

SERMON SERIES ON SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

Radically Egalitarian Hospitality

by John Stoesz – August 24, 2008

Preface – Acknowledge influence of Dorothy Day, co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement, “Hospitality Houses”

I. Introduction – In this sermon I’ll try to do a little Biblical Interpretation – which is not my specialty - and also a little Christian Ethics – where I have more training.

II. Biblical Interpretation Part One – What does the Bible say regarding hospitality?

A. In the Hebrew Scriptures the focus is on the immigrant. “The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.” (Leviticus 19:34)

B. This theme of concern for the immigrant is continued in the New Testament in the words of Jesus according to Matthew. “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” Matthew 25:35. I understand that the Greek word for “stranger” here may also be translated “immigrant.” Then the passage would read, “I was an immigrant, and you welcomed me.”

C. I will use the opportunity of giving this sermon to address the issue of welcoming the undocumented immigrant – what the church should do as well as what the church should say.

D. Then there is Jesus’ parable of the dinner party. These are the key sentences in Luke. ‘Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, “Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.” And the slave said, “Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.” Then the master said to the slave, “Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled.”’

III. Biblical Interpretation Part Two – Let’s take a closer look at the parable of the dinner party.

A. There are three versions of this parable – in the Gospels of Luke, Matthew and Thomas. The Gospel of Thomas is not included in the Bible – but Thomas is important to the work of the Jesus Seminar. The Jesus Seminar is a group of scholars who have set out to find the actual words and acts of Jesus. I am a follower of this group – although I should acknowledge it is a controversial group.

B. The Jesus Seminar holds that the Luke and Thomas versions are probably close to what Jesus actually said.

C. One of the notable Jesus Seminar scholars is John Dominic Crossan. Here is his interpretation

1. He observes that if you go out into the roads and lanes and compel people to come in – then classes, sexes and ranks will all be mixed up together.
2. The parallel passage from the Gospel of Thomas says, “Go out on the streets and bring back whomever you find to have dinner.”
3. Crossan then quotes from a book on “The Anthropology of Eating.” “In all societies, both simple and complex, eating is the primary way of initiating and maintaining human relationships. Once the anthropologist finds out where, when, and with whom the food is eaten, just about everything else can be inferred about the relations among the society’s members. To know what, where, when, and with whom people eat is to know the character of their society.”
4. Crossan’s conclusion is that “radical egalitarianism” is the message. He says, “Open table fellowship is the symbol and embodiment of radical egalitarianism, of an absolute equality of people that denies the validity of any discrimination between them and negates the necessity of any hierarchy among them.”

IV. Christian Ethics Part One – Hospitality as a virtue

- A. Ethics may be seen as virtue-based, rule-based, or consequences-based.
- B. Hospitality is best thought of as a virtue – or as a quality of character of either an individual or a community. It doesn’t make much sense to think of hospitality either as founded on a rule of reason or as founded on the good consequences that hospitality may bring.
- C. In addition to the words of Jesus concerning hospitality, the scholars of the Jesus Seminar judge that an authentic act of Jesus was dining with sinners and tax collectors. For example, the gospel of Mark chapter 2 says, “As he sat at dinner in Levi’s house, many tax-collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples—for there were many who followed him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax-collectors, they said to his disciples, ‘Why does he eat with tax-collectors and sinners?’” Also, we know that there were women companions of Jesus. For example, the gospel of Luke chapter 8 says, “Jesus went on through cities and villages proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.” So we know that Jesus practiced the radically egalitarian hospitality that he taught.
- D. I conclude, then, that the virtue of radically egalitarian hospitality is based on the foundational teaching and practice of Jesus.
- E. It is typical of virtues that they are based on the foundational examples and stories of a particular community – as with hospitality and Jesus in the Christian tradition.
 1. The strength of a virtue is that it has a lot of moral power – and a lot of specific content – within the relevant community.
 2. The weakness of a virtue is that it is difficult if not impossible to “generalize” the virtue beyond the particular community in which it is based to the whole society.

V. Christian Ethics Part Two – The thought of Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder

A. Christology – which is thought about the meaning of Jesus for us.

1. Yoder tried to recover the social ethics that stem from following Jesus. For Yoder, Jesus is the norm – or the standard – for social ethics. But most Christians do not take this position.
2. What excuses do these Christians usually offer for not imitating Christ and following in his footsteps? Generally, Jesus is made irrelevant for social ethics in one of four different ways:
 - a. Jesus thought the world was about to end and so he wasn't bothered with being practical.
 - b. Jesus was a simple, rural man. His were personal ethics that can only be applied in such a simplistic situation.
 - c. Jesus and his followers were a minority without power. Thus they didn't have to be responsible. But since Christianity took the 'reins of power' at the time of the first Christian emperor, Constantine, Christians have to face up to their responsibilities of governing and get 'realistic'.
 - d. Jesus dealt with *spiritual* and not social matters. Jesus did not come to provide an example, but to die on the cross and be raised again in order that our sins might be forgiven.
3. All these approaches assume that we will have to get our social ethics from somewhere other than Jesus. But Yoder says no, we can and we must get our social ethics directly from Jesus.

B. Ecclesiology – thought about the nature of the church and its meaning for us

1. Yoder's is an ethic for the church (the minority who confess Jesus is Lord) – not for the whole society nor for the state. Yoder's is definitely not a Constantinian ethic.
2. What Jesus brought to Israel was a new peoplehood and a new way of living together.
3. "The usual name for this new society which Jesus created is 'church.' But the word which Jesus used in the Aramaic language, like the equivalent word which the New Testament writers used in the Greek language, does not mean a gathering for worship. It means a public gathering to deal with community business. The church is God's people gathered as a unit, as a people, gathered to find what it means here and now to put into practice this different quality of life."

C. Eschatology – thought about what the last things (eschaton) mean for us.

1. Yoder holds that the church is called to live by the values of the new age – the Kingdom of God. Not by the values of the present age – which is passing away.
2. By living according to the values of the new age, the church proclaims by its very way of being the intention of God for all of humanity. The church proclaims the kingdom.

- D. Yoder concludes, If the church as a minority community of committed disciples is faithful to the social ethic of Jesus, and if it truly proclaims the Kingdom of God in its being and in its actions, then the church can be "the most powerful tool of social change." I am in basic agreement with this judgment.

VI. First Conclusion – What should the church do?

- A. Putting together the Biblical Interpretation and the Christian Ethics segments, we may conclude that the church (as a minority community following Jesus and witnessing to the Kingdom of God) should practice the virtue of radically egalitarian hospitality, including welcoming the non-citizen immigrant.
- B. But solely on the basis of what the Bible says, and what Jesus taught and did, we are not entitled to conclude what the church should say to the whole society or to the government. That will take some more thinking.

VII. I'm going to pause to consider the distinction between Christian ethics for the Christian community and general ethics for the whole society

- A. We in the US are a pluralistic, religious people (Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, New Age, etc.), but we are a secular nation.
- B. We need a Christian ethic for ourselves (just as Muslims need a Muslim ethic, etc.) – and we need a general ethic for the whole society.
- C. In this context, it is not appropriate to ask the whole society (including the government) to operate according to a specifically Christian ethic, just as it is not appropriate to ask the whole society to operate according to a specifically Muslim ethic, or a specifically Hindu ethic, etc.
- D. But is it possible to develop a general ethic based on standards that are available to everyone – rather than on standards that are based in a particular religion?

VIII. General Ethics Part One – Human Rights Theory, Law and Application

(Acknowledge MCC colleague Yvonne Diaz – its important to shift the language fro “illegal immigrants to human rights.)

- A. Alan Gewirth was a moral philosopher at the University of Chicago who died in 1997. He argued that the necessary conditions for rationally purposive action are human rights. This is an example of a general ethic - that is an ethic for everyone. This is also an example of a rule-based ethic – that is, an ethic based on a rule of reason.
 - 1. Gewirth held that there are two necessary conditions for rationally purposive action.
 - a. First, a basic level of freedom is a human right.
 - b. Second, a basic level of well-being is a human right.
 - 2. I'm not claiming that Gewirth's proposal is perfect – it has weaknesses – but it shows that it's possible to develop a generally acceptable ethical theory – in this case an ethic of human rights – without appeal to any particular religion.
 - 3. It's also important to note that human rights apply equally to all people – citizens and non-citizens alike. So far as human rights are concerned, citizenship status makes no difference.
- B. Here's a copy of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
 - 1. It's a United Nations document with 30 articles. It has won wide acceptance by the nations and peoples of the world.
 - 2. Also, it has been signed and ratified by the US – so it's the law of the land.

C. Allison Parker of Human Rights Watch bases her thoughts primarily on this document.

1. She says that human rights law can correct the mistreatment of immigrants in the US.
2. For example, she holds that “draconian deportations” violate the human right to family unity. Article 16, part 3 of the Declaration of Human Rights says, “The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the state.
3. Also, Parker holds that immigrants have international labor rights the same as US citizens. These labor rights should be enforced. Article 23 of the Declaration of Human Rights includes the following, “Everyone has the right to just and favorable conditions of work. . . . Everyone who works has the right to just and favorable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity. . . . Everyone has the right to form and join trade unions for the protection of his interests.”

IX. General Ethics Part Two – Analysis of the facts (from the MCC Washington Office)

- A. Why do immigrants come to the US? A large part of the reason is that US trade policies have decreased economic opportunities in countries of origin.
- B. For example, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) promised Mexico increased economic opportunity in exchange for its willingness to remove trade protections.
- C. But since NAFTA took effect, wages for workers in Mexico have stagnated and, in some instances, declined.
- D. At the same time, subsidized grain in the US has led to surpluses of US corn which were then “dumped” on the Mexican market, undercutting the price of Mexican crops, and resulting in a bleak struggle for survival by poor Mexican farmers. Not surprisingly, many Mexican farmers looked north for jobs and survival.
- E. According to advocacy groups in Arizona, more than 4,000 people have died trying to cross into the United States since border policies were enacted in 1990.

X. Second conclusion - What should the church say?

- A. Putting together the segments on “General Ethics” above (on human rights and on analysis of the facts), the church should say the following to the US government. (MCC Washington Office public policy recommendations)
 1. Trade barriers should be removed in developed nations such as the US as is asked of developing nations. This might mean that the US should remove subsidies on crops, especially for the richest farmers.
 2. Trade and immigration policies should affirm human rights.
 3. Public policies should protect the most vulnerable.
- B. The church is not entitled to say – on the basis of general ethics – that the US government should welcome undocumented immigrants. This is going too far – beyond what can be justified solely by

appeal to generally available standards such as human rights theory and law, or by an analysis of the facts.

XI. A Real Example - Postville, Iowa immigration raid in Ma

- A. 389 undocumented workers captured and detained. This was the largest immigration raid in US history.
- B. MCC sent \$1,000 to Cedar Falls Mennonite Church to help cover housing and food costs for families who lost workers. MCC also sent 500 cans of turkey.
- C. Cedar Falls Mennonite Church provided money and volunteers
- D. Pastor Susan Janzen – “Our faith in Jesus Christ compels us to stand in solidarity with immigrants, to welcome the strangers among us.”

XII. What about Mennonite Church of the Servant?

- A. When there is an immigration raid in Wichita – will we practice the virtue of radically egalitarian hospitality and welcome the strangers among us?
- B. I think the most important thing is this – If we are faithful as a church in practicing the radically egalitarian hospitality that Jesus taught and modeled, then God will use our faithfulness to be a powerful tool of social change.
- C. Actions speak louder than words. But words – public policy recommendations – are important.