

Reflection: Dorothy Day's "Loaves and Fishes"

Perry Pike

Pike is an M.Div. student at Starr King who wrote this piece as a weekly reflection for a fall 2006 class, "Spirituality and Nonviolent Social Transformation," taught by the Rev. Dr. Dorsey Blake, SKSM Acting Dean of the Faculty and Visiting Professor of Spirituality and Prophetic Justice.

...we were not a community of saints but rather a slipshod group of individuals who were trying to work out certain principles—the chief of which was an analysis of man's freedom and what it implied. ... It was a practice in loving, a learning to love, a paying of the cost of love.

It's ironic to me that in all the years of my formative "Christian education" no one ever mentioned the name Dorothy Day. I know in part this is because she was Catholic and in my world these people were as foreign as the Maories of New Zealand. Still no one presented her or anyone remotely like her as a model of Christian values. But then ironies like this abound in my Christian experience. I think how many folks I knew who kept (and still keep) a sanitized and stylized portrait of a white European savior on the wall. These well meaning people never imagine any sense of irony might be possible in that portrait either. And like these folks, it never occurred to me as a child to question the image of or the message of the church as it was presented. Amazingly though, until recently I never even questioned inherent injustices like the segregated church that still exists. After all, I can disapprove of segregated churches and still wash my hands of any responsibility by not attending those churches. Besides and any way, this is just how things are.

Sure, I could always see injustice done in the name of Christianity. I'm still shocked at what I could not see for the first 40 years of my life. My poverty could have been beautiful as I was closer to the example of Jesus—instead I knew it as shame. The dangling carrot for me was that I might get into that exclusive, affluent white club—or at least be mistaken for a member if I really worked at it. I

made straight A's, passed as I wore my yard sale clothes, attended church religiously, and even got invited to country club dances. My life was made marginally comfortable by this effort—so I never considered “borrowing trouble” with difficult questions.

How does Dorothy Day's story bring all this memory to the surface? Here is an actual person just like Jesus was, living a message based on principles. Along with friends, Dorothy revisited Jesus' message for currency and reinterpreted his words into a vision of how the world could be. “A world utopia of Christian communism,” is what her friend Peter Maurin proposed. Even as a young person I secretly knew Jesus was a communist in the literal sense but I knew the high toll for talking about this—trouble makers were socially ostracized and physically shunned. I didn't want to address Jesus for the trouble maker he was any more than I wanted to label myself a communist—I was too desperate to fit in. I worked to hide my family's poverty—one source of my shame. If that shame weren't enough even worse—these feelings were awaking in me. The objects of my school crushes were all same-sex—and this budding awareness incubated a new shame within. These were feelings to hide at all costs. What with all the passing I was doing on so many levels, it never occurred to me to question the club into which I was pretending to have assimilated. It never occurred to me to stand up for those in the same grade as me, the ones who would never be smart enough or white enough to pass.

What a radical notion that poverty might not be shameful—that it might be freedom. Frankly I still don't get it. Everything in me still emotionally retreats in wild desperation from people knowing my poverty for so many years. It is odd then that today as I reflect on Dorothy Day's words, from my distant childhood memories, Jesus' words surface in my mind. “Take no thought for the morrow.” “Whatever you have done to the least of my children, you have done this unto me.” These are the very principles Dorothy Day attempted to live in voluntary poverty. Voluntary poverty? What could possess someone to take such a position? Her vision was achieved through voluntary cooperation, a kind of inverse corollary to the recent readings of Gandhi's life.

Her actions indict me and I ask myself, “Was I ever a Christian?” Somehow the message for me from church was nothing like the message in her life. I was consumed in the “Be a good boy” message that was reinforced at home and church, by my teachers and by the veterans, the local government and even by the minister who said the prayer at the Friday night football games. Like so many other children around me, I was a lamb, one who would not challenge authority even if I questioned it. So now past forty years of age I begin to awaken from a stupor. I'm beginning to see how pervasively economic interests have colored my world view—hell, my whole universe. Jesus' message today, as in my childhood, is controlled by the same powerful men he preached against, cloaking their greed in sound bites like “back to the Bible,” “the American way of life,” and “family values.” It is odd that it takes a voice like Dorothy Day in order to actually begin to imagine an encounter

with a walking, talking Jewish rabbi named Jesus. I'll close with an amazing quote from "Loaves and Fishes" that is as current now as when she first wrote it:

In a world enslavement through installment buying and mortgages, the only way to live in any true security is to live so close to the bottom that when you fall you do not have far to drop, you do not have much to lose.

STARR KING SCHOOL for the MINISTRY
Educating Unitarian Universalist ministers and
progressive religious leaders since 1904