

Christian Socialism



Acts 2:44 "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need."

The very first Christians were communists. As clearly recorded in the Book of Acts, the earliest Christian community, the one in Jerusalem, held all their property in common. As it is described in Acts, "Now the whole group of those who believed

were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common . . . There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold, and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need" (Acts 4:32-35).

The Book of Acts continues then with the notorious story of Ananias and his wife Sapphira, who sold a piece of property like the others, but who then held back a part of the proceeds, and brought only a portion of what they had received and laid it at the apostles' feet. Both of these individuals were separately struck dead by God in front of others for this deceit, and great fear, we are told, seized the whole church and all who heard of these things (Acts 5:1-11), as one can well imagine.

The communist model, however, did not survive long in the Church. Indeed, it may have even impoverished the earliest Christians in Jerusalem, who fervently believing that Jesus was coming back very soon, had sold all their possessions and given away all their wealth. By the time of St. Paul, a few years later, Christians were just socialists, meaning that individuals within the Christian community were expected to care and contribute to the welfare of the whole of the community, of all the people, but there were no longer any references to them

selling all their property and laying it at the feet of the Apostles. Thank God.

Now in Paul's writings, we hear references instead to a so-called Jerusalem Fund, a collection from various early Christian congregations spread throughout the world to help the poor struggling back in Jerusalem, to help those who had sold all that they had, especially after a famine struck the region. Whether St. Paul started this fund or not, he would collect monies from the various Christian communities he founded in Asia Minor and Greece, in cities that were often rich and influential, like the bustling ports of Corinth or Thessalonica or Athens itself. Indeed, the city of Corinth in St. Paul's day boasted a population of about 90,000 people. So, St. Paul brought back the proceeds from these large Christian communities to the apostles in Jerusalem for distribution to the poor. This, no doubt, also improved St. Paul's standing in the early church to be the distributor of such a large and important fund. Money is power, and power is politics, even back then.

Thus, the various congregations all contributed as they were able to a central pot, from which funds were derived for care of the needy in the early church, especially, we are told, for widows and orphans, for those who had no one else to provide for them. Christians were now socialists, and not communists, but nonetheless the idea was firmly established that Christians

ought to provide for one another as a fundamental doctrine of the Church, as a basic tenet of Western catholic social teaching. We may not have to sell all that we have, but we are still considered responsible for caring for the poor out of our abundance.

So then, in 1933 President Franklin Delano Roosevelt appointed Frances Perkins as Secretary of the Department of Labor, a position she held for twelve years, longer than any other Secretary of Labor, and she was also the first woman to hold a cabinet position in the United States. In the aftermath of the Great Depression, it was Frances Perkins who instituted such programs as unemployment insurance, federal laws regulating child labor, and the adoption of the first federal minimum wage. Francis Perkins was a devout Christian, a devout Episcopalian, a faithful Anglo-Catholic who regularly attended the Convent of the All Saints' Sisters of the Poor, an Episcopal monastery in Catonsville, Maryland, that I often visited in my seminary years.

Frances Perkins said her proudest accomplishment in life, however, was the Social Security Act of 1935, which she personally believed embodied the Christian principle of caring for one another, as Jesus commanded us to do. She believed that in order to truly be a Christian nation, our government had to make provisions for the care of the poor. There was no place

within her understanding of the Christian Church for the popular American tradition of 'rugged individualism.' There was no place for the popular proverb that "God helps those who help themselves," which is perhaps, as I noted last week, the most often quoted scripture that is not from the Scriptures. That popular Americanism derives not from the Bible, but from the writings of Benjamin Franklin, along with "cleanliness is next to godliness."

In the Christian Church, Perkins argued, we have a responsibility to care for one another, especially the poor. We have a responsibility to provide for widows and orphans, for the marginalized, the handicapped, for the uninsured. It is the Christian thing for us to do. It is why this congregation is hosting another food drive this Saturday to support our local Food Banks, why we host Red Cross blood drives quarterly, why we helped settled an Afghan refugee family, why we support the Literacy Volunteers, and why we are now working with the group A Little Help From Our Friends coordinating efforts with Litchfield county social services agencies and non-profits.

So, I, for one, am not bothered that our government passed the Social Security Act in 1935, although it has been under attack ever since. I am not bothered that in 1965 our government established Medicare for the elderly, and Medicaid for the poor. I am not bothered that in 2010 Obamacare was established for the

uninsured. It seems the Christian thing to do. I am glad to pay taxes that support these programs. I would gladly pay more in taxes to provide childcare for the working class, or paid leave for new parents. We could easily pay for such programs with small changes in our tax code. For instance, I am not sure why Food Stamps or WICK benefits for poor mothers with children are called 'government hand-outs', while tax deductions for mortgage interest or capital gains for the rich, who don't really need them, are not so labeled. Or why one is means tested and the other, oddly, is not.

I am very concerned about the inequality in our society, a so-called Christian nation where there is an abundance for a few, while so many others of us go hungry, or homeless, or friendless. It is a question of a fair balance between the prosperity of some and the needs of others. What does that inequality, that has grown so great in recent years, say about our society, except that the rich get richer, and the poor, get poorer? What does it say about us, as Christians?

I am also concerned that our children receive over 3,000 messages a day in our consumer culture urging them to buy something, to spend more and more, when so many others in our society go wanting, when so many others are desperate to simply find second and third jobs to pay electricity and heat bills, or to put food on the table. Where is the voice in our community

inviting us all to buy less and give away more? Where is the voice in our community encouraging us to share what we have with others, especially with those less fortunate than ourselves? --- I believe the Church is meant to be that voice. --- For where else in our society is there a voice that says that we should care for one another, love one another, share with one another, as those early Christians did? Where else in our society is there a voice that knows the meaning of 'enough.' For we have enough. We have more than enough, when so many others in our world do not have enough of the basic necessities of life. Those early Christians beseech us to share with one another, to witness to God's love and care for one another, to be the Church, to be Christ's body in the world.

I believe that we have a divine responsibility and opportunity to be the voice which teaches some very different ideas about the use of our material gifts from God, gifts of our time, talent, and treasure. We have all been blessed, and thus all of us have a divine responsibility to share those gifts with one another, especially the less fortunate. This is why I am spending time each week now with a group of students from Rumsey Hall, to help them organize micro-loans to the poor in third world countries, people with limited education and means, with no access to banking, but nonetheless who seek the improvement of their lives and the lives of their children, people who are

born and work hard in desperate places. This has been an eye-opening experience for those students, as they read about the lives of these people and their efforts to improve their circumstances. It is so much easier to simply look the other way.

Let us all then be the voice that cries out for justice in our world. Let us all be the helping hand that stretches out to the downtrodden, the forgotten, the abused. Let us all be a witness of living within our means, of generously sharing what we have, even when we have only a little, and of gladly giving from whatever we have to help to others, as any has need. Amen.