

HEAVEN SCENT¹
John 12: 1-8
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
March 21, 2010

In this extraordinarily polarized time in our nation's history, we now have a television commentator, before millions of viewers, calling on Christians to leave their churches if they find the term "social justice" used. He said that the term "social justice," when used in Christian churches, is just a code word for communism and Nazism. Furthermore, he said that if your church cares about social justice, you should report your church to the authorities.

I

Now I have to admit that I am a little confused. When he says that Christianity has nothing to do with social justice, is he talking about the Christianity that reveres as sacred scripture the words of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, and Micah? Is that the Christianity he is talking about? Is he talking about the Christianity that holds in reverence the words,

*...what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?²*

Is that the Christianity he is talking about?

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² Micah 6: 8.

When he says that Christianity has nothing to do with social justice, is he talking about the faith that holds as scripture the words,

*Let justice roll down like waters,
And righteousness like an everflowing stream.*³

Is that the Christianity he is talking about?

I'm confused. Is he talking about the Christianity that has Jesus proclaiming as the mission statement for his life: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*⁴ Is that the Christianity he is referring to?

When this commentator claims that social justice is not a central part of the Christian faith, is he talking about the faith in which Jesus told a parable about the final judgment in which God separates the nations using the criterion of social justice for the most vulnerable in their societies, and God says, *Come...inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you*

³ Amos 5: 15, 24.

⁴ Luke 4: 18-19.

visited me.... Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to the least of these...you did it unto me? Is that the Christianity he is talking about?

When he dismisses social justice, is he talking about the same religion whose sacred scriptures say clearly that *Religion that is pure and undefiled before God...is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world*?⁵ Is that the Christianity he is talking about?

And when this commentator advises Christians whose churches use the term “social justice” to report that church to the authorities, is he including Baptist churches? Because the highest authority for a Baptist church is the local church, and that means that you would need to report this church to itself, for this church has stood for social justice for nearly 200 years.

Or perhaps he is talking about a more hierarchical church government, like the Roman Catholic Church. Is he talking about faithful Roman Catholics reporting their church to the Bishops? But the Bishops of the Catholic Church have repeatedly asserted that social justice is at the heart of the gospel.⁶

Maybe he is talking about evangelical churches! But there’s a problem: the National Association of Evangelicals has explicitly endorsed social justice

⁵ James 1: 27.

⁶ “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship, a Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States,” published in 2007. This document may be found online at <http://www.usccb.org/faithfulcitizenship/FCStatement.pdf>.

as a biblical imperative!⁷ Maybe he is talking about his own church where he is a member, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—the Mormons. But wait...the Mormon Church has repeatedly declared that social justice is central to their teachings! One Mormon leader, in fact, describes the Book of Mormon as “a vast tract on social justice!”⁸

So I am confused. I don't recognize the Christianity he seems to be advocating. Maybe he is talking about another religion that goes under the name of Christianity. If so, he is talking about a Christianity that only selectively quotes the Bible; a Christianity that has no relation to the message of Jesus; a Christianity that does not know of St. Francis of Assisi or John Wesley or Adoniram and Ann Judson or William Wilberforce or Albert Schweitzer or Harriet Beecher Stowe or Sojourner Truth or Walter Rauschenbusch or Helen Barrett Montgomery or Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Rosa Parks or Harry Emerson Fosdick or Martin Luther King, Jr., or Gordon and Margaret Torgersen or Harriet Miller Hight or Ralph Elliott or Gardner Taylor, and many people in this congregation today, to name just a few.

He must be talking about some other religion because the religion I know from the witness of the Bible, the witness of history, the witness of this

⁷ See the National Association of Evangelicals website and article at <http://www.nae.net/government-affairs/policy-resolutions/102-charitable-choice-2000>.

⁸ See Laurie Goodstein, “Christians Urged to Boycott Glenn Beck,” *The New York Times*, March 11, 2010.

church for nearly 200 years, the witness of the Spirit that I feel deep in my heart, affirms the conviction that no one enters what Jesus called the “Kingdom of God” without a recommendation from the “least of these.” That is social justice.

II

Maybe that commentator read our text for today in which Jesus says, *The poor are always with us....* If so, he must have assumed that what follows is something like this: *...therefore, let the poor fend for themselves with no help from Christian churches. Let the poor suffer while real Christians pray for them but refuse to get involved in issues of social justice.*

The story read today is about an aroma of perfume poured over the feet of Jesus by Mary, whose devotion to him was evident. I think that the writer of this gospel included this story because he wanted to say that some religion smells good, like Mary’s perfume. And some religion fails to pass the sniff test.

The religion that fails to pass the sniff test is represented in the story by Judas, who complained that Mary’s love of Jesus cost too much to waste on such an act of devotion. It was too extravagant, said Judas, and the Gospel of Matthew, in telling the same story, says that all the disciples agreed with

Judas!⁹ It was in that context that Jesus says, *You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.*

You always have the poor with you.... Does that sound strange coming from the very one who said, *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor?* If we assume that he is dismissing social justice as unimportant to the faith, then it would be strange indeed! In fact, it would be utterly contradictory to everything else he said and did!

The key to understanding is this: when Jesus said, *You always have the poor with you*, he was quoting the first part of a well-known proverb. The second half of that proverb was so well known to everyone there that he did not even need to finish it. It was a familiar part of their Torah studies and can be found in the book of Deuteronomy. Here is the way it is completed: *You always have the poor with you; therefore, open your hand to the poor and needy.*¹⁰

So in this wonderful little story about Mary's devotion, Jesus wraps his protective kindness around Mary's act of devotion and therefore commends it to us for all time. At the same time, he says that the poor ARE always with us; therefore, we are always called upon to work for social justice.

⁹ Matthew 26: 8.

¹⁰ See Deuteronomy 15: 11.

That kind of religion...the kind that works for social justice and at the same time is not shy about extravagant acts of devotion, has the scent of heaven, something like Mary's perfume.

III

What do people find when they enter this place on the corner of Park and Salisbury in Worcester, MA? What did they find over 75 years ago when they entered the church on Ionic Avenue in Worcester? What did they find when they entered the church located at Salem Square from 1813 until 1836? Surely it was deep devotion to Christ. But never has this church defined its devotion solely by warm feelings and cum-ba-yah moments. Devotion has always been both a matter of the feeling and action. We can look back with pride that our spiritual forebears have always included social justice at the very heart of their faith.

And now? What will our descendents say about us in fifty years...a hundred years hence? In the year 2110 this church will be preparing for its 300th anniversary, and one of the things they will do is to look at what was happening here way back in the year 2010 as it was preparing for its 200th anniversary celebrations.

I predict that they will see a ringing affirmation of Mary's devotion lived out in a solid commitment to acts of social justice.