



FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF PHILADELPHIA

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THEOLOGICAL CAPITALISM

A sermon offered by Reverend Nathan C. Walker on February 28, 2010

Readings

Let us gather as *transdisciplinarians*, moving seamlessly among and between schools of thought to make meaning of our lives. One of our three readings today is derived from a sociological term that describes a dominant American ideology. Another reading is from a Hindu creation myth, but first a parable from Christian literature.

A young rich man asked Jesus what he needed to do in order to inherit eternal life. Jesus replied that he should keep the commandments, to which the man stated he had done. Jesus responded, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." The young man became sad and was unwilling to do this. Jesus then said, "I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."¹ This ends the reading from Christian literature.

"There were four classes, *varnas*, of ancient Indian society: the priests, Brahmins; nobles or warriors; the *all*, meaning, the general populace; and finally the servants. The following cosmogonic myth from the Rg Veda is a Hindu story that explains the origins of creation²... of not only the physical elements of the universe but also the social order." This social order is often referred to as the caste system: "When they divided the Man, into how many parts did they disperse him? What became of his mouth, what of his arms, what were his two thighs and his two feet called? His mouth was the Brahmin, his arms were made into the nobles, his two thighs were the populace, and from his feet the servants were born." This ends the reading from Hindu literature.

We now close with a reading from the literature of sociology. "Individualism is the belief that each member of society is personally responsible for his or her social lot. An open class system is the belief that people can rise without limit based on their own effort. This belief is rooted in the individual responsibility and the American Dream – success is mainly dependent on individual effort. An open class system provides equal chances for all to achieve material success or political power regardless of their social origin... Social success, then, is the result of one's willingness to work hard; failure is the result of lack of ambition or desire to improve oneself."³ Today we will examine this dominant ideology of individualism in the context of creation myths and parables as we ask ourselves, what is a modern religious response to classism?

Sermon

I had the pleasure of meeting a chef yesterday named Micha. He told me stories of serving food to prime ministers and truck drivers. Whether they paid \$70 for a bottle of wine, or \$7 for an entire dinner, they all deserved a decent meal. Micha told me he was dedicated to serve everyone fairly regardless of one's social lot. Why? Because he believes that everyone is worthy.

I intent do replace Micha's modern wisdom with the ancient parable that claims, "It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." Some use this passage to express a theology of generosity. I interpret it as story of shame: why should this man's net worth be used to demean his inherent worth?

Today's sermon examines how theology contributes to classism, aware that economic oppression is indistinguishable from other kinds of discrimination such as racism and sexism. As Patricia Hill Collins states, "oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type. Oppressions work together in producing injustice."⁴ How can we unravel these inequalities?

First, we must exchange the worldview of individualism with a theology of interdependence. And second, we must commit ourselves to educate the girls of the world about contraception and women's inalienable right to decide what happens to their own body. Together these two initiatives can contribute to building a just and sustainable world.

As bell hooks proclaims, "[We must acknowledge] the overwhelming significance of the interlocking systems of race, gender, and class... Women of all races and [people of color] of both genders are fast filling up the ranks of the poor and disenfranchised."⁵ In this context we ask, how does theology and political ideology contribute to this disenfranchisement?

Theological & Ideological Origins of Oppression

Religion can contribute to classism. For instance, Christian theology that deems material things to be bad – such as money and the body – teach people to be suspicious of the wealthy and teach women, in particular that their bodies are not their own. As for the belief that money is bad, theology that encourages people to give up their wealth in exchange of eternal salvation is a form of theological capitalism. If you give the church money, at most your soul will be saved, or at least your conscious will be free from the guilt that this kind of theology places upon you. For centuries, clergy have used the eye-of-the-needle parable to preach, "Give to the church and you'll receive eternal salvation." It is strange how religions that deem money to be bad offer to save your soul in exchange for money.

There are other religions that contribute to classism. Take for instance the Hindu creation myth of the Primeval Man, whose body parts "produce not only the physical elements of the universe but also the social order,"⁶ or the caste system. "His mouth was the Brahmin" (the educated clergy) and "and from his feet the servants were born." Theologies that teach that one's social order is predetermined give more power to the Brahmins who articulate such a theology. This, too, is a kind of theological capitalism: in exchange of the belief that *you are a nickel* and *will never be a dime*, you are told to be good in this life (i.e., remain complacent) so that karma will award you by becoming a Brahmin in a future life.

Secular ideology can also contribute to the interlocking oppressions of classism, racism and sexism. Take for instance the belief in individualism. Many in our country hold the misperceived worldview that an *open class system* allows the individual to transcend the economics of one's birth. The American Dream is achieved by working hard. If you fail to work hard then the meritocracy will punish you. This shames the poor for lacking some kind of ambition. It is more valuable to have the opportunity to work, or else one's social lot will be determined by an accumulative disadvantage.

Accumulative Advantage

In the book *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell says, "It is those who are successful... who are most likely to be given the kinds of special opportunities that lead to further success... It's the

best students who get the best teaching and most attention. Success results in what sociologists like to call *accumulative advantage*.”^{7,8} And where does such accumulation begin: with one’s early childhood opportunities for education – a critical point intimately tied to our church’s social justice theme of education and literacy. Take for instance a study about summer vacations.

Sociologist, Karl Alexander from the Johns Hopkins University tracked the progress of 650 students in the Baltimore public school system from 1st to 5th grade, from varied socioeconomic backgrounds. Alexander found “the students in first grade with meaningful, but not overwhelming, differences in their knowledge and ability.” Over time the students in the lower class were underperforming on the tests that were recorded a month after summer vacation. Summer vacations allowed wealthy children to have access to high quality educational programming, which enhanced their scores. By the fifth-year the wealthy children had been reading and writing 15 months more than their peers, which gave them a head start. Despite an understanding of this accumulative advantage, we continue to perpetuate the dominant American ideology of individualism.

It is just as classist to shame a disadvantaged child for not *working hard* enough than it is to say to the wealthy that they are unworthy of getting into heaven. I offer this sermon to say simply that *meritocracy* need not shame the disadvantaged; hypocritical *theology* need not shame the wealthy; and *patriarchy* need not shame women for valuing their own bodies.

Conclusion

Do you really want to end world poverty? Then give every little girl equal access to education. Teach her that her body is sacred and need not be used as sexual capital. Her value is based not on whether she produces children. Teach her about the urgency behind contraception, about safe and responsible intimacy. Teach her that there is no greater authority than herself – for no longer will religion, or men or the state shame women to procreate.

If we really want to unravel the interlocking oppressions of sexism and classism and racism, then we must give women throughout the world equal opportunity to education and employment. If you really want to keep generations of people from being born into diseased slums then help young girls mature into women of conscience.

In order to do this, men and women must, once and for all, exchange shaming theologies with empowering beliefs based not on individualism but on interdependence. My dear, your loss is my loss; your gain is my gain. For the dream is not built by trampling over the have-nots so that the haves can have more, more, more. No! “Give me your tired, give me your poor.”

Ladies of liberty, men of dignity, seek not to build a “botique religion”⁹ that pontificates about the luxuries of life. Come, and help build a down and dirty community grounded in life’s suffering. Come into the bowls of these interlocking oppressions. For as we strengthen the financial integrity of our church family we seek not to make theological promises of the afterlife but to commit to equity in this life. By using a democratic process to prioritize paying our employees fairly and offering health benefits we ensure that the injustices out in world are healed within our walls.

So, whether you are rich with compassion or depleted by sorrow, come, and live the wisdom of Micha’s modern parable, aware that whether you are a prime minister or a truck driver, everyone, everyone is worthy.

Notes

¹ See Matthew 19:23-24, Mark 10:24-25 and Luke 18:24-25.

² The Origins creation was a “result of a primeval sacrifice –It is worthy of note that creation produces not only the physical elements of the universe but also the social order, the basis of life in the Hindu view, as well as the seasons and the parts of the very sacrifice from which creation proceeds.” p 27. “Dismemberment: The Primeval Man is Sacrificed” in *Hindu Myths* translated with an introduction by Wendy O’Flaherty, p. 27

³ Martin Marger, *The Dominant American Ideology*, p. 209-216.

⁴ Collins, Patricia Hill (1990) *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990)

⁵ bell hooks, (2000) *Where We Stand: Class Matters* Routledge: New York, NY, 2000

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⁷ Gladwell, Malcolm (2008) *Outliers*, p. 30

⁸ Sociologist Robert Merton coined the term: the “Matthew Effect” after the New Testament verse in the Gospel of Matthew: “For unto everyone one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance. But from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.”

⁹ See Muder, Doug (2007) *Not my father’s religion: If my working-class father started attending a UU church, I’m not sure who he’d talk to*. UU World, Fall 2007, 8.18.07, accessed on February 25, 2010 at <http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/36467.shtml>