

Taking the Kingdom of God Seriously

A Message by James R. Newby

Text: Luke 6:17-31

The ministry of Jesus centered on our need for personal renewal. This is the process of being "born anew," or what I prefer to call becoming *transformed*. And His ministry also centered on a God of love and justice whose passion for our life together is the Kingdom of God. This is what we can call *The Double Priority of Jesus*.

As the theologian Marcus Borg reminds us, the passion for justice in the Bible goes back to the origin of Israel. It begins with Moses and the exodus. Ancient Israel's foundation story is a narrative of liberation from bondage in imperial Egypt—an *oppression* that was political, economic, and religious, and a *liberation* that was political, economic and religious.

This same passion continues in the prophets of Israel several hundred years after Moses. Now the target was the injustice created by the monarchies of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah.

Such figures as Amos, Isaiah, Micah and Jeremiah were voices of protest against the human suffering created by the unjust systems imposed by the powerful and wealthy.

What Egypt and the monarchies of Israel and Judah shared in common is that they were both forms of the ancient *domination system*. Powerful and wealthy aristocracies centered around the monarchy structured the political and economic systems in their own self-interest. In his book, *The Heart of Christianity*, Marcus Borg writes that such pre-modern societies were marked by three traits:

- 1. They were politically oppressive. Ordinary people had no voice in the structuring of society.**
- 2. They were economically exploitive. The powerful and wealthy structured the economic system so that approximately one-half to two-thirds of the annual production of wealth ended up in the hands of the wealthiest 1 to 5 percent. 90 percent of the population lived in poverty, malnourishment and disease.**

3. They were religiously legitimated. In most if not all pre-modern societies, it was affirmed that the social order reflected the will of God. Kings ruled by divine right, and *the powers that be* were ordained by God.

Passion for God’s justice and criticism of the domination system surfaces again with Jesus in the first century. In Luke’s version of the beatitudes, the Kingdom of God is combined with the poor and with the hungry. “Blessed are the poor,” writes Luke, “for yours is the Kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.” You see, the coming of the Kingdom of God means blessing and happiness for the poor. It means food for the hungry...they will be filled.

We are living in a confusing time. As I assess the religious, political and economic landscape, I see a great deal of confusion among Christians about what it means to be living in so called, "Christian America." Depending upon what poll you follow, somewhere around 85 percent of the citizens of America claim that

they are Christian. 75 percent claim to pray to God on a daily basis, and 33 percent claim to go to church or meeting every week. We seem to be a Christian saturated nation. *But how do we define Christian?*

In Louisiana this past week, their state legislature passed a law requiring every class room in that state to display a copy of the Ten Commandments. This, they feel, will help define our nation as "Christian," even though the Ten Commandments are only found in the Hebrew Testament. Kurt Vonnegut writes: "For some reason, the most vocal Christians among us never mention the Beatitudes. But often with tears in their eyes, they demand that the Ten Commandments be posted in public buildings. And of course, that's Moses, not Jesus. I haven't heard one of them demand that the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, be posted anywhere. "Blessed are the merciful" in a courtroom? "Blessed are the peacemakers" in the Pentagon? Give me a break."

The sad truth is that this "Christian Nation" lags far behind other modern nations when it comes to meeting the basic needs of its populace. Nearly 18 percent of American children live in poverty. In childhood nutrition, infant mortality, and access to pre-school, we come in nearly last among what are known as "the rich nations," and often by a wide margin. It is not just that America trails badly in all of these areas; it is that the overwhelmingly *Christian nation* America trails badly in all of these areas—*areas to which Jesus paid particular attention*. The justice passages in the New Testament, and especially the Gospel of Luke are difficult reading for those of us who are North Americans: "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation...Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry...Give to everyone who begs from you, and if any one takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you." To paraphrase Mark Twain, "It isn't the passages in the Bible that I *don't* understand that bother me, it is the passages that I *do* understand that bother me."

Taking the Kingdom of God seriously means taking the systemic causes of human suffering seriously. Taking the Kingdom of God seriously means taking God's justice seriously. In the Bible, the corporate heart of justice is just as important as an individual's new heart. If we emphasize only one, we miss half of the biblical message, half of the Gospel. The message of Jesus is about both. What we see in Jesus and in Scripture answers our deepest personal longing, to be born anew, to be transformed, and the world's greatest need, justice for all in the Kingdom of God...For those of us gathered together here this morning, this is our "double-Priority."

I want to close with some words from Senator Cory Booker, words which seem a fitting conclusion to what it means to take the Kingdom of God seriously: "Don't speak to me about your religion; first show it to me in how you treat other people. Don't tell me how much you love your God; show me in how much you love all God's children. Don't preach to me your passion for your faith; teach me through your compassion for your neighbors. In the end, I'm not

interested in what you have to tell or sell as I am in how you choose to live and give." If we do what Senator Booker suggests, we will be taking the Kingdom of God seriously.