

Was Jesus a Socialist?  
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church  
July 26, 2009  
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture:

First Reading: Matthew 13:24-30

Second Reading: Matthew 13:36-43

Well, how many times have you heard it this week ... that our president is a socialist, I mean?

The hubbub, as I'm sure you know, is that President Obama is following through on his campaign pledge to try to fix our healthcare problem in America, four decades in the making.

The plan he is working on with Congress would significantly expand the role of government in addressing the multi-headed problem of rising costs to consumers, inaccessibility of health care to tens of millions of people and acceleration of the national deficit.

Opponents have attacked a proposal that create a government-run competitor to private sector care providers and tax the very richest in our country to pay for it. So, any self-respecting opponent of the plan was on message this week, using the right talking points, whether it was on TV or radio, the internet, around the office or over the back yard fence, likening President Obama, a law professor specializing in the United States Constitution, to Karl Marx, perhaps the best known proponent of socialism and its big brother, communism.

In case you think you have tuned in to one of the Sunday morning political talk shows instead of church, you haven't. Because, as we continue to dip into our Summer Sermon Grab Bag, the question from one member this week is both timely and thought provoking:

Was Jesus a socialist?

Some may immediately react to such a question – as well as the preacher who would take it up – as heretical, especially in America. Two of the pillars of our society, after all, are democracy and capitalism and anyone who disparages either is itchin' for a fight. Perhaps. But we would all say just as quickly that another pillar of our society is faith –

belief in a higher order, a supreme being, and, while our country grows more religiously diverse every day, most of us in America are still Christian.

So, it stands to reason, that we should think deeply and even critically, on this one Sunday in July, or over the course of our faith journey, about how our faith intersects with things as influential on society as our form of government and our economic system.

\* \* \*

Before going any further, we should review our civics lessons.

Socialism refers to any one of various theories of how societies organize economically. In general, socialist societies centrally own and administer how their economies produce goods and services and how they distribute resources. In theory, socialist societies distribute wealth and power evenly based on the amount of work one does, using the government as the mechanism for that distribution. In very plain English, the state controls how things get made and who gets what.

Capitalism, on the other hand, is a way of using goods and services to make profit. Buyers and sellers determine price and value in a free-market. The means of production, such as factories or big companies, are privately held, not held by the government. There are no limits on how much a person can make and how much wealth they can build. So, if you are Bill Gates and you build a company called Microsoft, you can have a net worth of \$40 billion.

Capitalistic practices have been around since ancient times but became the norm in some nations after the middle ages, beginning in the 1500s, while modern forms of socialism took root in the 1800s through leaders such as Germany's Karl Marx, who ultimately advocated for Communism.

Communist countries practicing the most extreme form of socialism today include China, Cuba, North Korea and North Vietnam as well as the Russian and Eastern European states. More moderate forms of socialism are practiced in Western Europe, including Sweden Finland and Brittan.

We Americans, of course, have only an arm's-length view of socialism while capitalism shapes our lives. If we own stocks or bonds or have them in our 401-K or college savings plans, we are betting on capitalism. If we own a home, we count on getting a fair price for it in the free market when we're ready to sell. When we shop, we count on

retailers to compete so we can get the very best deal, whether it's a car or a can of soup that we need.

Our national and local history is full of Christian capitalists who were as serious about their Christianity as they were about their capitalism and who have done great good through faith with their wealth.

Locally, we can look to people like C.D. and Meredith Spangler or Hugh and Jane McColl, who do great good that never makes the papers. But we don't have to look beyond the walls of our own church, which was sustained in large part in decades past by the Belk family, one of our region's department store dynasties.

\* \* \*

Why, then, the question of whether Christ was a socialist? What could be the basis for such a controversial notion? And, where do we turn for an answer?

As I have said before, we should always pick up with Bible as if there is a warning label on it that reads, "Handle with care." Scripture has been used to justify both good and evil, such as slavery, for eons.

But throughout the gospels there is consistent reporting of what Christ said and did that deserve a look on this subject..

Consider the Beautitudes and even the Lord's Prayer in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus didn't pray, "Lord, let us compete for our daily bread in a free-market system." He said "Give us our daily bread."

A few verses later, Jesus says: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven ...."

When Jesus fed the five thousand, there is no record of money being exchanged for the fish and the loaves. What about the parable of the laborers, where the landowner pays the same wage to the one who worked only a few hours as those who put in an entire day in the field? That hardly seems like capitalism or fair labor practices.

Then, of course, there is the parable of the rich young ruler. Remember him? He had kept all of the commandments but was still told by Christ that he would have a hard time getting into the kingdom of God because he had become entrapped by his wealth.

Each bears an important meaning that we should consider only in context. But, some might say, they do indicate a pattern in Christ's thinking – a concern for the masses and common people and strong sense of fairness and equity, all absent any notion of supply and demand or open competition.

Not so fast, others say. Christ – and the Bible in general – hold up certain principles and values that lie at the very heart of capitalism. Consider these arguments from a professor of business management at a Christian university.<sup>1</sup>

1. Christ's admonition that we should love our neighbors as ourselves highlights the importance of justice and fair exchange, just as with the fair exchange of goods and services. Capitalism and free markets depend on the same kind of economic justice.
2. When Jesus commanded us to love our neighbor as ourselves, he advocated self-interest and people motivated by self-interest know that it should include taking an interest in others.
3. Because God gave us spiritual freedom, there should be freedom in how our economies work.
4. Market competition is really just another form of the Christian principle of good stewardship.
5. And, finally, the capitalist notion that the way to make money is by taking care of customers is just another expression of the Christian concept of servant-hood. And by taking care of customers and shareholders and employees in all the right ways, we capitalists provide for the welfare of others.

A full review of scripture also shows that Christ associated with people of means, even some with great wealth, who served others with it. We remember the woman who anointed Christ's feet with ointment worth a year's wages, Joseph of Arimathea, the rich disciple who buried Jesus' body, and Zacheus, a rich tax collector who pledged half his worth to the poor and to whom Jesus brought salvation.

---

<sup>1</sup> Christianity & Capitalism: Correlation or Causality? A paper by Dr. Dave Arnott and Dr. Bobbie Martindale. Dallas Baptist University

These stories remind us that wealth itself, like our world's natural resources, is morally neutral. The issue is how it is used.

\* \* \*

So, now, with those two snapshots of the differing perspectives out there, mark your ballots.

Was Jesus a socialist?

Yes?

No?

Or NA, not applicable?

I would argue NA.

I would argue that Jesus was too radical for either system, too focused beyond the ways of men and women in economics or government. So, no system measures up to the standards Christ set for us and the perfect grace, love and care we experience in Christ from God.

In our scripture lessons, we heard Jesus tell the parable of the weeds among the wheat and then explain the meaning of the parable to his disciples. The picture is of a field, with beautiful wheat sown in rows but intermingled with weeds whose roots are evil and sin.

At the end of the age, Jesus says, "The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evil doers and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of God. Let anyone with ears listen."

Human constructs, whether democratic or despotic, capitalistic or socialistic or something else, are just that – human constructs, therefore broken by our sinful ways and as likely to produce wheat as weeds. They can be used for good and for evil by men and women, whether they are organized as the state or as a private equity fund.

One might say that socialism protects and serves most of its citizens equally and evens out the distribution of resources so that none suffers more or less than the next person.

But it also wrongly concentrates power in the hands of the state, whose primary motivation is to retain that power. It squashes the potential of the human spirit to soar and achieve and eliminates the capacity of one person or a group of people to create wealth and resources that can serve others.

One might say that capitalism puts people in charge of their own lives just as God gave us free will. Capitalism draws out those best qualities of humanity – creativity, industry, innovation for the greater good. But it is equally true that, in and of itself, capitalism is never satisfied and often concentrates wealth and power in the hands of the few. It also must be said that capitalism draws out some of the ugliest of human sins, including over-consumption, greed, excess and idolatry.

To put it in very current terms, those who label the president's healthcare plan as socialist are worked up, in part, because of the cost of the program. The highest estimate for the most expensive plan proposed is \$1.6 trillion over ten years.<sup>2</sup> In comparison, the tab for the government bailout of the financial industry is \$4.7 trillion to date, three times the cost of the healthcare plan and the equivalent of one-third of the entire U.S. economy. The worst-case scenario for a total end cost of the bailout is \$24 trillion, or \$80,000 per American.<sup>3</sup> So, as much as we might fear socialism, we are reminded that capitalism sometimes has its own sting, especially here in Charlotte, as our unemployment rate hovers notably above the nation's, in part due to our dependence on the financial services industry.

In the end, though, all of this is of the world and not of God. Neither socialism nor capitalism fulfills the deepest human desire, the deepest human yearning, as expressed by Saint Augustine, whose famous prayer to God is: My heart is restless until it rests in thee.

And in the end the church, the body of Christ, stands apart, in its call and purpose, thus giving each of us a unique call and purpose for our lives that transcends everything of this world. As we confess today, using the Confession of 1967 as our affirmation of faith, the church is not to be made captive of any one nation, government or economy.

Instead, the church is uniquely called to embody the coming Kingdom of God, which was Christ's one and only focus in all that he said or did.

As one author said about the church:

---

<sup>2</sup> Obama Plan, according to the Associated Press, Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee

<sup>3</sup> Associated Press, Charlotte Observer, 7/21/09, based on report by Neil Barofsky, inspector general, TARP.

“This is the true society, this is the true economy, and the world needs us to be the church, living out our better selves as given by God and practiced in Christian community and setting the groundwork for the Kingdom that is upon us and (is) to come in full some day.”<sup>4</sup>

So, let us give thanks for the gift of the church, and hold it gently in our hands as citizens of the one God, that we might serve others through it in God’s name, above all others. Amen.

---

<sup>4</sup> Todd Cioffi, PhD, Whitworth University (Presbyterian, Spokane, Washington), writing in response to an article by Dr. Mark Douglas of Columbia Theological Seminary, Atlanta, “Capitalism, the Crash and Christianity.”