowner doesn't leave. The true landowner goes out and he finds people to work the fields. He goes out throughout the day and finds people at different times during the day. And how does the landowner act towards all of those people? Jesus says the landowner acts with generosity towards everyone. God is generous. What does this mean? You see, in the Roman economic system, and in the American economic system - don't think that America isn't in this, America is Rome in this. In both of these economic systems of oppression they are based on what we call a meritocracy - you get what you deserve. You get what the Empire thinks you deserve.

And so in this system, your value is based on what you can produce. If you can't produce then you are a drain on the economic system. That's what the Roman economic system is about. That's what the American economic system is about. That is not what Jesus's economic system is about. That's not what the Kingdom of God is about.

Here and now, Jesus wants us to live in a way where everybody gets what they need. Where everybody gets true justice, whether you have worked eight hours or whether you have worked one hour, you still need food and water and shelter. And I'll tell you this, if 21st century American Christian evangelicals were there to hear this story of Jesus, they would have called him a socialist, or a communist, or whatever they would have wanted to call him. And Jesus would have said - I don't care what you call me, justice is about meeting the needs of everyone.

Why weren't these people hired during that day? Why aren't people hired today? We have all kinds of excuses. A lot of people blame those who aren't hired for being lazy. Do you know how hard it is to find a job if you have a criminal record? You've paid your time, but you still have that criminal record. You can't get rid of it. It is almost impossible to find a job. That is unjust!

When you read this parable I hope that you have in mind our Latinx siblings who come to the United States because our economy demands that they come to the United States and work the jobs that nobody else wants to work, for wages that nobody else wants to work for. And yet we demand that they come here. A certain segment of our population calls them illegals and demands that they leave. The very people who benefit the most from that economic oppression double down and scapegoat our undocumented siblings who come to the United States looking for economic benefits and then they get scapegoated and called illegals. Give me a break! That is such an injustice. Jesus's parable comes at us and says it doesn't matter who you are, it doesn't matter what you look like, it doesn't matter if you're male or female, non-binary or transgendered, or cisgendered, or gay, or lesbian, or straight, or black, or white, or brown. If you're hearing Ruth Bader Ginsburg in

this, and I hope you are, because none of those things matter when it comes to justice. What justice means is that you get your needs met.

Last year, our current administration went to the Supreme Court and tried to make it so that our transgender siblings and our gay siblings could be fired just for being transgender, gay and lesbian. And our Supreme Court at the time said - no. They said no, you can't discriminate. Businesses can't discriminate against our LGBTQ siblings. Thank God. Thank God that Ruth Bader Ginsburg was on that Supreme Court and helped lead the way in that decision.

They said Title VII doesn't protect our LGBTQ siblings from being fired. The Supreme Court, Ruth Bader Ginsburg said - no, our LGBTQ siblings are protected under the law from that kind of discrimination. We are living in a presidential administration that wants to take those benefits away from our LGBTQ siblings and I am here, as a Christian pastor, to say that is unjust. That is un-Christlike and we here at Clackamas UCC have got your back because that's not the kind of world that we want to live into.

I want to live into a world that Jesus describes. That Jesus gets from his Jewish roots. Jesus says - love your neighbor, all of your neighbors, as you love yourself. Jesus gets that from his Jewish roots. One of the greatest commands in all of Judaism is to love your neighbor as you love yourself. That is what we are called to live into. When we live into that, we will have a more just world. We will have the world that Jesus, that God, that our Jewish and Muslim, Hindu, atheist, agnostic, and the list goes on, we all believe this that we are called to live into - a more loving and just world.

And so in the days and months and years ahead, whatever happens with this election, it is our work to labor and to call our politicians, to call ourselves, to call this church and all churches to account, to live into a more just and loving world for all people. So friends, may we continue the journey now and forever. Amen