

CHRIST AND CLASS¹

This financial crisis has created enough upheaval that it has most of us re-thinking how we are living and how we have lived. And whenever life changes or when we get a wakeup call or suffer, it strikes me that our faith speaks deeply and wisely and calls us freshly to vital living and new purpose. And that's true these days. One of the factors that is at stake in all the upheaval in the economy is where this will leave our sense of where we stand in life. Is affluence over? Will we be winners or losers in the shakeup? Will our jobs and lifestyles change? Because the issue of status is in the air, I'd like to talk about social class for a bit this morning.

It doesn't often happen that something in the news perfectly parallels a lesson in the Bible. But that perfect example happened at one of President Obama's Inauguration Parties. According to the New York Post, singer, Mariah Carey was furious that she wasn't accorded a more prestigious seat for a meal. Mariah was in the VIP area, where every celebrity, like Jon Bon Jovi and Bruce Springsteen, was seated. Somehow she thought she'd be up with the Obama family. When she realized she wasn't, she left the event.

We laugh at spoiled celebrities, but we're looking at a timeless and universal human reality—where we are located in the great ranking

¹This sermon was written by the Reverend Douglas DeCelle on February 1, 2009 and preached at First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, GA.

Christ and Class, page 2

system of life. Put 10 adults in a room and in an hour everyone will have an idea of who is important and who is down low. Ten adolescents can do it in half an hour.

Both our own country and the former Soviet Union were grand efforts to eliminate social class from national life. For our part, we have managed to eliminate the rigid class distinctions of inherited aristocracy. We don't have royalty. Neither do we have a caste system as they do in places like India, which designates some groups as untouchables and freezes them in abject poverty for generations. What we do have is a subtle status ranking system that is not official. It's not overtly supported by law. But it's very real. We all know who the supposedly important people are. We know who is down and out. We all know who is suffering because of the ranking system. Mariah Carey suffered from it. And she's a widely known celebrity, whose tantrum doesn't get any sympathy from ordinary people. But, you know, her pain was nevertheless very real. She knows, to evoke the name of a famous book on social ranking, the hidden injuries of class.

And that raises another issue. Talking about social class is controversial. I'm quite nervous about this sermon. To talk about class is to start messing with the status of your family name and reputation, the amount of money you have or earn, what you own and what you do for recreation, where your house is and how big it is, your job status, how you talk and people's sense of your intelligence and

Christ and Class, page 3

education. Can you feel the energy level in the room rising? I'm trying very hard to talk about class without any comment contributing either to the pain involved with class distinctions or the importance of our prestige holds for us.

Have you noticed in life that no matter where you go or what you do, there are always people who are going to feel inferior to you. And there are always people who seem to be looking down at you?

Back when I was barely 30 and looking for a new call that would take me away from my first situation—a yoked parish with two small churches. One Pastor Nominating Committee member visited, interviewed me, and upon standing to leave, one of the members remarked: "I think it's a wonderful thing you're doing here trying to minister to these people by the side of the road. But I don't think you'd be happy in a Presbyterian Church where we have so many community leaders and educated people."

What does our faith say about all of this? It's pretty clear that in a starkly class-divided society, Jesus lived a class-free existence, and disrupted the ranking structure. Jesus moved freely and associated with everybody from community leaders to social pariahs. Jesus makes it clear that human class and status systems which place some up as elites and others down as nobodies doesn't fit well with the God who stooped down to love all people as spiritual equals.

Christ and Class, page 4

Jesus goes on to puncture reputation by showing it too often to be a far cry from reality. Jesus walks all over the social conventions of his time which assign worth to various people. Think what we have seen. Jesus defies holiness considerations by eating with known sinners. He touches corpses, lepers and others whose bodies were sick or defective and therefore unclean. Sinners and outsiders are frequently the heroes in Jesus' teaching. Daily and even hourly, we see Jesus upsetting the social mapping of who is important and good and who is a nobody and a sinner.

Jesus' defiance of the social status system is so dramatic that some theologians feel that the whole Christian tradition of reaching out to the poor and oppressed--social work and social service--is rooted directly in the New Testament. When Father Damian goes to the leper colony in Molokai, Hawaii or Henri Nouwen becomes the pastor of a remote church in the mountains of Peru, these acts of reaching out to the least in society may actually have been invented by the Jesus and the gospel tradition.

There's a certain freedom and lightness in all of this. Jesus is telling his hearers that the whole status system is beside the point and sometimes misleading and cruel. People are not honorable or important because of where they were born or by what others think of them. People are precious because God created them and loves them.

I like Jesus' remarks about sitting in the cheap seats because

Christ and Class, page 5

it appeals to something mischievous in me. Jesus is suggesting here that his followers do things that confuse the status system. He suggests that his followers do things which make it difficult to rank themselves and people in general. This is one of the few places where the Christ-like thing to do is to sabotage something. Sit in the wrong place. Invite the wrong people. The more I think about what Jesus is saying, the lighter and more fun it sounds.

In Dominique LaPierrrer's wonderful book, The City of Joy, he tells about a Polish priest--Steven Kovalski--who surrenders his European background to join the poorest of the poor in the slums of Calcutta. Strangely, the poor Indians are filled with hope over what their Polish priest has done. They are hopeful because they realize that the social class system is not all-powerful. They knew this because they had met a man--Father Kovalski--who could move downward.

As I worked on this sermon last week, I pondered how much energy I and maybe you too put forth insuring that our worth as persons is recognized and secure in the eyes of others. I believe that Jesus releases us from all of that energy and worry. Disciples of Jesus Christ are people liberated from having to secure their status. Imagine the freedom of not having to make a statement or impression! We can buy used Chevys and not pretend to like opera--if that's our truth. We don't have to be seen with the right people or order the newest bottled water or bitter lettuce when we eat in restaurants.

And there's more than just our own personal release from status anxiety. When Jesus suggests inviting the poor, the disabled and sinners to a feast, he's asking disciples to subvert actively any status system.

Imagine with me how subverting the status system might look in your life. Is there someone you know whom the status system might hold to be your inferior? What if you were to behave in ways that absolutely confounded that system? You're the boss and you eat lunch every two weeks with the company custodian. You play a round of golf and then carry the clubs for the caddies while they play. Imagine yourself cleaning for the cleaning lady. These are small gestures and that's probably good so we don't appear to be a kind of grandstanding. And in that small humble service, the oppressive apparatus of privilege and prestige is--even if just a little bit--turned on its head.

Jesus Christ was no respecter of status systems. He defied them in hundreds of ways. How true it really was--to use the words of Jesus' accusers as they brought him before Pontius Pilate--that Jesus was perverting their nation. Their system of rank, their schemes which assigned wonderful reputations to some and sub-human status to others, Jesus defied. And he invites you and me as his followers, to that same ministry of defiance. You are a disciple of Jesus Christ. You are elevated beyond all imagining by being Jesus' friend. In turn you are a friend and equal to every person. Don't let any ranking system

Christ and Class, page 7

suggest that you or anyone else is anything less. If we can do this, don't you think that the upheaval in the markets and economy just might be a tad easier on everyone?