

Discomfort Will Save Us: The Bad News of Jesus

A talk for the Progressive Christianity Network Britain St Albans Group, February 22, 2024, by Amanda Udis-Kessler; written February 15, 2024; updated February 24, 2024.

Let's start with some of the hard sayings of Jesus (full passages on separate sheet; restricted to sayings the Jesus Seminar thinks are original to Jesus or close to original):

- Challenging demands
- Hard words about wealth
- A troublesome, unclean, inaccessible Kingdom
- The hardest saying of all (Luke 17:33; I think the saying about taking up one's cross is harder, but the Jesus Seminar does not believe that it is original to Jesus)

Progressive and liberal Christians may be tempted to ignore or explain away these sayings. I believe that they have something to offer us today if we take them as a whole.

What do challenging demands have to do with hard words about wealth? What do images of the Kingdom of God as troublesome (mustard seed), impure (leaven during Passover), and largely inaccessible (the "narrow door") have to do with the idea that only those who lose their life will keep it?

Discomfort. Or rather, a willingness to engage with discomfort. I think one legitimate way to read the hard sayings is as an invitation into discomfort. Is this exactly what Jesus had in mind? Probably not. But let's take a hard look at the discomfort at the heart of Jesus's ministry.

Jesus was willing to make people uncomfortable, as the hard sayings suggest.

Jesus's actions as reported in the Gospels also made people uncomfortable: healing people (even unclean people, even on the Sabbath!), dining with the devalued, overturning the tables of the moneychangers in the Temple...

Jesus was willing to be uncomfortable himself, even (literally) unto death. Whatever we make of his death – however we understand its purpose or lack of purpose – we must acknowledge that he did not avoid the possibility of dying for his vision. He would have known that his trip to Jerusalem, as described in the synoptic Gospels, involved risking his life, perhaps especially after his action at the Temple during the week of Passover – a time when Rome was on high alert for Jewish attempts at liberation from Roman domination. Some biblical scholars believe that the final supper and the betrayal were later literary inventions and that the Romans simply picked Jesus up in the Temple after his actions there and summarily crucified him with no need of involvement by the Jewish leadership. Whether this is what actually happened or not, it is absolutely plausible in light of how Pilate treated Jews.

So, discomfort plays a larger role in Jesus's life, work, and death than we sometimes consider. Let's explore the discomfort of the sayings mentioned above and have a conversation, then turn to the ways in which we may be invited into discomfort today.

Demands

Matthew 5:39-42: Most of us, if hit by someone, would either flee or hit them back. Here, Jesus asks his followers not only to absorb the blow but to invite the person striking the blow to strike another one. In situations where an already poor person was asked to surrender one of the only two clothing items they had, Jesus instructs his followers to voluntarily surrender the other item and leave themselves stark naked and unprotected from the elements. Faced with conscription to carry the pack of a Roman centurion one mile – an unpleasant, humiliating, potentially physically difficult situation – Jesus says to voluntarily suffer for an additional mile. It is true, as biblical scholars have proposed, that all of these actions are “civil disobedience” strategies that expose the corruption and violence at the heart of the Roman occupation, but that does not make them any the less uncomfortable and challenging. Jesus also tells his (already economically poor) followers to give to everyone who begs from them, which means giving away essentially all of their money, and to loan resources to anyone who asks (which, in the economic context of first-century Judea, meant having no guarantee that the “loan” would ever be repaid).

Matthew 5:44a: Jesus tells his followers to love their enemies. Matthew and Luke later added the elaboration of this instruction, but the instruction itself is likely to go back to Jesus. Not attacking one’s enemies is hard. Not wishing one’s enemies ill is harder still. Loving one’s enemies is close to impossible (depending on how we define love) and certainly exceedingly uncomfortable.

Matthew 7:3-5: Here, Jesus points out that while we love to criticize others for their faults and flaws, we are often unable to see our own faults and flaws, even if they are substantially greater than the faults and flaws of our neighbors. This too is a properly uncomfortable observation.

Matthew 8:22/Luke 9:60: Jesus here asks someone to ignore their ritual obligations to their recently deceased parent in a time of mourning, and implies that there are living people who are as good as dead, who can take care of those ritual obligations instead. There are a number of passages in which Jesus is reported to put his own movement above the family obligations of his followers; this is one of the few understood to be authentic by the Jesus seminar. Most of us would be deeply uncomfortable, if not actually horrified, to be asked not to attend to the death of our beloved parent.

Luke 10:30-35: If we do not understand the relationship between Jews and Samaritans in Judea at the time of Jesus, we may read the “Good Samaritan” story as a simple story of morality over ritual purity. In reality, to Jews in Judea at the time, Samaritans were understood as half-breeds who worshipped God in the wrong place and in the wrong ways, and were mostly despised by observant Jews. By some arguments, Jews might have considered them enemies. At a minimum, they likely loathed them. My favorite contemporary parallel to this story (as a queer person) is to imagine a gay man or lesbian getting beaten by a bunch of homophobes and left for dead. Another queer person passes by but does not help. A progressive/liberal politician passes by but does not help. Then, a fundamentalist pastor currently serving as a right-wing politician in the federal government comes by and helps the injured queer person. In that “translation,” one of the people I most hate and fear is the person who helps my queer comrade (or me). That is a very uncomfortable story, indeed! (An even better parallel, in the US at least, would be an African American person helping a working-class white racist.)

Luke 14:26: I think the discomfort of this passage is pretty clear. One must actually “hate” one’s own family and “life itself?” Wow.

To sum up, Jesus demands of his followers that they suffer physical discomfort, make material sacrifices even to the point of abject poverty, love those who hate them while hating their own families and “life itself,” confront their own failings and frailties courageously and root them out, ignore ritual and familial obligations, and take care of those they despise (who may well despise them back). That’s a LOT of discomfort.

On Wealth

In Mark 10:23 and 25 and in Matthew 6:24, Jesus says that it is close to impossible for a wealthy person to enter the Kingdom of God, and that it is not possible to serve both God and wealth. While the Lucan woes are widely thought not to be authentic to Jesus, some of the Lucan blessings are thought to be authentic, and these suggest that just as the wealthy will struggle to enter the Kingdom, the poor have already had it granted to them. For most of us who are pretty well-off, these are some uncomfortable claims.

The Troublesome, Unclean, Inaccessible Kingdom

Mark 4:30-32: Mustard seed was a weed, not a plant. No sane farmer would “sow” it voluntarily, because it was universally understood as troublesome and problematic. It would take over gardens, crowd out and kill off desired crops, and leave a nightmare in its wake. Mustard seed does not grow up to be a shrub or a tree; Jesus here is referencing (and perhaps mocking) TANAKH (Hebrew Bible) passages about the cedar of Lebanon; a troublesome weed is the hope of Israel, not a great royal tree. That’s awkward, to put it mildly.

Matthew 13:33: Leaven is not consistently unclean in Judaism, but it is unclean at certain times, which is why it must be removed during the celebration of Passover. Biblical scholars generally think this reference to leaven is a reference to its uncleanness. The kingdom of God is thus like an agent that renders food impure and unclean. For a people whose meaning system is based on a set of commandments that treat purity and cleanliness (in this context) as akin to holiness, this would be a ridiculous and very uncomfortable passage.

Luke 13:24: For those of us with universalist inclinations, this passage is quite uncomfortable. Most people will not be able to enter the kingdom even if they try? That’s pretty disturbing. It would have been disturbing in Jesus’s time as well.

The Hardest Saying of All

We will lose our lives if we try to make them secure. We will only keep our lives if we lose them. What?!? This would have been profoundly hard to hear back then, as it still is today.

Discussion: What do you make of these passages? How do you wrestle with them? What do they mean to you? What do you think Jesus’s relationship to discomfort was? Why do you think that?

Tidings of Discomfort and Joy: The Bad News is Good News

We may all have different reactions to these passages. Here's my read on them, for your consideration. I've developed these ideas while carrying out antiracism training on white discomfort, particularly among other white people:

While discomfort is largely an emotional and embodied phenomenon, it tends to be a response to three kinds of potential danger in which our amygdala (primitive "lizard brain") kicks in:

- Physical dangers (violence, hunger, environmental danger)
- Relational dangers (exclusion, discrimination, mistreatment, fears of abandonment)
- Cultural dangers (ways of making meaning or making sense of the world in which we don't matter, don't count, or don't merit good treatment)

Members of socially devalued, disenfranchised, and disempowered groups are especially likely to experience situations in which two or all three of these types of dangers are at play.

Jesus and his followers, as economically deprived Jews under Roman occupation, potentially faced all three kinds of danger. They were always at risk of hunger or of violence from Romans. If they were unable to keep the commandments, they were at risk of being cut off from Jewish communities that prized purity as a way of remaining Jewish in the face of Roman oppression. (We should take seriously Amy-Jill Levine's concerns about how some or all of "the Jews" have been villainized by Matthew and John, but there is still reason to believe that Jesus clashed with some Jewish leaders over the role and meaning of purity and the commandments.) Moreover, poor Jews who were unable to keep the commandments lived with a meaning system in which they were failing God and in which Jewish failures of purity or commandment-keeping explained why the Romans were oppressing them. This way of understanding the world would be demeaning if not actually devastating.

Jesus comes into this picture and says that God's love is greater and deeper than physical danger and even death, that those who have been excluded can and should be restored to their communities, and that understandings of God that punish the poor for their poverty are misguided. Jesus did not know about the amygdala, but he did know how to quiet the amygdala, which may be one reason why people followed him.

What does this mean for us today?

First, most progressive Christians in countries like the UK and the US do not face the kinds of dangers faced by Jesus's followers. Most of us are white and middle- or upper-middle-class, meaning that we are not in the same kind of immediate danger of hunger or physical violence as poor Judean Jews were (though we all collectively face environmental devastation – but that moves more slowly than the immediate violence of poverty and racism). Those of us who are female and/or LGBTQ do face the potential violence that can be a part of sexism and heterosexism, but that may be mitigated by our race and class to some extent.

At the same time, many of us struggle to be in deeply authentic relationships in a time of political crisis, global pandemics, environmental catastrophe, and the exhaustion of having to keep performing and proving ourselves under late-stage capitalism. Many of us have a hard time being emotionally vulnerable. Some of us are deeply lonely. Some of us are so well-protected against discomfort that we can be comfortable but not ecstatically joyous because we are not in fact emotionally free. Many of us “comfort” ourselves with addictions or with compulsive behaviors. (I say this as someone who spent almost 50 years with an eating disorder, so I know how much comfort such behaviors provide, and I also know that they don’t solve anything.)

If we are white in racist societies, male in sexist societies, wealthy in classist societies, and/or heterosexual in heterosexist societies, these forms of inequality have almost certainly cut us off to some extent from those oppressed by these systems, putting walls between us and those who suffer the inequality, making us fearful of them or perhaps just uncomfortable around them. If we have learned that all individuals rise and fall on their own merit and effort, we will struggle to understand how systemic inequality makes a joke out of claims of meritocracy and fairness, and that struggle can also make us uncomfortable.

In short, even if we are not in physical danger much of the time, we live in societies that put us in relational danger and cultural danger to a greater or lesser extent. There is much about which to be uncomfortable but many of us do not have the resources to engage with our discomfort directly.

Jesus can help us with that – if we let him.

By Jesus, I do not mean a spirit existing among us today. I don’t mean “the Christ” (though of course we may experience the Christ spirit as helpful in these ways today). I mean the human being who lived millennia ago, who instructed his followers to, as we might put it, “lean into” discomfort, and who also gave them the tools to do so.

Faced with an occupying country that thought nothing of violence and murder, Jesus modeled deep faith in God, generosity, hospitality, compassion, and love.

Faced with a religious leadership which relied on a meaning system that could exclude and shame people, Jesus challenged the meaning of that meaning system, restored people to community, and assured them of their blessing and their access to God’s beloved community.

Jesus did, however, challenge people whose priorities were such that they were not open to receiving the invitation to the beloved community. Wealth, family, a focus on ritual to the exclusion of relationship, hatred of enemies, inability to see one’s own failings, a grasping onto life as one knows it: these were logs in people’s eyes. Jesus invited people to remove them to better “see” the kingdom and enter into it – or, perhaps better, open up to its already existing presence around, within, and among them.

That same kingdom – or beloved community, or kin-dom, or economy of God – is available to us now under the same conditions. If we grasp too tightly onto our identities, our status, our power, our access to good things, our understandings in which we are better than others, we will not

encounter Love's Domain. To open to it, we must lose our selfishness, our self-centeredness, our self-preoccupations. We must, in short, become uncomfortable.

Deep, vulnerable relationships are uncomfortable. Self-sacrifice is uncomfortable. Justice work is uncomfortable. Love itself is uncomfortable. In that discomfort is our salvation, our healing.

Discomfort will save us from our isolation and loneliness.

Discomfort will save us from our perceived self-reliance.

Discomfort will save us from our fears of others, especially of the devalued.

Discomfort will save us from our dissociation, compulsions, and addictions.

Discomfort will free us to engage deeply in justice work, including taking the risks that such work can involve.

Discomfort will open us up to interact with any and all people with respect, compassion, patience, and love.

Discomfort will equip us for the profound joy of knowing the sacred in the midst of our discomfort, the love that never abandons us no matter what.

Discomfort will do all these things to the extent that we become willing and able to engage with discomfort, to become comfortable with discomfort (as it were), and to tolerate discomfort and let it pass through us so we come out on the other side. There are many tools to help us do this: prayer, worship, silent meditation, other spiritual disciplines (such as the Examen), psychological counseling and therapy, among others.

Finally, I cannot consider discomfort in the life and work of Jesus without saying something about the cross. On Ash Wednesday, Christians around the world had crosses marked on their foreheads in ash. That same day, I pulled out my "lethal injection Jesus" necklace (an updated take on the cross in which Jesus is strapped to a gurney prior to being injected with poisons to execute him) and put it on.

We do not need to buy into atonement theories to understand some of the ways in which the cross is a referendum on discomfort:

- We need to die to whatever makes us suffer and keeps us from relationship with ourselves, each other, and God –fear, judgmentalism, hatred, self-destructiveness, addiction, something else) and rise to new connections, possibilities, vulnerabilities, and relationships. Such dying, needless to say, is hugely uncomfortable which is one reason so many of us never do it.
- We need to make some sacrifices to be in solidarity with the poor, dispossessed, and devalued – whether those are sacrifices of time, money, energy, or something else. Such sacrificing is, of course, uncomfortable.

- We need to remember that prophets get killed. Whatever specifically got Jesus killed, it was almost certainly something prophetic that he said and/or did. If we are going to speak prophetic truth and act prophetically for justice, we risk suffering the consequences.

Jesus offers us tidings of discomfort and joy if we are open to receive them. His bad news is good news – if we are willing to encounter it that way.

Discussion: How should progressive Christians be in relationship with discomfort? What opportunities does discomfort offer us? How, if at all, can discomfort save us?