

# **“What Does Following Jesus Mean When Social Change Fails?” by Ron Kraybill**



**The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany**

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Good people agree that we should seek peace, justice, and harmony in the world. But what should we do when our efforts fail? When carefully planned and executed strategies for change don't work? When standing up for the right thing makes us a target of those in power? When rulers and privileged people clearly care about nothing other than staying in power

at any cost? When social change movements falter and fail?

What does Christian faith say to these questions?

## LOCATING OURSELVES

Let's start with a candid recognition of our location.

- Everyone who is able, please come forward and bring your index finger close one place, the microphone. This represents us, here on earth.
- Now move back 1 inch. This represents the distance from here to Los Angeles. Travelling at the speed of light, it takes about **1/60th of a second** to travel this distance of about 3000 miles.
- Now move back 100 inches, 8 feet. You've gotten to the **moon**. It takes about **1 ¼ seconds to travel** at speed of light.
- Let's say you want to travel to the **sun**. Move back to the far walls of the room. You'd have to keep going a lot farther of course. Using this scale, how far will you have to travel to get to the sun? Seven miles. If you travel at the speed of light it would take you **8 minutes** to get there.
- Maybe you'd like to travel to our nearest star. That would be **PROXIMA CENTAURI**. It's 25 trillion miles away, and it would take 4.2 years at the speed of light to get there.
  
- How about taking a jaunt across our entire neighborhood, the Milky Way Galaxy. That would require traveling at the speed of light for **150,000 YEARS**.
- OK, let's say we get really ambitious and we want to get an overview of the entire universe that we are able to

observe. It would take traveling at the speed of light for **92 billion years** to cross it.

When we struggle for change and get despairing, we're bringing reason and logic to our situation. "We did X and Y and we believe that will result in Z. But it didn't!" But if we apply reason and logic to recognizing our location in the universe, it becomes obvious how ridiculous it is to expect that we might be in a position to rely on our expectations regarding what God is up to in the universe. We occupy the tiniest corner in the vast universe that somehow birthed us. We know almost nothing about 99.99% of that vastness. How can we possibly form realistic expectations regarding God's intentions for us and the world?

#### A PERSPECTIVE FROM SCRIPTURE

Nevertheless, here we are, in one small corner of that vastness, wrestling with difficult issues that are very real in this location. We stand in a tradition that has certain affirmations and convictions about how to respond to the realities that we're in. What then can we take from the texts?

1. The realm of human relations is where God intends us to focus. There's a lot of religious activity that's about rituals to please the deity. Isaiah 58 makes it clear that God isn't interested by holy feasts, holy fasts, or holy smoke. God is interested in what's going on between people.

*58:5 Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?*

*58:6 Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds*

*of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?*

*58:7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?*

*58:8 Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard*

2. More, there is a particular location in human relations that God is particularly interested in. – the broken places, the painful places, the places where people are suffering and wounded. The bottom, the edges, the margins.

When Mary, mother of Jesus anticipates his birth many years later in the Magnificat, she echos this focus: (Luke 1) “he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.”

If we take seriously that God’s main concern is what’s happening between human beings, and that God is particularly interested in places of brokenness, suffering, and injustice, we’re going to find ourselves doing the kinds of things many of us in this congregation have been doing for years. We’re going to be going to marches and demonstrations, writing letters, and organizing, with or for the people of Hong Kong, Nicaragua, Haiti, Iraq, South Africa, Palestine, and more; with or for victims of police violence, immigrants, homeless people, prisoners, animals that are abused and tortured, and on behalf of the environment that we all share.

But what is our expectation when we join, cheer for, and contribute money to these causes? Here is where Christian discipleship gives us quite a different perspective than many of our comrades in these struggles.

3. As followers of Jesus, our question becomes, how was Jesus present in these places of pain and suffering? Movements for peace and justice come and go because they are focused on *success in achieving a particular set of objectives*.

I will never forget my disappointment in South Africa after the political transition when leaders of the revolutionary struggle who had spent years calling for justice and fairness were appointed to positions in the new government, and began driving around in Mercedes Benz, and rushing in and out of meetings in posh hotels in fine suits and sun glasses. The objective had been achieved, and all the energy of The Struggle seemed to just disappear overnight.

And I think of Israel where there have been waves of peace movements over the years, exciting and hopeful for a while, but eventually people get disillusioned with repeated failures, and give up.

4. All that we know about Jesus' life, death, and teachings suggests a focus quite different than "success in achieving objectives". Listen to his words.

**Matthew 5:13-20**

*5:13 "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.*

*5:14 "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.*

*5:15 No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.*

*5:16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*

That's not a message you can measure in terms of success. It's not a set of strategies for taking down the old order. It's not a call to gather warriors to destroy the bad guys or to arm the good guys who are fighting off the bad guys;; it's not a campaign to take over or reform the institutions of society. Jesus is about being present in places of brokenness and proclaiming a new order. He's out there working the crowds, constantly insisting there's a better way, and endlessly insisting that the better way requires a change of heart.

5. And as we know, he fails! The powers that be go after him; they torture and execute him publicly. But lo and behold, in his failure he is elevated. He comes back from death; he's alive, present, influential. He's absent and yet he's not. A whole vast new community emerges despite his apparent failure that carries all that he was doing forward.

What made Jesus unique? What sets us apart from our comrades in the many struggles that we are connected to? Most movements are focused on success in achieving a particular set of goals that we can see and measure here and now. Jesus had a much larger agenda, a vision for a whole way of being that changed everything. Even though he failed in terms of short-term earthly standards of success, he succeeded in the larger economy of God's universe.

## BRINGING A JESUS-INFORMED VIEW TO OUR SITUATION TODAY

A few minutes ago we took a quick imaginary tour of the entire universe and we noted what a tiny piece of it we are here on earth. As Christians we seek to live and participate in the struggles of our world *in awareness of the whole universe and all time*. We believe that in ways often not yet visible in the world around us, the universe is grounded in justice and harmony.

We don't choose to love those who hate us, or do good to those who are evil towards us *because we count on a sudden melting of hearts*, but rather because we trust that these acts actually align with the deepest wisdom, the most powerful intentions of the universe. What looks like foolishness in the short-term horizon is profoundly wise in the perspective of the Creator.

*This is the hidden wisdom that Paul speaks of in Corinthians.*

*We live in a world of people who see a few feet of space that we used to symbolize travelling to the moon. But we are living according to a perspective that looks at things from the perspective of the entire universe, all 92 billion lights of it!*

*2:4 My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power,*

*2:5 so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.*

*2:6 Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish.*

*2:7 But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory.*

*2:8 None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.*

*2:9 But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him"*

*2:10 these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.*

*2:11 For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God.*

*2:12 Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God.*

*2:13 And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual.*

*2:14 Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.*

*2:15 Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else's scrutiny.*

*2:16 "For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.*

Paul speaks of the hidden wisdom of God. We can't see it when we read only the New Times and the Washington Post (I speak with some authority on this since I've been reading both papers every day for years). But when we look out, over space and time, and when we look inwards at the vastness of our own soul, and when we reach across the divides and connect in



vulnerable ways to the vastness of other human beings around us, we get hints of it.

Peace and justice will eventually prevail, not because our strategies were so brilliant, but because the Designer of the universe wrote wholeness into the very DNA of all that is.

## **CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY IS WHERE AND HOW WE SUSTAIN THE LARGE PERSPECTIVE**

To live in this way, in awareness of the whole universe and time, while struggling with the intense messiness and pain of our world is difficult. We can't do it on our own.

One of the things that has been painful for me is the way in which struggles for justice exhaust and destroy those involved. Often there are fierce internal conflicts, between fellow revolutionaries struggling for power and influence. Often there is despair and hopelessness because failure is so common, the struggle takes so long, and because disciplines of self-care, physical, social, and spiritual are seen as a luxury.

Part of the hidden wisdom imparted to us by Jesus is the understanding that getting to where God wants to bring us starts *here and now with care for the quality of our life, with diligent thought and care in how relate to and make decisions with others around us, and perhaps with special attention to how we respond to our enemies.*

We can't live in awareness of the larger perspective alone. We need others to do it with us. The church is the here and now place where enough of us gather and talk and pray together and experience just enough of that larger reality that we are able to retain a focus on it.

Social justice movements, regardless to the rightness of their cause, are insufficient to do that. They are partners and friends and comrades, but their horizons are far shorter than

ours.

So, we gather here, weekly, and in our mission groups, to be church with each other, that place where we gather in the light of the entire universe and all time. We can't do this as individuals. But in the social reality that we sustain among each other we can.

To be sure, we carry the limitations of all humans. Precisely because we study the horizons we understand how dimly human beings see, and therefore humility infuses our every action and attitude.

But we keep looking and listening. As we catch glimpses of that ultimate reality, we experience here and now, as brothers and sisters, what we believe the Creator intends the whole universe to someday experience.