

2 November 2019

Saints of the Counter-Narrative (Luke 6: 20-31)

© Sue Hanna

Last week, Neil explored the issue of call to radical discipleship that comes with the decision to follow Christ. This week's passage, with its blessings and corresponding woes, reassures us that *if* we follow the path of radical discipleship, it's not going to be all beer and skittles. If poverty, hunger and tears is our blessing, it's hardly a hard sell, is it?

I thought it might be helpful to consider text for today in the context of Jesus times. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, delivered a lecture, "What's in your wallet?" At a New York Presbyterian church two years ago. It's available on YouTube and is really worth a listen.

Brueggemann describes of the dynamics of the extractor economy, an economic system which has been at play in the world throughout history. He suggests the Archetypal extractor economy story is that of Pharaoh and the Israelites in Egypt. The dynamics at play in an extractor economy, are a paradox. Because it is those who possess wealth and power, who in fact *fear* the loss of their wealth and power. Once you've got it, you don't want to lose it and you just want more of it. In the case of Pharaoh, who controlled the wealth and power in Egypt, it was his fear of losing power that led to the growing exploitation of those at the bottom of society in Egypt, which were the Israelite slaves. Over time, the demands made on the Israelites became cruel and inhumane, there is no end to their suffering. The work of God is to call Moses to lead the Israelites out of slavery, through the wilderness and into the promised land, into freedom, and the oppression is resolved. But, sadly, the story doesn't end there.

Brueggemann assures us, that this extractor economy has been at play in the world throughout history. In Jesus time, it was the Roman Empire. Today, we name it as capitalism. The forces at play in Jesus world are the same forces at play in our world. What has changed perhaps, is the position of where we, who are listening to Jesus words, are placed in relation to the extractor economy.

In this sermon on the plain, Jesus has gathered around him the disciples and the apostles, and a larger crowd, which presumably is drawn from those on the outside of extractor economy. Jesus articulates in this passage his vision for a life within his new order. While the old order characterised abundance and good reputation as the marks of God's blessing, the new order places prioritises justice and compassion as marks of God's blessing. Jesus is drawing a distinction between those who will follow him, and those who will remain committed to the status quo.

American Mennonite John Howard Yoder, explored Jesus motivation for creating a new society in his book *The Original Revolution*. In this book, Yoder critiques his Anabaptist tradition, exploring how they had lost their way from the original social action vision of Jesus. Yoder suggests Jesus could have followed four established paths:

1. He could have joined the Herodians, that sought collaboration and compromise with the Establishment, the Roman Empire. This was not actually an option, because the Establishment wanted him dead, first as a baby and later as an adult.
2. He could have followed the way of the Zealots in a revolution, which sought to overthrow the system, but offered little in the way of concrete alternatives to the prevailing system.
3. He could have joined the Essenes, who followed the way of an "outward emigration", by withdrawing from urban life in order to preserve the purity of a select few.

4. Or lastly, he could have followed the “inward emigration” of the Pharisees, who stressed the rigid observance of ritual law over socio-political involvement.

Yoder suggests his own denomination had followed either one of those last two pathways, that of the Essenes or the Pharisees. Some Anabaptists had withdrawn to pursue a puritanical agricultural lifestyle, others emphasised a rigid observance to doctrine as central to religious belief. I suspect many of us here have experienced at least one of these dynamics at play in our own Christian walk.

The work of Jesus, said Yoder, was to found a new society of operating principles and assumptions, which stood as an example to and would challenge, the old society. It would derive its existence, not from the old aeon, where rulers and subversives struggle violently over who will control the path of history, but rather from the new aeon, where God’s future kingdom is breaking into the present. There is a sense here that this new community has a prayerful contemplative dimension, that of waiting on and listening to God in discerning the way forward.

The promised land that Jesus leads *us* to, therefore, is not another physical location, but a new way of living, based on the golden rule of doing unto others as you would have them do unto you. It is the alternative way to the extractor economy, which places the benefit of all above self-interest.

For us today, living within the wealthy west, we are all beneficiaries of the extractor system of capitalism. And every day we see the impact of the extractor economy everywhere. For those who watched Q&A on Monday night, the issue of water management in this country drew forth deeply passionate viewpoints, with one indigenous elder claiming the mismanagement of water amounts to Australia’s second genocide, with the death of aquatic life and lack of water that has led his people to move from traditional lands to urban settlement for their survival. Representatives from farming communities said water management

inequality was forcing families to leave their farms and forsaking the future for their young people. The politician conveniently pointed to drought as the problem.

When Jesus says, “Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man”, I can’t help but think of the response of the establishment to the young environmental activists who speak truth to power today, such Greta Thunberg and those leading the School strike for climate change. They are the ones offering a counter narrative to the extractor economy that we live in. Is it no wonder the Establishment has bitten back?

As today is All Saints day, I thought it might be of interest to delve into the origins of the festival. The festival itself is a christianisation of the Irish season of Samhain. In the Northern hemisphere, Samhain is a connecting season. For a culture steeped in agriculture, living close to the land, the days are becoming shorter and colder, the summer farming routines are displaced with uncertainty and waiting. Autumn has begun and the harvest festivals have passed, but it’s not quite yet winter!

In pagan Irish belief, respect for the land is founded on a belief in the Sí, a race of God like creatures who live under the land. These fairies are still revered today, mainly by farmers, who preserve on their land designated fairy forts and fairy trees for fear of retribution. Belief in the Sí is a transactional faith, treat the fairies well, they will reward you, if you disrespect them, you will be punished. Very similar to fundamentalist Christianity.

So Samhain is the time of year the fairies get active, because the fields are free to roam! With all the spirit activity, the traditional belief is if you leave a treat for the fairies, you could hope for a blessing for bountiful crops in the coming year. Thus we have the basis for the Halloween trick or treat tradition. Bonfires were lit and candles placed in carved out vegetables to ward off any fairies with evil intentions.

Of course, as Christianity was introduced, the festival of Samhain no longer focused on the "other world" of the fairies, but the breaking in of God's Kingdom on earth. And who better to focus on at this time, but those souls who have followed the way of Christ and led the way for the rest of us, All Saints!

I can't help but observe the irony, that the original pagan Samhain festival, was based on seasonal observance and a desire to live well with and respect the land. And the irony that the modern Capitalist economic system, that poses the greatest threat our environment, can trace its roots to a Christian theology. That in our times, there are so many followers of Christ who do not acknowledge climate change, perhaps being so enmeshed with participating in and profiting from the extractor economy that it has become an inconvenient truth. Or that it simply the easier way to follow the Pharisaical collusion with the status quo and retreat to doctrinal purity, based largely on sexual morality, which has nothing to do with what is really happening in the world.

Who are the real saints among us that we might celebrate today? Those who lead the way with an alternative vision of how we might justly address the problems created by our own extractor economy. And those of us who are prepare to join them. **Amen.**