

“You have made us equal to them.”

Matthew 20: 1-15

March 22, 2009

Winston Baldwin

There are stories that go against the grain of conventional wisdom and social norms. These are the stories we tend to remember. Jesus' story of the labors in the vineyard is one such story. The story is hyperbole, as most parables are. Their function is to over state the case that we, the hearer, get the case stated in its ridiculous form, providing opportunity to see the absurdity of the conventionality it challenges.

The image for this is “going against the grain.” All you good Mainers know that image, especially if you have ever spent anytime splitting cordwood. One can only split wood vertically, with the grain, not horizontally, “against the grain.” There are, however two exceptions to this conventional wisdom of wood splitting, black gum, green or cured, which is so gnarly it is not worth the effort. The other is cured locus, which is as hard as iron. One might as well cut these woods to length and let it be. They seem to always be against the grain no matter which way one tries to split them.

But back to Jesus and his story, which itself goes against the grain. The story doesn't fit our expectation. As one of my clergy colleagues says of this parable, it is like trying to fit my oversize three month old into a regular size snuggly. “It would have worked if she could have kept her knees and elbows bent and her tummy tucked; but it didn't fit.”

Neither does Jesus' story about labor fit our conventionality. That is the point; Jesus is cross grain and counter cultural. He doesn't fit whether in the 1st century or the 21st century. This is why those who try to follow in the way of the Jesus movement feel the sting in the axe handle when Jesus hits cross grain.

There is a cultural tension about Jesus that will not go away. No matter how hard we try to line him up with our conventional wisdom and social norms. He is cross grain. It would help us understand Jesus if we could remember that Jesus is cross grain and counter cultural as we make our Lenten journey toward Good Friday and Easter.

At the risk of quoting Dom Crossan too often, I will, for he is the best scholar of Christian scripture I know. Crossan says of Jesus: “Jesus had both a religious dream and a social program. It was this combination that got him killed.”

He goes on to say, “The Roman Empire may have regularly abused its power, but it seldom wasted it. It did not crucify teachers and philosophers: it usually just exiled them.....Indeed, if Jesus had been only a matter of words or ideas, the Romans would have probably ignored him and we would not be talking about him now.

His kingdom movement, however, was action and practice and not just thought and theory.”---
The Essential Jesus

The Jesus movement, then and now, is action and practice.

But what does that mean for us if Jesus is cross grain and counter culture?

Dick Hamm, former General Minister and President of the Christian Church, Disciples of Christ, our full UCC ecumenical partner, has written a book entitled Recreating the Church: Leadership for the Postmodern Age, Richard L. Hamm (Chalice Press, 2007).

Dick says that “since 1968 [actually, 1963 for the UCC] that mainline institutions of all kinds, including mainline churches, began to experience decreasing attendance.

Typically, says Dick, the first response of an institution to shifting cultural ground is to seek to do what has been successful in the past but to "try harder." Since 1968, "trying harder" has been the primary institutional strategy of the mainline churches. The result is a focus on *maintenance* rather than on *mission*.”

The mainline church in America has become acculturated and domesticated. It goes with the grain, not against it. What is hard for us Americans to get is that Jesus is coming from a different place than our conventional, acculturated, American Christianity.

According to Dick Hamm, Diana Butler Bass, our own UCC, David Roozen down at Hartford Seminary, and others who study the Sociology of Religion, it is our failure to “get it,” this acculturated Christianity in America, that has led to the decline of the mainline church in America.

American political philosophy and Christian Practice is not the same thing. The congregation and the town are not the same entity, not even in New England, and when they were and are, whether in Colonial Virginia or Colonial New England, it has been a train wreck getting ready to happen as it did in the post-colonial era.

The church and the town can indeed become the same thing. To one degree or another, we have done that from New England to the Midwest, and on to sunny California. But the Jesus movement and our respective towns and their cultures are never the same thing. The Jesus movement is cross grain with the culture.

It was this unholy alliance between town and church that precipitated the need for the Second Great Awakening, a spiritual renewal movement in late 1700 to early 1800’s. Not the least of those involved in this movement was one Lyman Beecher, father of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Henry Ward Beecher.

It was Harriet’s spiritual encounter with the Jesus movement, that she is reported to have had here in this worship space, not her religious affiliation with this church, that empowered her Christian practice which went cross grain with the culture kindling the fires of a cultural revolution.

But we have domesticated poor Harriet and acculturated her, plaque and pew, screwed her down, and given her house over to foundation and institution. Wonder what words of wisdom Harriet would have to say to us now about Christian practice and its importance to the vitality of her congregation? She is, after all, part of our tradition. We need to honor her voice and rekindle her spirit.

“Tradition is,” says the church historian the late Jaroslav Pelikan, “the living faith of the dead to which we must add one chapter while we have the gift of life. Traditionalism is the dead faith of living people who fear that if anything changes, the whole enterprise will crumble.”

But change is what is happening in vital mainline congregations. We adapt or we change or we die. As Diana Butler Bass discovered in her study of mainline congregations, change is happening, changing from an acculturated, symbiotic, relationship to the culture to that of cross grain relationship seen in seeking spiritual expression in everything from the walking of labyrinths to Zen meditation, from serving in soup kitchens to addressing issues of poverty, from small sharing groups to theological forums, from Sunday afternoon jazz worship services to Bach’s B minor Mass sung in the Sunday morning worship.

“Christian practice, says Butler Bass, integrates faith and life.”

One of the reasons that Dick Hamm, former General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), whom I just quoted, resigned his position is that he became frustrated at the wasted energy and resources of the churches being focused on maintenance rather than on mission. “It is” he says, “like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.”

We can do better. We here at First Parish Church are doing better. But during this time of economic crisis we can not afford to be sucked back into cultural accommodation. We cannot lose sight of the fact that Jesus is always cross grain with the culture. This is why he begins his stories with, “the Kingdom of God is like...” Like God’s values, not like cultural values.

Jesus’ story this morning is about money, personal worth, and generosity. This story raises all kinds of cross grain issues for us; things like: work does not equal worth, our value comes from our being rather than our having and doing.

Living out the way of Jesus in our lives is a challenge. It was a challenge for Harriet Beecher Stowe and it is for us. Yet, this living of the way of Jesus connects us to the sacred and centers us when much about our postmodern lives is fragmented and unintentional.

There is something about Jesus’ story of the workers in the vineyard and our conventional wisdom of “my work equals my worth” that is particularly challenging to us. One of the parts of this story that I have always found intriguing each time I read it is: “You have made them equal to us.” --Matt. 20: 12

The protest is: “We are better because we have worked more, worked harder, our work is more important than theirs.”

I have a female acquaintance, a successful attorney, now a district judge who is always telling me how hard and long she has been working, how much she has to do, and the time it takes. She does it unconsciously. No doubt working hard and long is true of her as it is of most people, especially the working poor!

It is self-justification, the harder I work the more I am worth. Jesus' story says, no! Our worth is in our being, not in our having and doing.

In this time of economic crisis, we feel that our worth is challenged, pun intended, by the loss of our wealth.

It is interesting in the story that the “hard working folks” are threatened by the “less working, slackers”; the “why have you been standing around all day” folk when the “hard working folks” get paid what they contracted to get. The argument is we should get more in relationship to the others who worked less time. What is it about us that raises this question?

The kingdom of God, says Jesus, is about relationship. The realm of God is about generosity, about being made equal; “you have made them equal to us.” The realm of God is about changing the way we relate to each other and changing the values we use with which to relate to one another.

“You have made them equal to us...” that is the challenge and the practice of the Kingdom of God. Amen.

Winston Baldwin