

November 18, 2024

First Universalist Society of Central Square

Commitment

I want to tell you a story. It's based on the Gospels, the first four books of the New Testament, but it's a story that I've never told, it's one I've never heard, and it's a story I never even read about. But - if you read closely and spend a bit of time learning a bit of background information - the story is clearly there. It's just hiding in plain sight.

The main characters in this telling are the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Twelve Disciples, and, of course, Jesus. The location is Judea, the southern part of what had been the nation of Israel. In 333 BCE, it had been over-run by Alexander the Great who, instead of obliterating the cities and enslaving the people, had instead introduced the Greek language and culture. About 2 hundred years later, the Romans took the area by force and installed a governor whose main job was to exact taxes and keep the rabble under control.

In order to keep the peace, the Jewish people were allowed to govern themselves - to a point. Their government was the melding of church-state entities - or a Temple-autocrat collusion. The religious leaders were the Pharisees who were extremely legalistic and forced their interpretations of Scriptural law on the populace. The Sadducees were the wealthy land-owners, who were pretty much above the law and didn't much care how the Pharisees did their work.

Times were bleak for an ordinary Jew in those days. No land of their own, no say-so on how things would be run, under the iron thumb of the Pharisees, and in fear that they might say or do something - anything - that might be seen by a Pharisee as being too far out of the bounds of their laws - and the Pharisees were the only ones who knew the every aspect of their religiously zealous legal system. Cross that line, and they would be banned from the synagogues - local houses of worship - and deemed persona non grata. Socially and ceremonially unacceptable.

It was in this social setting that Jesus is said to emerge. He spoke of hope and acceptance - of an end to exclusionary policies, of damning edicts against private citizens, of the denigration of women and foreigners. That kind of talk was irritating to those who were calling the shots, whose decisions could alienate a rule-breaker. By the way, a person who was so marked would

find it difficult to participate in the barter system that most people relied upon for the survival of their family.

But what really made Jesus a marked man was that he knew the Scriptures as well as, if not better than, most of the religious hierarchy of the day. That meant he was able to use those Scriptures to defend himself against the personal attacks they wielded against him. The Pharisees launched their confrontations with him in public, in an attempt to belittle and debase him in hopes that his influence on the general public would diminish and come to an end.

What happened, though, was the opposite. Jesus took on those challenges thoughtfully and calmly turned the tables on the Pharisees, gaining the upper hand. Although he appeared to be winning struggle, he had set the stage for his own execution.

Even as his popularity was gaining traction - to the point that many of his supporters wanted to see him and his policies of fairness, inclusiveness, and broad acceptance be elevated - the leaders of the entrenched policies of power and control took him to court on trumped up charges.

The message that sent to the populace was clear and the fear it projected was intentional. And it had the desired effect. The support for Jesus evaporated almost overnight. Within a week, even his closest friends were cautious about what they said and who they said it to. They were living in the shadows, trying to keep hidden from view, and keeping their identity secret.

After the political execution of Jesus, those who had been his closest friends, with the most prominent voices - what did they do? They fled, scattered beyond the borders of Judea. The movement was effectively quashed.

It took decades for the seeds of that vision of Jesus to sprout - but even then, the resistance from entrenched power was far too great to be overcome. That vision of Jesus had been constrained to the point that the only safe place it found was within existing religious groups. But even there, it had to be forced to fit within what was acceptable.

As any gardener will tell you, when there are weeds among your plantings, you'll never get rid of them. Treated like a weed, the Way of Jesus - which is what his teachings were referred to early on - The Way was accepted but only when forced to take shape like ornamental shrubbery.

It took a few centuries, but that real vision leaked out and became an inspiration to the riff-raff within the Roman Empire. Recognized as a threat that could not be eradicated, Rome adopted it as an official religion - and created a rigid structure that would oppress those within by use of the punishing might of dominant power. So it has been throughout the centuries.

Jesus never said for people to worship him. His vision was never about forming yet another religion that would adapt his name. He himself struggled against the confines of religiosity in order to find comfort from living out his life principles and sharing them among friends and neighbors without structure or confines. AND - without ties to political powers.

Yet here we are. We see the same stranglehold on The Way of Jesus that was so successful for the Roman Empire on full display, from sea to shining sea. As the Roman Empire showed us, one of the many perils of life under authoritarian rule is that the leader seeks to drain people of their strength. A defeatism takes hold. There is an urge to pull back.

It may sound bizarre for me to say this after all that - but as I understand and try to internalize our Seven Principles [listed below], I see the freedom to live out the vision that Jesus had for humanity. It is not a structure that binds and constrains but a guide for living life in a way that benefits all who live and breathe.

We are about to enter what Church tradition calls Advent - a time of arrival. In a more spiritual sense, it's a time of birth - of newness. When it may seem as if all we have held dear has been set afire, remember that ashes supply life-giving nutrients for new growth. And what we have to offer the world with these principles is that newness - a vision of a world beyond the one in which we currently exist.

So let it be, as we go our way, that these principles will be like a shining light that overcomes the shadows of darkness - by standing up convincingly for what we know is right.

These are The Seven Principles:

1. [1st Principle](#): The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
2. [2nd Principle](#): Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
3. [3rd Principle](#): Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
4. [4th Principle](#): A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
5. [5th Principle](#): The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
6. [6th Principle](#): The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
7. [7th Principle](#): Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Some things never change. Evil always raises its ugly head. What matters is what comes next - how people respond.