

Social Christianity**Proper 9B: Mark 6.1-13****July 4, 2021****The Rev. Scott Walters**

As much as they are formed by grand documents like the Declaration of Independence, human societies are made of countless small, informal exchanges and agreements between people. You're right to expect me to cite a reliable source to support a statement like that. A sociologist or psychologist or political scientist. Even a thoughtful bar tender or barber would be better than a preacher. But...sorry. No experts were consulted in the forming of this opinion. It's just something that occurred to me as Ardelle and I were deplaning last Tuesday at the Memphis International Airport.

Like most of you, I haven't flown much lately, so the ordinary miracle of human beings exiting a commercial airplane seemed like a curious vestige of another time. One in which a surprisingly egalitarian form of chivalry was the rule.

Remember how it works? When it's time to get off the plane, people don't stampede. No one comes flying around your blindside in the center aisle and cuts you off. People actually wait patiently for each other, as the person in the next row extracts himself from his tiny seat, yanks the not so tiny carry-on that he's expanded to twice it's original size and wedged into the overhead bin, extends its clattering handle, and begins to make his way toward the smiling flight attendant at the cockpit door. Row after row after row of people do this.

It's a beautiful thing. And it may well be the only empirical evidence we have that Western Civilization is not going to collapse within the week under the weight of so much rudeness and selfish tribalism.

So, imagine my shock when the one person on the plane who didn't want to participate in this sacred rite was my wife. It's true. As the plane began to empty, Ardelle actually said, "You know we could just wait until everyone else got off." That's Ardelle. Rebel, anarchist, blithe puller of the social fabric's last unraveling thread.

Worst of all, in the face of her patient calm, I was left to face my own compulsive need to get what's rightfully mine. It's true that we'd traveled to Memphis from the western edge of the United States that day, nearly 1800 miles in all. And letting the people seated behind us go first might have added all of 10 minutes to that trip. But there's something bred into my bones that says you can't just let those folks go first. That's like letting someone merge when, for any number of reasons, you don't think they've suffered sufficiently in the line of traffic. You can't let these people add another 50 whole feet to your commute.

Do you recognize these feelings? Both the pleasure of even a small society of air travelers finding a way forward together. And also the simmering, selfish resentments that I tell myself are about my unwavering commitment to justice, but which are actually about my unwavering commitment to me.

Well, these are glimpses, I believe, into how our moral selves are formed, for better and for worse, within the societies in which we live. We don't like to admit this. We like to think of ourselves as independent beings. As captains of our own fate, or at least of our own souls and minds. But we're not. Our souls and our desires are constantly being formed and reformed in our life with other people.

But guess what? The same was true for Jesus. It really was. Even he developed as a moral self in both acceptance and resistance to the society that shaped him.

I'm not sure there's a moment in the gospels that needs less translation across cultures and centuries than Jesus's return to his hometown in Mark 6. We know how hometowns work. They can be lovely places where the best in us is formed in the simple norms, customs, and relationships that make up our community. They can also be places where fears and prejudices and insecurities get baked into the same norms and customs as well. Actually, all societies are both of these things at once, in some measure.

But let's look again at the gospel story. Unlike the times Jesus stirred things up by healing — i.e. working — on the sabbath, in this story he's just teaching in the synagogue and a bunch of the people present were very impressed. So he hadn't broken any rules, per se. But some agreed upon order is clearly being disrupted by Jesus. One of those harder to articulate norms about who gets to say what and where.

The response of the people around him is telling. We know they're threatened, because they want to push him back into his assigned place within their little society. They remind him that he's a carpenter. He's not a scribe or a rabbi or otherwise official expert on the scriptures. Not only that, they point out that he is, not Joseph's, but *Mary's* son. Which, in a patriarchal culture, was probably a dig. One meant to remind everyone of the scandal that Mary's pregnancy was already underway when she and Joseph married. Why, some say the child wasn't Joseph's at all!

We recognize this world, don't we? Norms and roles and expectations, rumors and family histories all exert an influence on who any particular person is, including Jesus. The people at the synagogue that day were offended. They knew this Jesus and he was getting just a little too big for his tunic. So they used the kinds of influences social creatures have to push back.

Jesus responds with what seems to have been a known saying about prophets not being without honor except in their hometown. "Familiarity breeds contempt" is how Chaucer put it more than a dozen centuries later. But the power of the scene is in this tension. Jesus has gone back to the society in which he was formed. But he can't let himself or his redemptive mission be defined by the vision of that society, can he?

And yet, in what may be most striking detail in the story, we hear that Jesus's healing power is not only his own. It is limited, because it is bound up with the faith of these very people who both shaped him and are threatened by him. Jesus's healing power is, at least to some degree, socially determined.

So, even Jesus is not divinely free from ordinary societal forces. In fact, what we see him doing in the story is struggling to stay true to a prior and higher commitment to the kingdom of God. He then heads off to other towns and sent his apostles out, two by two, to continue his healing work. He sends them out with no bread, no bag, no money in their belts. He sends them out unprotected from the societies they were sent to serve. But he says, "Be careful. If you are not welcomed, leave that place. Don't let it form you in its ways if it is not open to the ways of God in at least the basic obligation to welcome a vulnerable stranger."

Societies have always tried to put religion, even Jesus's, to use toward their own ends. Watch out for that, Jesus says.

In 1905, a German named Max Weber wrote *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. If you're like me, you might have had a vague sense that the "Protestant ethic" was about how industrious and hard working Protestants were, especially as industrial capitalism was taking shape in Europe. That's not untrue. But Weber coined the term because he was confused. Remember, if only through a Dickens story or two, that people didn't just step out of feudalism and into the bright light of freedom and prosperity. There were no child labor laws or 40 hour work weeks. And Weber

wondered how in the world all these poor people were convinced to work so hard for such meager portions of the spoils that these new economies produced. There weren't great options, but there were other options.

And not only did there not seem to be adequate financial incentive to work so hard, Weber was especially curious about the Calvinist countries where capitalism grew most. The Reformation had supposedly done away with a system by which good works, in the form of indulgences and such, are what get a person into heaven. So that can't be the motivation. But Calvinists, in particular, hadn't just set aside the Pope. They believed in double predestination. That is, they believed that whether you're going to heaven or hell is determined by God before you're even born. You might think a theological system like that would produce the opposite of ethically upright, hardworking people. If it's all been determined, why try to be good? Why try at all?

But here's what Weber said actually happened. Calvinists believed that one's salvation has already been determined. But the *evidence* that a person is one of the elect should be visible in their lives. Specifically, you could see whether someone was saved by how selfless and hardworking that person was, especially when that hard work produced very little in the way of earthly reward. So, here were all these Calvinists, working themselves sometimes literally to death, because their lives needed to look like the lives of people whom God had already chosen for heaven. It was as if the Reformation took the keys to heaven from the priests and handed them to the leaders of industry.

There were challenges to Weber's theory, of course. But I don't have to look any further than the mixed motives that swirl around in me to see he was onto something very important. And that is that all societies, from small towns to great nations, will use religion to achieve their own ends.

That's what was happening in Jesus's time, when he met resistance in his hometown. Christian theologians today, like Kathryn Tannerⁱ, are asking Christians to look again at how the societies and economies we live in now form us and even ask us to understand Jesus's teaching on their terms, rather than the other way around. Which means that you and I, if we're to be faithful to Jesus, must struggle to ground our deepest identity in his way, his truth, his life. Even as we acknowledge that we are social creatures, dependent on the people and culture and society in which we live. Even as we acknowledge that Jesus's own healing, redeeming work took place within all the relationships and norms and customs that formed him. Some of which he cherished. Some of which he challenged.

And so, on this beautiful fourth of July in Memphis, maybe you and I could pause and pray, for the sake of America, to be American Christians who are faithful first to the way of Jesus. A struggle that even Jesus understood. We could pray to be people who not only remind one another, but enact rites and rituals, norms and practices that help us see other human beings as creatures whose worth and dignity are the gift of God, not proved by their performance, whether in churches or economies or airplanes or anywhere else.

And maybe we could begin by simply looking up and into the eyes of the next friend, or relative, or stranger we encounter, especially the one with no bag, no bread, no money in her belt, imagining that she's been sent to us by Jesus to see if there's any welcome left for her in our world. But sent also to save us. Sent to heal us. Sent to call us back to lives grounded first in the way of Jesus, the only life for which we were truly made.

ⁱ Tanner, Kathryn (2021). *Christianity and The New Spirit of Capitalism*. Yale University Press.