

Commentary on the Gospel for Tue, Jan 21st 2014

The gospel lesson for today reminds me of one of my “experiments with truth” that I conducted in the early 1990s when I was engaged in my Ph.D. dissertation research. I wanted to understand if religious beliefs and practices contributed to the sustainability of agricultural communities in Northeast Iowa. A lot of family farmers went broke or quit during the 1980's and 1990's but I was aware that those farmers organized around rural church communities had greater staying power. I hypothesized that religious beliefs and practices associated with judgments about priorities might help me understand how that worked.

I looked at three very different German-American communities living in the same area: Evangelical Lutheran, Old Order Amish, and Mennonite Brethren. Each community had about 30 farm families. I interviewed all of the adult members of each community and asked them all the same questions. One of the bible stories I examined was the story in Mark. I gave the respondents two choices regarding the story of David and his men raiding the temple and eating the sacred loaves. One was that “David wanted to show the priests that he was God’s chosen leader” and the other was that “rules are made for man, not man for rules.” I was looking to see what it was about the religious community that allowed members to think outside of mainstream traditions, especially in terms of farm production decisions.

The Brethren thought rules were made for man, not man for rules. Surprisingly, the Amish also thought this. The Lutherans really surprised me. Most said that “David wanted to show the priests that he was God’s chosen leader.” What I found in my study was that the most mainstream religious group, the Lutherans, were the least likely to question the authority of mainstream leadership and ideas. The Brethren and the Amish were the most capable of doing this. I happen to be a Lutheran, so this was a big challenge to me. We like to pass ourselves off as independent thinkers. But we aren’t when it comes to the larger society and its influence on us. We usually go with the flow. The lessons today bring this issue back to me. Jesus tells us that our religious traditions are not what save us, not even our observation of the Sabbath.

The Amish purposely marginalize themselves from the mainstream, yet they continually remind me that it is not their way of life, especially their observation of the Sabbath, that is their salvation. Their salvation is in Jesus Christ, who is the lord over the Sabbath. They strictly observe the Sabbath not because it is commanded of them, but so that they can stay closer to God. And despite their strict observance to the “Ordnung” or rules of community life, they are quick to change them if they appear to be maladaptive or separate them from each other or from God. Not surprisingly, the Amish are the most sustainable of all the farming communities in America. They are most capable of challenging the status quo.

My reflection of my own research and that of other anthropologists reveals an interesting insight. Those societies that remain capable of evaluating the long term effects of status quo rules and traditional wisdom are the most sustainable. Jesus was a perfect role model for placing rules and traditions in the perspective of God's long term plan for our salvation. With all the conversations about sustainability these days, we need to look at what Jesus says about that topic. That exercise requires us to step outside of mainstream thinking. The Society of Jesus has done some careful thinking about sustainability. We can read "Healing a Broken World" at this link [It is my prayer that we will all take the time to read it and share it with others....It is a Christ centered Sabbath experience.](#)

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