

20 February 2022

Social Justice Mark 14:3-9

Last week, from the Gospel of Luke, we heard the story of a time when Jesus was visiting the home of Simon the Pharisee, and a woman with a bad reputation intruded with an alabaster jar of ointment and anointed his feet. Today we hear a suspiciously similar story from the Gospel of Mark, but with a very different message. We read Mark 14, verses 3-9:

³ While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. ⁴ But some were there who said to one another in anger, 'Why was the ointment wasted in this way? ⁵ For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.' And they scolded her. ⁶ But Jesus said, 'Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. ⁷ For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. ⁸ She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. ⁹ Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.'

Now the chances are that this story has always troubled, or at least puzzled, you. Jesus seems so dismissive of the disciples' concern for the poor. Really? Doesn't Jesus *want* to help the poor? – I mean what was all that with feeding the five thousand then? From a practical perspective the disciples clearly have a point: this woman spent a whole lot of money on a one-time anointing, money that could have done a whole lot of good for a whole lot of people. Now the way I normally deal with this problem is to say that yes, of course, Jesus cares about needy people, but this shows us that a well-rounded Christian life involves more than just doing good for others. There is a place for worship as well, and isn't that what the woman was doing? I still think that's true and part of what we should see in this story, but today I want to suggest another approach. What if Jesus *doesn't* want to help "the poor"?

Now hear me out. Notice that there's a difference between the sort of help that Jesus gave people and what the disciples are talking about. When Jesus helped people it was nearly always face-to-face, one-on-one, responding to a specific need. Even feeding the five thousand was face-to-face, in response to hungry people that were right in front of Jesus. But the disciples talk about helping "the poor": not individuals who have an immediate need, but a category of people that they classify as existing in a state of need. "The poor." "The needy." They aren't talking about people so much as a social problem. "So what?" you might say. The social problem is made up of people in need. It's the same thing, just on a larger scale, right? Well, not exactly. The scale matters. There was a very old Peanuts comic strip that I had in a book when I was a child. It's part of a story-line in which the character Linus has decided he wants to grow up to become a world-famous humble



country doctor. His sister Lucy mocks him:

That's not nonsense, is it? It's not hard to picture a humanitarian doing many good deeds for "the needy" but only from a distance, not really wanting anything to do with "those people." Just as it's possible to imagine a social worker or pastor who leads many charitable endeavors but is also a horrible person who bullies his staff, neglects his family, endangers others on the road, and hates his next-door neighbors. You can care deeply about good causes without actually caring about people. Jesus helped people; his disciples wanted to contribute to the care of a demographic. To them, Jesus replied, "You know there will always be poor people, right? You're not going to fix society." Does that help? Maybe it doesn't. Maybe you still find Jesus' words unpalatable. But hold on, because I'm just getting started. Today, in our sermon series on modern idols I want to talk about Social Justice.

To recap, briefly, where we've been so far: we've been talking about the new religions that are appearing in our culture, made up largely of people who have left traditional religions like ours. We've talked about such things as Wellness Culture, the re-appearance of old-style nature-religions, and the fierce attempt to reclaim the past that is called atavism. And of course none of these things are intrinsically bad: being healthy is good, nature is a gift of God, and there certainly are good things in the past that we should honor and hold on to. It's only when those things are elevated to the place of God, the center of life's meaning, that they become idols. And that's where I'm going with social justice today. Yes, of course, social justice is a good thing. At any rate, it's *way* better than social injustice. But as people – especially young adults – have left the folds of established religion, a great many have replaced it with a modern Social Justice movement that demands religious fervor and a cultlike devotion to the cause.

Tara Isabella Burton writes, "The social justice movement is so successful because it replicates the cornerstones of traditional religion – meaning, purpose, community, and ritual – in an internally cohesive way . . . [threading] them together into a visionary narrative of political resistance and social renewal." That basic narrative is that evil – in the form of an unjust society – must be crushed, completely dismantled, and replaced with a new, just world in which the oppressed (people of color, women, gay or trans people) will be raised up into power, while the former oppressors (the white cisgender patriarchy) will be cast into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. From the ashes of the old world will arise a new one that is more just, more fair, "a world in which societal repression gives way to a panoply of liberated persons, all being their best selves." (Burton 178) That is this new religion's gospel.

Its purpose, its mission, is to begin that dismantling, using all the means in its power. The movement doesn't usually use direct violence (and when it does it is speedily put down by the far more disciplined and effective agents of society), but it makes use of the tools it has to great effect; protest, doxxing (that is, publicizing an enemy's private information, opening them to harassment), and Twitter. Don't scoff. By these tools, they have terrified politicians, university administrators, and corporations. Remember a couple of years ago when a business traveler tweeted an incredibly ignorant, racist comment before getting on a plane to Africa? "Going to Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. Just kidding. I'm white." When she landed in Africa and turned on her phone she discovered that she was the number one trending topic on Twitter and her employer had already fired her. You do not want to fall foul of social justice Twitter.

And this new religion has community. Much of that community takes place online, but there are in-person gatherings as well – in protests, for instance, and even in the so-called “safe spaces” that universities set up. These are often mocked as indicative of fragility – those “snowflakes.” But be careful about making fun of people who like to retreat to safe spaces where they will be surrounded by others who agree with them. Isn’t that what we do every Sunday morning? What does “sanctuary” mean but “safe space”? No, more than anything else we’ve talked about this month, the new Social Justice movement has clothed itself in the garments of religion, and there are tens of thousands who bow at that altar.

But even now, some of you may be thinking, “Come on, give them a break. After all, the injustices that they are calling out are real. Systemic racism exists. Sexism is pervasive. Discrimination against gay and lesbian and trans people is not a figment of their imagination. These are things that *need* to be changed.” And I don’t disagree with any of that. I share many of the concerns of the Social Justice movement. And yet I still find much about social justice as a religion that frightens me. For starters, it is not just a religion, it is a fundamentalism. It is rigid and inflexible and demands a purity of doctrine. Those who do not toe the line, even in one area, will be punished – as author J. K. Rowling has discovered. Rowling, whose Harry Potter books influenced a generation with basically liberal, feminist values, expressed reservations about some of the received orthodoxy concerning gender and has been subjected to full religious shunning. Second, for the social justice faith, the ends justify the means. Destroying someone’s life and livelihood on Twitter for a racist comment or viral video is felt to be completely justified: they deserved it, and besides, we have to make an example of her. Most of all, though, this religion offers a weak and inevitably disappointing salvation. You see, this is a godless religion, so the only paradise they have to offer is that projected new world that will arise, apparently all by itself, once they’ve brought down the patriarchy. In 2019, *Vice* magazine asked several social justice leaders to describe the society that they envisioned. One said it would be a “world without prisons and without cops, so cops are just these community members who don’t even need night sticks because they just give people emotional support.” (Burton, 179) The social justice religion is a utopian faith, pointing toward a new paradise on this earth, and it shares the core contradiction of every utopian faith: on the one hand they see the current society as impossibly corrupt, too evil even to reform, so it can only be abandoned, but on the other hand, they manage to believe that once they’re in control, everything will be perfect, and there will no longer be crime or corruption because, apparently, people will be different. Last week I said it was idolatry to place our faith on a return to an imaginary, idealized past world; it is just as idolatrous to center our faith on an imaginary, idealized future world.

But most of all – returning to where we started – the social justice faith is scary because it worships a cause and in the service of that cause is too often indifferent to people. If you are all right destroying individual lives in your quest to create a better world, you are *not* creating a better world. That’s just a different flavor of the world we already have. For Jesus the person in front of him mattered more than any cause, and the ends never justified the means. We are not called to achieve goals or to reform culture; we are called to live lives of love and compassion in whatever culture we find ourselves. We are not to live in either the past or the future, but in the present because love is possible only in the present. So yes, we can and should do what we can to reform injustice where we find it, but when we do, remember that our motivation must be love, our method must be love, our only measure of success must be love. Can I just say it again? We

are called to love. People.

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A final word. Last week, when I criticized the extreme nostalgia of atavism, I might have offended some of our conservatives. Fair's fair. This week I might have offended some of our liberals. But if we can all agree that the core of our calling is to love, then maybe the conservatives and liberals among us can even live together. We should try it sometime.