

Jesus – A Middle-Class Messiah? (*He begins at the bottom*)

The Baptizer paced the perimeter of his cell pondering over what Jesus was up to. “This is a waste of time,” he said to his two visitors. “What am I doing here when there’s so much more work to be done? I don’t understand; if he’s the Messiah that I’ve been saying he is, why isn’t he confronting Herod, putting our nation back at the top, and getting me outa here. Go ask him, if he’s our guy or not.” [Luke 7:18-23](#)

I get John. If I were in his situation, I would’ve been confused too. But I’m more puzzled by Jesus’ reply: “*Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.*”

I used to think that he was appealing to his miracles to prove his Messiahship, but John and his disciples knew he did miracles. It occurs to me that the point wasn’t so much about his power but the people for whom he wielded his power. It was the poor, the outcast, the people at the end of their rope that Jesus typically rescued. He came to change society, and instead of at the top, *he began at the bottom*. He spent his days on the street rescuing powerless lepers, prostituted women, and disabled pariahs. You wouldn’t have found him in the boardrooms of the rich and powerful or in Herod’s face lobbying for the release of the Jews. He did his best work among those on the margins. It was not his obligation to the inner circle but his compassion for the outer circle that proved his Messiahship. It’s not that he didn’t love those in power, but his way was to begin with the ones who were abused by power. That’s what he was trying to tell John.

Imagine a sort of modern slant on the narrative where Canada (feel free to substitute your own country of choice) managed to come down and take over America. OK, I said “imagine”! Our government, economy, and all our public systems were placed under Canadian control and our free and prosperous American way of life became a thing of the past. It wasn’t just the loss of our liberty, but of our affluence that really hurt. We hoped for someone to arrive and lead us back to our rightful prosperity – personally and nationally.

We heard of one such candidate; a charismatic, miracle-working leader of multitudes. Whole towns shadow him just to hear him teach and to take advantage of his wonders. There had been reports of him dazzling the crowds by multiplying food, walking on water, making wine from water, and raising the dead! We assumed he was our guy to liberate us and restore the fortunes to which we’re entitled as Americans, so we sent a couple representatives to ask him to lead the way back to our rightful place in the world. “We know you perform miracles,” they said, “and we want you to use your power to deliver us from our enemies.”

“Yes, I do miracles all right,” said the prophet, “but...”

“But what?” they asked. “You seem to have divine power to do just about anything you want and all we want is to be restored back to our Fortune 500 lives. Will you do it?”

“Well, if you look carefully, you’ll notice that most of my wonders have been done for the disabled, destitute, and deprived who weren’t able to help themselves,” he replied. “Unless they have families to take care of them, the blind or lame or deaf or leprous have no other recourse than to beg. They simply can’t work or pull themselves up by their bootstraps, so I’ve healed many of them to put them on equal footing with most other people.”

[By my unofficial count, the Gospel writers highlighted twenty-three healings of Jesus. All of those except five or six of them were done for impoverished people. His healings did more than make sick people well and reveal his divinity; they rescued people from bone-grinding poverty.]

“That’s just fine with us, go ahead and keep helping poor people if it makes you happy,” they argued, “but don’t you think it’s a little short sighted? Couldn’t you flex a little of your muscle to lift us back up to the top of the global heap where we belong? We heard you could do just about anything, so while you’re doing your philanthropic work, why don’t you reinstate the rest of us to our prosperous and free way of life? We have to go back to our officials with a report. Are you in or not?”

“Well, I’m ‘in,’ but maybe not in the same way you want me ‘in,’” he said. “My orders were to begin at the bottom – to concentrate on the vulnerable and oppressed.”

“You’ve come to the right place then – that’s us! We’re at the bottom. We’re oppressed! Can’t you see that our whole American way of life has been upended. Those evil Canadians have robbed us of control of our own destiny, our economic sovereignty, our political clout, and our ability to amass personal wealth. You’ve got to care about that, right? If you’re supposed to be our Savior, then save us from our plummeting stock values. We’re prepared to offer you total control of our country if you’ll just wave that magic wand of yours over us and ...”

“Yes, I can see that you’ve lost a lot,” he said, “but can’t *you* see that what’s at stake for you for the most part is your *preferred* way of life? You want a *better* life than the one you have. I get that, and someday that hope might be realized – in this world or the next. But while you’re absorbed with your wants, a lot of other people don’t even have their bottom-line needs met. I’ve come to meet *needs* more than *wants*.

“You’re right about the miracles I do – they’re a ‘sign,’ but not necessarily a sign that the Divine is going to erase everyone’s inconveniences and hardships. He doesn’t often wield his clout to make comfortable people even more comfortable. He and I are not the exclusive possession of the middle and upper classes. We begin with the poorest and most destitute and then we make them a *sign* to the wealthy. My assignment is to teach and heal the poorest first. Their needs are the direst, plus they tend to be the most receptive to my message.

“I’ve been hoping that those of you with greater health and a more privileged status would get a clue and follow my lead to share yourselves and your wealth with those who have nothing. Instead, you lusted for a place at the pinnacle of society and when you arrived there you flunked the test.”

“But if you’ll give us back our middle-to-upper class status, even though it’s their own fault that they’re poor, we’ll use our affluence to be benevolent with those you seem to care so much about.”

“That was my original plan, where the rich help the poor, but it hasn’t played out that way in reality. You wasted the opportunity that abundance gave you. Instead of giving a hand up to the planet’s poorest, you used them as slaves so you could maintain your opulent lifestyle at a discount. And you did all this under the guise of being my followers. But selfishness doesn’t so easily sanctify.”

He knew they wanted to hear it but he went on to say, “You’re so accustomed to your own interests and personal advancement that you’ve lost sight of those who, without help, can’t move forward. You’re striving to *thrive* when all they can do is barely *survive*. You middle-class moaners fume over your drop in salary and your bump in taxes while many don’t even have a salary to drop or an income to tax.”

“OK, well, this isn’t going like we’d hoped,” the envoys whispered among themselves. “This may not be our guy. His agenda is definitely not the same as ours and he doesn’t seem to care at all about our American Dream. He’s so concerned about the poor that he cares nothing about our plight.”

[I’m certainly not insinuating that John the Baptizer had any such self-serving, nationalistic, or economic interests of his own. Jesus said he was the greatest saint and least materialistic person of his day. His struggle was not about personal prosperity, but about what he expected the Messiah to do about Rome’s control over Israel. Nevertheless, I believe that in his answer to John’s envoys Jesus used his compassionate dealing with the poor to make his point about what is actually important to God, and what his kingdom actually looks like.]

Roman oppression gave Israel an opportunity to love their disadvantaged neighbors (Jewish and Gentile) and live in compassionate community with each other. Those who had even a modicum of wealth had every chance to act generously toward the poorest among them. Instead, many of them protected their wealth and used their influence for their own benefit.

When they made Jesus’ miracles and message about their own socioeconomic interests, the Jews of the first century looked a lot like so many twenty-first century Christians who seem to feel entitled to their own thick slice of the American pie.]

The prophet interrupted their conference – “I heal the poor, because they need it and because you need to see it. I want you with greater health and wealth to catch my passion for the most destitute among you. I’ve been trying to show you how much God loves the “outer circle,” as it were, and inspire you to live justly among them. But I’ve noticed that instead of learning compassion from your own losses, you’ve become even more tightfisted and overprotective of what you think is yours. How is it that it’s not news when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but when the stock market loses two points, it’s front-page fodder? I want you to find ways to narrow – rather than widen – the gap between the classes. There’s enough for everyone in every place on my planet if you’ll learn to share.”

“What? He’s obviously a socialist!” one of them protested through pursed lips.

“No, I didn’t come to condone or condemn anyone’s politics or economic system, but to model a lifestyle of generosity and hospitality among neighbors. If you choose capitalism, that’s fine, but be the kind with a social conscience – compassionate capitalists. Be sure that whatever socioeconomic advances you make are never on the backs of the poor. Your *gain* should never be at the expense of someone else’s *pain*. Always take into account the global community, otherwise known as ‘neighbors’.”

[Thankfully, there are a growing number of socially responsible business models cropping up these days whose goals are not merely about personal wealth. They put people before profit and choose to sacrifice some of their own bottom-line in order to include marginalized communities and help lift people out of poverty.]

He went on to say, “When you look for me you’ll find me in the poor. I don’t just mean *among* them, I mean *in* them, *as* them. When you look into their eyes you’ll see me looking back at you.

I look forward to the day when I’ll be able to say to some of you:

“I was hungry, and instead of stuffing yourself to obesity you bought me lunch. I was thirsty, and you quit buying sparkling mineral water and dug clean water wells in my community. I was a stranger, and

instead of having me deported, you got to know me and realized that I left my country to make enough money to send some home to my starving family. I needed clothes, and instead of buying more shoes to add to your already full closet, you took me shopping for my first pair of new jeans. I was sick, and instead of pointing out the behaviors that led to my sickness, you took me to the doctor and paid my bill. I was in prison and you didn't say I was getting what I deserved, but you befriended me on visiting days and helped me find a job when I got out."

Exasperated, they asked, "So you're not going to restore our rightful fortunes?"

"I can't say if I will or if I won't," he replied, "but I can guarantee that if you'll begin where I do – at the bottom – and join me in my mission of mercy, you'll find a more authentic fortune than you ever imagined. Then you'll hardly notice whether or not you're economically prosperous. Purpose – eternal purpose – trumps prosperity any day."