

Proper 29 (Christ the King/The Reign of Christ) Year A 2023

Gospel: Matthew 25: 31-46

### **The Social Gospel: A Reawakening**

We have all heard and read about the demise of and the diminished role of the church in our country and the world today. Church attendance is down. Poles show that fewer and fewer people identify themselves as Christian or as being affiliated with any organized religion. We remember or at least imagine that idyllic picture of the American family with children, all dressed up in their “Sunday best,” attending Sunday worship and Sunday school every Sunday morning. That time, as much as it really existed, with few exceptions has passed. The question I have this morning is this: Is the church still relevant? And the related question: Does the Gospel still have meaning in our culture today? My message this morning is a message of hope, because my answer to that question is: “Yes!” The Gospel is still relevant, as much or more so now than ever.

I recently read an article on the CNN website by John Blake. In it he writes about Shawn Fain, the president of the United Auto Workers union. Fain led the recent unprecedented strike against the Big Three automakers. He warned the auto workers that they would probably have to strike, citing the resistance of automaker CEOs whose companies he said made “a quarter of a trillion dollars in profits while they nickel and dime our members every day.” But then he did something extraordinary. He started talking about his Christian faith. He cited scripture, using his grandmother’s Bible, including Matthew 17 where Jesus tells his disciples that if they have faith the size of a mustard seed they can move mountains. He said that for his UAW union members, organizing and making bold demands of automakers was “an act of faith in each other.” Now picture this: the president of a huge union addressing the auto workers, Bible in hand, talking about the faith of St. Paul, of Moses at the Red Sea, and of Peter facing imprisonment, saying this: “Great acts of faith are seldom born out of calm

calculation. They are born in a fearful, desperate band of believers that were backed into the corner.”

The faith of these auto workers in one another did move a mountain, a corporate mountain, three in fact. The UAW reached a historic agreement with General Motors, Ford Motor Company, and Chrysler-owned Stellantis that gives workers their biggest raise in decades. The contract which was ratified just last week is for 4 1/2 years, and gives workers an 11% raise in wages now and 25% over the course of the agreement, along with other benefits. This historic victory also marks the revival of another movement in America: the Social Gospel, that being the application—the calling upon the Gospel—to effect change in our social structures.

Fain’s work with the UAW union is an example of a Christian movement happening now that is quite different from the white evangelical nationalistic movement we hear so much about. This movement has nothing to do with race or nationalism. It has everything to do with the message of Jesus in the gospel today, that is having compassion and caring for one another, for following his commandment to love one another, or as he puts it today: “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 visited me.” It’s a pretty simple message, and it is the foundation of this movement emerging again today.

Fain’s blending of scripture with a strike is straight out of the 19th century Social Gospel playbook. It exemplifies the reawakening of the Social Gospel movement promoted by Walter Rauschenbusch and others almost 150 years ago. It was then and has continued to be a movement that aims to apply Christian ethics to social problems like economic inequality, poverty, racism, [crime, slums, child labor], unclean environment, [education, and lack of unionization.] It was important and powerful when it first took hold back in the

days of Rauschenbusch, who viewed sin not so much as the behavior of individual people, but as institutionalized evil that permeates our social structures. It arose then as a response to the obscene levels of inequality in a rapidly industrializing country. Its adherents took on the exploitation of workers and unethical business practices of robber barons like oil magnate John D. Rockefeller. It turned religion into a weapon for economic and political reform. Its leaders campaigned for eight-hour workdays, the breaking up of corporate monopolies, and the abolition of child labor. They spoke from pulpits, lectured across the country, and wrote best-selling books. We see it in our hymnal in the section of Christian Responsibility, hymn # 609, written by Frank Mason North, who was another leader in the movement. Here are some of the words in his hymn:

“Where cross the crowded ways of life, where sound the cries of race and clan, above the noise of selfish strife, we hear thy voice, O Son of Man. In haunts of wretchedness and need, on shadowed thresholds dark with fears, from paths where hide the lures of greed, we catch the vision of thy tears. O Master, from the mountain side, make haste to heal these hearts of pain; among these restless throngs abide, O tread the city’s streets again.”

Its message was this: saving people from slums was just as important as saving them from hell. This stream or branch of Christianity has continued through the years, and we have seen it in liberation theology and in people like Martin Luther King, Jr., among others.

And as we see with Shawn Fain the Social Gospel movement is making a comeback. It is re-awakening again today. Other leaders of this movement include Senator Raphael Warnock of Georgia, the Revs. William Barber and Liz Theoharis of the Poor People’s Campaign started by Martin Luther King, and the Pulitzer Prize-winning author Matthew Desmond. These people are using the Bible, as did the original Social Gospel leaders a century and a half ago, to argue that Christian deeds are more important than creeds, and that “unfettered

capitalism thrives on selfish impulses that Christian teaching condemns.” Its proponents have helped to reshape the way many Americans think. John Blake writes that more Americans now believe that big company monopolies are a growing threat to prosperity, and to the health of our environment; more support raising the federal minimum wage; more believe that government should help those least able to help themselves, as in government spending for individuals and small businesses suffering from the Covid pandemic. Author Christopher Evans says of Fain’s work: “It sounds like there’s very much an emphasis that Jesus is for the worker; Jesus stands in solidarity with the laborers.” Other leaders carrying this Social Gospel torch have helped shape debates around everything from health care and minimum wage to attitudes toward the poor. Senator Warnock, for example, arguing for expanding Medicaid to recalcitrant states, cites the gospel we read today, Matthew 25, and says people will be judged by what they do for “the least of these.” Rev. Barber ties issues like climate change, immigration, and voter suppression to his Christian faith. He has said: “The same politicians denying living wages are also suppressing the vote; the same people who want less of us to vote are also denying the evidence of the climate crisis and refusing to act now; the same people who are willing to destroy the Earth are willing to deny tens of millions of Americans access to health care.” And Matthew Desmond in his book Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City argues that poverty is not the result of an individual’s moral failures but the result of a system in which “keeping some citizens poor serves the interests of many.” His books are filled with scriptural references that could be taken right out of a Social Gospel sermon from the late 19th century. As in Isaiah 6, “I, the Lord, hate robbery. I hate injustice. I love justice.”

These leaders affirm that the Gospel remains relevant, and that our faith in the hope and love of the Christ Jesus is justified. Listen again to the words of Jesus from today: “What you do for and to the least of these—the sick, hungry, homeless, oppressed, imprisoned—you do to me.” John Buchanan says that

within these words is a statement about God. The God of Jesus and of the Bible is not a remote supreme being on a throne up there above the clouds or out there somewhere in the mysterious reaches of the universe. God is here, in the messiness of human life. This is what Jim meant in his sermon two weeks ago about process theology. God is here, particularly in your neighbor, the one who needs you. You want to see the face of God? Look into the face of one of the least of these, the vulnerable, the weak, the children. Notice also that Jesus says nothing about religious practices. There is not a word about theology, creeds or orthodoxies. There is only one criterion here, and that is whether or not you see the Christ in the face of the needy and how you care for him or her. In this passage, which is the only New Testament description of the final judgment, Jesus says we are saved by caring for those who need us, by forgetting about ourselves and thinking about others, and by accepting his fundamental lesson—the secret, the truth—that to love is to live. That is eternal life, here and now.

I believe that you the people of All Saints' exemplify this Social Gospel, that you are the light within the reawakening of this movement, that you are living out the Gospel, that you are affirming its relevance. Look at the work you do for those in need: food share for our neighbors including those without homes, the Backpack ministry and books and education for the children, caring for the immigrants on the border and those who have made it here, environmental justice and care for our home Earth, Wade in the Water and voting rights, among others. The Gospel is alive and well at All Saints'. I am honored to be part of such a community.