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Studying the Historical Jesus Through Service

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Abstract. *Service learning pedagogy often assumes a variety of forms when connected with classroom teaching. Through a creative use of service learning pedagogy, the author constructs learning designs that foster student engagement with course content and prompts interrelated connections between the subjects and their own service learning experiences. The author highlights the importance of setting a context for service learning through creating activities linked to learning goals, integrating service learning components with classroom teaching methods, and proactively engaging student apathy, resistance, and faith perspectives through specific assignments that combine experience, analysis, and subject matter. The course described in this essay directly contributed to the author's receiving the 2004 Fortress Press Award for Undergraduate Teaching.*

Introduction

As many instructors of Christian origins know, teaching a class on the historical Jesus to undergraduate students can be both exciting and somewhat daunting. Some of the students in the class experience it as a direct assault on their Christian beliefs, especially beliefs related to the Bible and Jesus. There can be such resistance to questioning whether or not Jesus said this or that, or whether he really did what the gospel writers claim he was doing, that the student adopts a highly defensive posture and avoids any depth of engagement with the material. Other students in the class admit to taking the course only because it fulfills a university requirement and fits their schedule, and resent having to study religion, let alone Jesus. Why should they learn about a 2000 year old dead person who gave rise to a religion that they perceive to be sexist, hypocritical and obsolete? A third group represent a range of students who are curious about the figure of Jesus and willing to

engage historical critical methods, but are sometimes frustrated by the lack of definitive answers, and not ready to embrace the ambiguities and uncertainties inevitably bound up with studying such an ancient figure. Finally, a minority of students from diverse backgrounds is ready to jump right into the material, eager for the rigorous and disciplined study of religion.

It is very tempting to focus on the last group of students, but to do so would be a disservice to the rest of the class and an obvious violation of one's responsibilities as an instructor. Thus, how can one attempt to convey the insights of historical studies of Jesus in a meaningful way, with integrity and with intellectual rigor, to a class of such variety, vulnerabilities, fears, and frustrations?

Service learning pedagogy has contributed to meeting the challenges just described. My observation is that service learning experiences provided a way for students who upheld biblical inerrancy to reflect more neutrally upon what they perceived to be threatening ideas about the Bible and Jesus while it engaged the suspicious and even *anti-religious* students such that they were willing to consider the study of the historical Jesus as a worthwhile endeavor just as the lives of Muhammad, Abraham Lincoln, or Emma Goldman are worth studying. For those students frustrated by the lack of definitive answers in the class, it provided sufficient support such that they were better able to handle ambiguities, for they were drawn into the challenge and pleasure of seeking unanswerable questions. It has sensitized some students to the fact that one's perspective and experience affect the way in which one reconstructs the figure of Jesus, an important learning goal of the course. Finally, by asking the students to draw connections between their service learning experiences and the content of the course, the incorporation of service learning contributed to another central academic learning goal, which is to deepen students' understanding of the

teachings and actions of Jesus, insofar as we can determine what these are, within their historical contexts.

Setting the Context

The first time I taught the course on Jesus I did not include service learning pedagogy. The students in the class reflected the diversity mentioned in the introduction. One student in particular seemed angry throughout the entire semester, and informed me that because her research paper had required her to study one of her favorite sayings of Jesus using historical critical methods, it had destroyed the meaning and significance of the saying for her, making her never want to read or hear it again. It is easy to let such comments cast a dark cloud over the entire experience of teaching the class, but there were other students who genuinely found the course to be stimulating and enriching. One first year student – a self-proclaimed atheist – wrote a brilliant paper on a parable, while others told me how much the course had helped them with their own struggles with how to interpret the Bible.

I was still bothered, however, by the first student's (and others') frustration with historical critical approaches. Although I agree with Philip L. Tite who argues that crisis moments in students caused by such methods are important, and can often prompt them eventually to seek greater understanding, even if they are not fully aware of it mid stream (Tite 2003), I thought that there must be better ways of engaging such students, especially since historical critical methodology was so central to the course. Through a variety of workshops that I attended at the university and conversations with colleagues, I became intrigued with the notion of service learning, and thought it might be a good fit with the class. In particular, I found that at the end of the semester, even those students who were willing to engage historical critical analysis to a certain extent, continued to focus almost exclusively upon the theological significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Indeed, these students appreciated his teachings, but such teachings took second place to what Jesus had done for them. Although we read several articles that discussed the possible reasons why Jesus was killed, such students generally did not seem to understand that some of his teachings and actions probably led to his demise. I clearly remember one student pointedly informing me that it did not matter who actually killed Jesus or why, historically, as it was all part of God's plan. After reflecting on how I might improve the course to address student learning needs, I decided to incorporate service learning because I thought it would be a concrete way to focus on the life and ministry of Jesus and it would temper the inevitable tensions, which arise when employing critical approaches, such as text, source, and redaction criticism. It would aid, I hoped,

in encouraging students to think about what sorts of actions and challenges could lead one to be executed within the Roman Empire. The aim of employing service learning was thus to enrich and make more comprehensible the content of the course.

In order to get to the Jesus of history, we first had to engage questions of each gospel's (including the *Gospel of Thomas*) respective Christology. We studied the gospels using historical critical methods, before moving into various scholarly reconstructions of the historical Jesus within his first-century-Palestinian context. In the latter section we explored some of the current issues of debate such as whether Jesus was proclaiming a future kingdom that God would usher in, or whether the kingdom of God was something Jesus wanted people to build. We explored the question of whether Jesus was criticizing forms of social and ritual practice, and to what degree he could be described as political. We looked at who may have been responsible for the death of Jesus, and why it may have been thought advisable to kill him. I also included a component on the history of the quest for Jesus, such that students could understand the broader historical framework of scholarship. Here I acknowledged Albert Schweitzer's observation that when one searches for Jesus, one often discovers one's self (or what one would like to be!) and used this point to emphasize that we would never be able to find a single, objective historical Jesus. One of the key texts that we read was John Dominic Crossan's *Jesus. A Revolutionary Biography* (1994) as I find this book to be accessible, provocative, and especially focused upon Jesus' social teachings and actions. Although Crossan's book is only one reconstruction, and has limitations, its emphasis upon Jesus' social concerns was a good fit with service learning. Moreover, I think it indisputable that Jesus was concerned with the welfare of others, especially the disadvantaged, and thus Crossan's book provided a good way to emphasize this concern to students. We also read an article on historical Jesus study in African New Testament scholarship (LeMarquand 1997). Besides exposing the students to other ways of doing scholarship, this article discusses how bias can have heuristic value. I kept returning to this point when the students began their service learning, for one of the course goals was for the students to think about how their own biases were perhaps changing in light of the service experiences that they were having. Hence, this article was instrumental in helping students reflect on how their service affected their perspectives of Jesus. In the final section of the course, we returned to questions of Christology by examining a variety of early Christian Christologies and how such understandings of Christ might have been attractive to the Greco-Roman world (Riley 1997). Here I stressed that just as particular popular notions of Jesus were context specific in the ancient world, likewise in the current day people are

attracted to understandings of Jesus based upon their own contexts and experiences, including service experiences. We also read and discussed a few articles on contemporary Christology that deem the study of the historical Jesus to be important, such as the work of Leonardo Boff (1985) and Raúl Vidales (1985). I have found these Latin American liberation theologians to be the most articulate about why the study of the Jesus of history is significant to the doing of theology. Using a couple of examples of liberation theology was effective as the students could now read about how their learning, through service, was a serious way of doing theology. As we read various books and articles, I attempted to consistently link concepts in the reading to service learning in order to make the class a more coherent learning experience overall.

The Service Learning Component

Before describing the service learning component it is important to briefly define how I understand service and service learning. Taking my cue from Benjamin R. Barber, I view service to be “something we owe ourselves or to that part of ourselves that is embedded in the civic community” (Barber 1992, 246). Service is not volunteer work; rather, it is part of what it means to be a responsible citizen. It does not mean that one is giving something up or sacrificing one’s time and energy because one is morally virtuous. Instead, service entails engaging in one’s social responsibility to work with other people with whom one shares community. Service can also be distinguished from certain modern notions of charity. In a highly individualistic culture that stresses economic success, there exists what Janet Poppendieck calls a culture of charity, “that normalizes destitution and legitimates personal generosity as a response to major social and economic dislocation” (1998, 5). This culture often only reinforces the charitable person’s sense of worthiness, for he or she is providing for the dependent person who, in light of an independence obsessed culture, is ultimately deemed a failure (Bounds, Patterson, and Pippin 2002, 58). Moreover, this particular notion of charity can camouflage the culpability for social injustice, which many of us share. Service, on the contrary, stresses that both parties are receiving something, as both are members of the community. The student learns something about the human condition from people who are frequently marginalized, and often comes to see his or her own role in that marginalization. Moreover, a great gift that service learning gives to some students is an increased sense of self-efficacy in that they realize that they can make a significant contribution to their local communities (Muller and Stage 1999, 114–15).

Those who consider the discipline of religious studies to be primarily about the transmission of knowledge in

as objective a manner as possible will not be comfortable with this form of pedagogy. In my context, that is, a department of religion in a religiously affiliated school in which “educating for lives of service” is part of the university mission statement, service learning seems entirely appropriate. Members of my department would not, I suspect, dismiss notions such as “education as transformation,” even though there is no theological party line that all must follow. It is true that forms of experiential learning such as service learning still seek academic respectability among some (Glennon 2002, 9), but what I argue is that service learning can help students understand key ideas that they are studying in the course. Indeed, I rejoice at the insights, personal development, and increased sense of social responsibility that I witness in the students, but it is important to stress that service learning actually helps them understand the course content itself.

On the second day of class, I invited the university’s director of the Center for Public Service to discuss service learning and lead the students in an exercise about the definition and experience of service. In the future, I plan to supplement this exercise with readings about service learning, such as Barber’s work, for students often have not thought about the notion of service as a civic responsibility as opposed to individual charity. It is important to note that the students did know that there would be a service learning component before they signed up for the course, however, and thus to a certain extent they already had an interest or curiosity about service. Throughout the first month of the course, I invited representatives from several potential service sites to visit the class and explain what sorts of service was desired. I have found these visits to be very helpful, as it lessens the students’ anxieties. After the representatives came, the students had to choose where they wanted to do their 16–20 hours of service. I encouraged them to do it in small groups, as that would help with travel arrangements, and give them a chance to share their experiences with someone who was at the same site. The first time that they went to the site, they were required to fill out a “service learning agreement” with a staff person at the site. This ensured that both student and staff knew the number of hours the student was to spend at the site, and stipulated the activities in which the student would be engaged. In general, I selected sites where students would do their service in consultation with colleagues, the director of the Center for Public Service, and after having discussed the possibilities with staff at the sites.

The primary assignment associated with the service learning was a multi-layered journal. In this journal, students first had to research and write up a short history of the site, then interview a staff person who worked there permanently. The bulk of the journal then consisted of their site experience notes and analyses. I

learned how to structure much of this section from a colleague in the religion department, Patricia O'Connell Killen. First, students were to record what they observed at the site, including the physical surroundings, the interactions taking place, the smells, and the sounds. These observations were to be as descriptive and non-judgmental as possible. Second, the students had to analyze their own perceptions and reactions. What pre-suppositions did they have? What were their actions? Why did they feel uncomfortable sometimes? Third, they had to analyze the situational level. What was the collection of issues and problems that people at their site were facing? Why? What cultural, social, economic, physical, and/or linguistic issues were involved? Fourth, the students had to reflect upon social and cultural factors. Why, for example, does a family of four, with both parents working full time (at two part time jobs each) depend upon a food bank to eat? Why is it so difficult for people staying at the AIDS hospice to obtain much needed medications, and what happens to those people if the hospice must close? Why does it take four hours for the members of a L'Arche community (L'Arche communities are groups of mentally disabled adults who live together) to take city transit to travel 5 miles? Why has the Hispanic man at the homeless shelter, who does not speak much English, not been able to receive the dentures he needs to chew his food? What are the powers and systems that lead to all of the above difficulties? How does race, social class, gender, ability/disability, and sexual orientation factor into all of these problems? Finally, the students are asked to link their experiences and analyses to the material of the course. Here the students could write down biblical texts that came to mind, or write about what types of chronic injustices in first century Palestine (for example, exploitative patronage, onerous taxation) are comparable to the injustices that they witness today? They could also think about how Jesus might respond today, but I was explicit in that I did not want them to turn their journals into a "What would Jesus do?" exercise.

The journals were handed in several times during the semester and I graded them with a critical eye to determining whether the student had engaged the various levels of description and analysis. The students were weakest in the area of social and cultural issues and I found that I needed to push them to analyze and to find out more about the systemic problems that lead to the need for food banks and shelters. I was not asking for a sophisticated economic and social evaluation but some degree of disciplined reflection and questioning as to why so many needed these various types of aid. Although I was often quite moved by the students' personal reflections in their journals, especially when they described the new relationships that they made, I

stressed the need to move beyond description and the personal, to the analytical and social. Some students struggled with the latter, but I thought it absolutely necessary to dwell on questions of structural injustice or, to use theological language, social sin.

Reading the journals, however, convinced me that service learning had been effective in the course, for the students made clear connections between their experiences and the course content. One student who was working at an AIDS hospice observed that "people with AIDS are seen as modern lepers, they are ostracized and marginalized by society . . . they suffer not only from poor health, but also emotional deprivation and discrimination." She expressed frustration that her work was not always acknowledged by the residents at the hospice, but then wrote "to truly serve, one must reach out even when the response is uncertain because as Jesus said, 'if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you . . .'" and then, "the heart of service is radical and beautiful; it shows humanity at its best." Another student, who did his service by distributing food and clothing, offering English lessons, and providing companionship in a particularly rough area of town, wrote "we were bringing hope to these people, which was probably the most important message that Jesus got across to people around him." This student, a practicing Muslim, also offered comparisons between his own religious traditions of caring for the needy and those of Christianity, which were of great interest to the class when he presented them. Students commented to me later that the journals had forced them to make links between the class content and service experiences, as they may not have done so automatically. Later, the journals provoked me to speculate that one of the strengths of service learning is that it appeals to Howard Gardner's notion of multiple intelligences – the notion that there are a variety of ways of being intelligent, from the standard ideas of linguistic intelligence, to bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal as well as other categories of intelligence (Gardner 1999). For example, I think that some of the highly extroverted students thrived in the class partly because of the interpersonal relationships that they formed and wrote about in their journals. Others, who tended to be quiet, would be wonderfully articulate in the journals, indicating to me that one of their strengths was reflecting upon and analyzing their own thoughts and feelings. A few clearly valued the fact that people at the service site appreciated their physical strength and the work that was completed because of it. This appreciation no doubt contributed to a greater sense of self-worth, which for the most part improved the students' overall performance in the class. Thus service learning was a way of appealing to the different strengths of a diverse group of people.

Bringing Service into the Classroom

The students also wrote a major research paper analyzing a saying, parable, or action of Jesus, one section of which integrated their service learning, but the journal assignment was the key link between the classroom and the service experience. When the students handed in their journals at different points throughout the semester, the class spent time reflecting upon and analyzing the service learning in small groups and as a whole. It was during these sessions that the service and class content were brought together publicly, in contrast to the connections made in the students' journals or term papers, which were obviously more private. The students would use their journals, however, as a basis for our discussions in class. Service learning was thus another *text* for the class, as some of my colleagues have articulated.

These class sessions were quite lively because the students became the teachers. They were the experts on the service learning site, they provided the bulk of the class content and they were the ones responding to questions from other students and from me. Such a role prompted some students to participate much more than during the rest of the semester; they became much more active learners. In the future I intend to have them include summary and analysis of assigned class reading in the journal as well, as this would better integrate the course materials and the service learning and the students will be more likely to make connections to the reading on the historical Jesus during the class discussions of their service learning.

Students were generally very eager to discuss their experiences and in turn, their evaluation of their experiences. For example, several students who worked at a food bank pointed out that their attitude toward those who came to such banks had changed. The people who came to the bank were predominantly working poor. The students discovered that these people worked very hard, but in spite of it all simply could not afford many groceries, given the cost of housing and their meager incomes. The validity of stereotypes such as "the poor are lazy" was undermined when the students got to know some of these families. These students asked why more and more people were forced into such dire straits and began to understand that asking such questions led to other issues such as why many forms of employment do not offer health care benefits, or why higher education is simply unfathomable for so many people. One student from India, after his first experience at a food bank, exclaimed to the rest of the class, "I didn't know that there were hungry people in the United States! How can that be in such a rich country!?" These students also discussed why they previously had possessed such stereotypes of people who used food banks, which in

turn, led to some discussion of media and reflection about the students' own social locations and upbringing.

Service learning experiences opened doors to new perspectives on some of the sayings of Jesus. The beatitude "blessed are the poor" seemed to take on new meaning for students. They began to empathize, to some extent, with their new acquaintances, and appreciate how such a beatitude might be quite compelling to a poor person in Jesus' day. Jesus' teachings on anxiety (Matt 6:25–34; Luke 12:22–32) usually frustrate students for they perceive such teachings to be entirely unrealistic, and yet few of them have ever had to worry about from where they will get their next meal. I asked the students to read an article on the Sermon on the Mount, which argued that these particular teachings were challenging "the economic reasoning that would make of the undeniable need for food and clothing the overwhelming focus of one's existence" (Vaage 1999, 381). Rather, these sayings suggest that a divine economy is one in which people do not need to worry about food and clothing; in which an obsession with security no longer prevails. After having worked with people who did worry each day if they would eat, these teachings seemed to take on much more meaning for the students, for again, they could appreciate just how powerful such a vision must have been for those scrambling to obtain food in the ancient world, just as many scramble today. The students also understood that when Jesus spoke of a "kingdom" or "empire" or "domain" of God, he was not only offering a different idea of community, but also likely criticizing the one presently in place. This discussion of the kingdom connected to issues in historical Jesus scholarship that we had explored earlier concerning the possible meanings of the kingdom of God. Students came to appreciate that if one focused upon the notion of the kingdom as wholly future, and wholly dependent upon God's actions, then one might be less inclined to seek a more just society in the here and now. The distinctions between ethical eschatology and apocalyptic eschatology, made by Crossan, became clearer. Moreover, they understood that Jesus' teachings could have political dimensions regardless of whether he was focused on the present, the future, or both.

Certainly, issues related to economic violence and poverty were relevant for the students working at the AIDS hospice, and they raised them regularly throughout the conversations and in their journals. At the hospice they met people who had been rejected by their families, treated as shameless outcasts, and who did not want even their friends to visit them, as they were ashamed of their illness. Thus the debilitating sway of honor and shame that we had read about in class was noted in particular by these students, as well as the

sorrow and loneliness that one can feel after being rejected by family. Students honestly discussed their nervousness over touching the residents of the hospice, but one young woman in particular conveyed her new appreciation for the power of touch. This naturally led to questions of what Jesus might have been doing in the healing narratives. It seemed to me that the course reading, which argued that Jesus was healing social illnesses as opposed to physical diseases (Crossan 1994), a notion that some students are often shocked by, came more easily to the students working at the hospice. They knew that the residents were not going to get better physically, but they understood that there was tremendous healing needed in the social realm. Moreover, the students developed a real appreciation of the potential cruelty of purity codes. Often purity concerns seem strange to North American students, but after having spent time at the hospice, the students repeatedly brought them up in conversation and in their journals. In this way, we were able to return to the question of to what degree Jesus was criticizing aspects of ritual and social practice in his day.

Students who worked at the L'Arche communities also appreciated such issues. One of the most memorable classes was when a young woman who was working at a L'Arche house stated squarely, "The people at L'Arche don't need healing, the rest of us do." Again we had a lengthy discussion about healing the social world versus the physical world; whether we "can make the social world humanly habitable" (Crossan 1994, 82) and how that compares to what Jesus may have been doing.

One way I was able to assess the service learning was by supplementing the standard university evaluation forms with more specific questions related to service learning. Some students stated that the service did not affect their perspective on Jesus but it did affect the way in which they understood modern society. Others, however, indicated that it did alter their understanding of Jesus and his teaching. For example, one student wrote

the service learning made me change my views drastically on contemporary Christianity. I think that Americans today focus too much on self and personal righteousness, which is the opposite of Jesus' life and ministry. The service learning made Jesus' teaching come alive – more churches should do this.

Another wrote "the service learning was an awakening for me. I saw the parallels between the social struggles of the ancient world and social struggles today," while another indicated that the service "helped me to experience the meaning of Jesus' teachings." One stated that the service learning was "an awakening . . . the parallels with ancient poverty and social struggles could not be

seen otherwise," while another simply wrote, "it enabled me to think about the historical Jesus because I had never understood what that was before." Students also agreed at the end of the course that the teachings and actions of Jesus would have been considered somewhat countercultural in the ancient world, and appreciated the point of asking why, historically, he was put to death. Students grasped the fact that when they attempted to get to the root of why many depend upon food banks, or why some have no place but a hospice to go for care, or others are living on the street, they had to ask difficult questions regarding tax systems, health care organization, lack of public infrastructures, the power of racial and gender stereotypes and so forth. They were forced to pose fundamental questions about how our society functions, and in so doing, appreciate that challenging some of the systemic problems would be threatening to many, including themselves. Here we were thus able to return to previous discussions of how the Roman empire was structured, and why questioning the power and authority of Rome was upsetting to those who had wealth and power. When we speculated as to how Jesus might be received were he to appear on the scene today, many students argued that he would be assassinated if not put to death by the state.

Conclusion

At the end of the class, even the most dubious of students developed a genuine respect for some of Jesus' teachings within their ancient setting. Those who came from religious contexts in which biblical inerrancy was upheld were still angry about some of the things we questioned, but my impression was that their anger had been tempered by the knowledge that those who question the historicity of some of Jesus' teachings and actions do not do so in an effort to destroy the Christian faith. Rather, they came to see that many who study Jesus historically do so to gain more insight into his significance and meaning, both for the ancient world and for today. The students who had vocally registered their discomfort and frustration with the uncertainties associated with studying the figure of Jesus also seemed a little more at ease. Here, I think that the combination a certain self-efficacy developed through service learning and a contextualized study of Jesus provided a supportive setting for them to risk seeking explanations to questions that can never be fully answered, and to experience such questioning as opportunities, not threats.

The chief aim of the service learning was to help students learn about the teachings and actions of Jesus, which it did. However, through the dynamic of service and intellectual study, I think students developed greater appreciation for questioning and learning in general. This appreciation included the difficult realization that the students themselves were complicit in unjust

systems. Yet, they could also seek to change such systems. Finally, service learning made concrete the notion that experiences affect the way in which one learns, both by way of blocking one from noticing certain things, and by sharpening and sensitizing one to observing people, events, and structures in new ways.

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