



A Note from the Pastor's Corner

For those who have been with us regularly on Sunday mornings, you'll recall that I used the same text for my message two weeks in a row – Luke 6:17-26. You may even remember why I decided to use that text a second time. Just in case, I'll refresh your memory. They are difficult words for us to hear, difficult for us to internalize, and difficult for us to incorporate within the conduct of our lives.

Though we may hear and repeat what Jesus says, the content of Jesus' words is often neglected. And in this case, the words themselves are completely ignored. I can only guess why that may be, which is what I'll do – I'll guess.

There is no way to understand what Jesus is saying other than it is clearly counter-cultural. And in a nation where, in recent years, we have been taught – either directly or indirectly – that we live in a Christian nation immersed in Christian values, that God and country go hand in hand, that being patriotic is part of being Christian, and that our public officials should talk openly about attending church and make a public issue of their Christianity, even the thought that the Jesus Way runs against the grain of our culture's way can be shocking.

It's especially shocking when people have become accustomed to hearing just the opposite from their pulpits.

Being taken aback can be disorienting in itself. But when the obvious question "What do I do about this?" arises, we can feel as if we're floundering about with no sign of help. And this was the purpose for re-visiting that scripture. And that was as much for me as it was for anyone else. Unless we allow scripture to impact our lives, we have missed another opportunity to become a new creation, to experience spiritual growth.

My take on it is that, as agents of the Way of Jesus, we are expected to work against systems and constructs that perpetuate the lopsided tilt of the playing field of our society. Jesus stood in solidarity with the oppressed and so must we. Jesus took public stands against the forces that created and benefitted from the oppression of others and so must we.

I shared that I struggle with this passage, too – not as much as some, but maybe more than others. Because our society is structured differently from the society of Jesus' day, part of my calling is to interpret how his Way might be worked out in our context. I will briefly state what I presented that second Sunday and then let you know how I intend to work towards that end, inviting all who wish to join me in my efforts.

Our nation's systems are rigged to benefit a few. The economic system, the judicial system, the legislative system, the educational system – all of them – should be such that every citizen is treated as equals regardless of who they might be. This value is even enshrined in our nation's Declaration of Independence. However these systems operated 50, 100, or 200 years ago is not my concern. All I know is that they all not only tilted, they continue to be tilted to the extent that it's beyond denial. The public discussion has been twisted such that many people are in agreement with this direction.

I realize that nobody reading this has the power or position to "un-tilt" the playing field, including me. But if I am truly committed to being an apprentice of Jesus, I have no choice but to work against such systems. Jesus did this not just by speaking and acting compassionately towards those oppressed by his systems, but by living in solidarity with them. He spoke so directly against the beneficiaries of the existing structures that he was run out of the synagogue in his own home town. He acted so effectively on their behalf that those whose corrupted ways were being revealed felt they had no recourse but to kill him.

Arguably, most of us have been told so many times that Jesus is all about our internal state, that Jesus only cares about what we believe in our head and that in no way was he political. But simply hearing the same thing over and over again does not make it true. It's just as wrong the last time you heard it as it was the first time. Even on its face that statement is silly.

Why would so many of the power brokers want Jesus eliminated if all he was advocating was some kind of inner peace? The religious leaders, the political leaders, and the Roman authorities would all have been ecstatic if his message was, "Don't rock the boat. Accept things as they are. Just be a good citizen, and pray for an inner peace and for your sins to be forgiven."

The greatest movement to oppress our nation's under-privileged in my lifetime is taking place right now in Congress. The so-called 'budget battle' is more about a restructuring of our society in such a way that everyone I know will suffer as a result. Issues of health care, education, retirement, taxation, earnings, and others are being treated in such a way and at such a pace that I have no choice but to follow Jesus by swimming upstream, and encourage others to join me.

Let me know if you wish to take the 'Jesus plunge' with me.

Grace and peace, Pastor Bud



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These are challenging times for publicly funded organizations.

Since the Great recession of 2008, schools, governments and yes, churches, have all been scrambling to cut expenses and maximize income. (*Please see the article "Trustee News" in the main section of the Witness.*) The American Baptist Churches of NYS, of which we are a part, has been experiencing a budgetary crunch for some time. For most of us in the local church, the area minister has been our contact with ABC/NYS. We remember Tom Hast, Gary Baker or Hazel Roper, all area ministers who have served us faithfully. Our Iroquois Association has decided to retain the services of Rev. Tom Hast for up to 10 hours per month so he can continue to assist the various churches he has been involved with, including our newest members, the Chin and Karen congregations.

Unfortunately, the region can no longer afford this model of ministry. It worked well for several decades, but things change. Instead of paid area ministers, local congregations will be served by what is called a Regional Enhancement Team staffed by trained volunteers. Three volunteers from our association of forty local churches will join a larger team serving the NYS region. (If you have interest in serving in this way, see me for more information.)

Before you start to think that American Baptist Churches is all alone in this, you need to know that all denominations are facing the same situations. But because our denomination has never been one to be top-heavy with highly-paid judicatory staffs, we are not having the difficulties that others are dealing with.

Other denominations are discovering the same thing, that supporting paid, professional field ministry is no longer possible. For most organizations, what this boils down to is "doing more with less." But I do not believe this is the case for us. I see it as an opportunity for us to become more like the Baptists of our roots. As Rev. Larry Bell, Pastor of United Church of Auburn put it in his newsletter, "Instead, these *creative partnerships* are envisioned as a way to *do better with more*." [And I thank Larry for allowing me share many of his thoughts here.]

And, before you start to think that independent churches are in better shape, they are facing the same difficulties locally as denomination-affiliated local churches are. True, they don't have support staffs to support, but they also do not have support staffs to assist them in any way.

Historically, Baptists entered into associational relationships in order to more effectively and efficiently support the work of the church. When the church organization became large, stable, and considered itself to be permanent, it reflected the world around it and organized in a way that reflected this self-image.

In a way, the Church also took this approach with its mission of evangelism. This work was eagerly turned over to 'professional' revivalists and the local church permitted itself to become more like a social organization, both in structure and in conduct. This was a significant mistake, one which we have yet to recover from.

Our new model of ministry is much different and, I believe, it will help us learn a lesson from our forebears. Don't make the mistake of thinking they had it right and we have it wrong. We've learned a lot since then about what it means to be apprentices of Jesus in a secular world – although we still have *much more* to learn. Shifting back to the associational model is much more than turning back the pages of time. This in no way is means that the 'good old days' beats our present-day context. Doing the work of the Church in association with other, like-minded congregations becomes a blessing to all involved. In recent years, our Association activities have seemed to be more about maintaining a structure than about teaming up for doing God's work.

As our Regional Enhancement Team becomes active, we will have more real opportunities to be in association with our sister American Baptist Churches in the area. Whatever becomes of our associational model, though, will not be dependant upon the Regional Enhancement Team or the reduced staff at the ABC/NYS Region Office. It will depend upon us – meaning you and me.

Grace and peace, Pastor Bud