

**Would Jesus Occupy Wall Street?"**  
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**Unitarian Universalist Church of Sarasota**

It started with the Canadians.

According to Wikipedia, The Adbusters Media Foundation is a Canadian-based organization founded in 1989 in Vancouver, British Columbia. The foundation describes itself as "a global network of artists, activists, writers, pranksters, students, educators and entrepreneurs who want to advance the new social activist movement of the information age." In mid July mid-2011, Adbusters proposed a peaceful occupation of Wall Street to protest corporate influence on democracy, address a growing disparity in wealth, and the absence of legal repercussions behind the recent global financial crisis. September 17, 1,000 protesters marched through the streets of New York and estimated 100 to 200 people stayed overnight in a park near Wall Street.

They are still there, although no one know known if anyone will stay as the days grow colder. Hundreds of other occupy demonstrations have occurred across the United States and across the world. In London, on October 15, up to 3,000 protesters gathered in the square outside the London Stock Exchange, near St Paul's Cathedral, with the aim of occupying it. Police stopped that from happening. The Occupy London Stock Exchange protesters then turned to St Paul's Churchyard, the square in front of the cathedral, and set up camp, asking "What would Jesus do?" (see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00llr75> )

In Mark's Gospel it says "Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'how hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!' And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

Based on this passage, the answer to the question I posed in the sermon title is yes, Jesus would occupy Wall Street.

Of course this is a Unitarian Universalist church. Therefore, we can also ask the question "Would a Religious Humanist Occupy Wall Street?"

The humanist manifesto of 1933 says "the humanists are firmly convinced that existing acquisitive and profit motivated society has shown itself to be inadequate and that a radical change in methods, controls, and motives must be instituted. A socialized and cooperative economic order must be established to the end that the equitable distribution of the means of life be possible."

Although this is not as easy to remember as an image of a camel and a needle, based on this passage I suspect that the answer to the question "Would a Religious Humanist Occupy Wall Street?" is also yes. Although, to be completely accurate I think we should say that most religious

humanists are likely to support the occupation of Wall Street, but not likely to actually join the occupiers in sleeping out in the cold.

However I would argue that the question would Jesus occupy Wall Street? is an important question to ask, because we live in the country where the vast majority of people identify themselves as Christians and followers of Jesus, therefore if there is a change we would like to make in our society we are more likely to be successful if we can legitimately claim that what we want is consistent with the teachings of Jesus.

In other words if your goal is to separate yourself from traditional Christian religion then the question would Jesus occupy Wall Street? is not important. On the other hand, if your goal is the more equitable distribution of wealth in the United States, it helps to have Jesus on your side. It is even better to have Jesus and the religious humanists on the same side.

During my adult life I have watched the gap between the rich and poor in our country grow wider and wider. One economist has developed a graphic metaphor to convey the extent of wealth disparity. He asks us to imagine a parade of people where everyone's height is proportional to his or her individual wealth. A person of average wealth is represented by a person of average height. The parade begins with the smallest (the poorest) at the front and the rich bringing up the rear, in a one hour parade. The first marchers are buried several feet beneath the ground, since they owe more than they own. For approximately twenty minutes there are invisible marchers, for they own no wealth. After half an hour there are dwarfs, people about six inches tall, whose wealth is household furniture, a car, and perhaps a small savings account. Only at twelve minutes before the hour do we begin seeing people of average height, for more than three-quarters of the population have fewer assets than average. In the last few minutes giants loom up. In the last seconds there are people so tall we cannot see their heads. The last few persons are at least ten miles tall. [Jan Pen, "A Parade of Dwarfs (and a few Giants)," A.B. Atkinson, Ed., *Wealth, Income and Inequality*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 47-55. Quoted in *How Much Do We Deserve?* page 8.]

The Protestant work ethic is partly to blame for this inequality of wealth. According to the Protestant work ethic, worldly wealth is a virtue in the eyes of God. Poverty is a moral failure, a sign of laziness and lack of ambition. Wealth is a blessing from God that comes because of hard work, diligence, intelligence, and thriftiness. In twenty-first century America this prosperity theology is a key part of the teachings of clergy such as Joel Osteen, whose Television Sermons reach seven million people each week. On the first page of his book *Your Best Life Now* Rev. Osteen writes:

A man stopped to admire a gorgeous house set high on a hill. The property was replete with beautiful palm trees and lush green gardens, a peaceful setting with a panoramic view overlooking the ocean.

As the man gazed at the magnificent home, he commented to his wife and friend, "I can't even imagine living in a place like that."

[Osteen concludes] As long as you cannot imagine it, as long as you can't see it, then it is not going to happen for you. The man correctly realized that his own thoughts and attitudes were condemning him to mediocrity. He determined then and there to start believing better of himself, and believing better of God.

I agree that it is good to have a positive mental attitude. However, I find myself agreeing with the words of Ecclesiastes chapter 9 verse 11 "Wise persons do not always earn a living, intelligent persons do not always get rich, and capable persons do not always rise to high positions."

Like this Jewish writer, I do not believe that lack of a positive mental attitude or the lack of faith in God cause poverty. I do not believe that great wealth is always a sign of hard work or intelligence. Over half of the persons on the *Forbes* magazine list of the 400 richest people in America inherited their wealth. I believe poverty is caused by an unjust economic system. I believe persons who suffer from the sickness of greed perpetrate this unjust system. I believe this illness of greed, is at the root of our economic problems.

I am not a socialist. I believe in a capitalist system. I believe in economic incentives and I believe in the competition of the market place. But I believe that all of us must be protected from the extremes of a free market. In a good society no one should go without basic food, shelter, clothing, or health care. And in a good society there should be limits to how much wealth any one person can accumulate.

Economists Lester Thurow and Robert Heilbroner suggest a fairness ratio. This is based on the ratio between the average income of the top 20 percent and the bottom 20 percent of the population. They suggest that our goal be to establish a ration of 5 to 1. This policy would mean that the average yearly income in the top 20% of the population would not be more than five times larger than the average income of the bottom 20% of the population. So for example, if the average person in the bottom 20 percent of our economy can only afford to own one car, The average person in the top 20 percent of our economy should own not more than five cars. If the average person in the bottom 20 percent can only afford one house, the average person in the top 20 percent should only be able to own five houses.

In 2010 this ratio was 14.5 to 1. The average income of the top 20 percent of the population was 14.5 times the average income of the bottom 20 percent of the population.  
([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Income\\_inequality\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Income_inequality_in_the_United_States) )

Economists Lester Thurow and Robert Heilbroner first suggested the fairness ratio in 1982. In recent years the growth of income among most of those of us in top 20 percent, which includes many Unitarian Universalists, has only kept pace with the over-all growth in income. The real growth in income has been primarily in the top one tenth percent. Over the past 30 years our laws have changed so that wealth has shifted from the bottom 80 percent of the population and given to the top one tenth of one percent of the people who live in the United States.

How do we redistribution income more fairly? Ideally a truly progressive income tax would replace our current tax system that relies on property tax, sales tax and a regressive payroll tax.

Under a progressive income tax system, rates increase as the taxable income increases. Progressive taxes attempt to reduce the tax burden of people with a lower ability-to-pay, as they shift the incidence increasingly to those with a higher ability-to-pay. This is not a socialist idea or a communist idea. Something like it was suggested by Thomas Jefferson in a letter to James Madison in October of 1785. It was also the basic idea behind the federal income tax amendment to the United States Constitution.

Also, ideally, the poorest in our society should be protected from homelessness and hunger by a guaranteed minimum income. In 1963, Robert Theobald published the book *Free Men and Free Markets*, in which he advocated a guaranteed minimum income. In 1968, 1,200 economists signed a document calling for the US Congress to introduce a system of income guarantees. In 1973, Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote *The Politics of a Guaranteed Income* in which he discussed Richard Nixon's guaranteed minimum income proposal.

I believe that, if we wish to be a society where no person goes hungry or homeless, where persons no longer freeze to death on our streets, this is the ideal solution. It provides an income floor for the poor and it lessens income disparity. It preserves incentives. It maintains the power of the market while combining it with a program of income maintenance.

In our country about twenty percent of the people in our nation, including many religious leaders, support these types of solutions. About 20 percent of the people are strongly opposed and will like always be opposed to progressive income tax and guaranteed minimum income. About 60 percent of the people of this nation shift back and forth in their views. Each side struggles to win over enough of the middle 60 percent to gain power.

Robert Heilbroner died in 2005. Before his death he was not happy with the economic trends he saw in America. He wrote:

If the rich man - or better yet - the rich society - finally wins admission to heaven, I suspect it will be not because capitalists have pure hearts, but because scientists will have succeeded in breeding exceptionally thin and agile camels, and because technology has succeeded in making needles with very large wide eyes. (Quoted in *How Much Do We Deserve?* page 156.)

But last September 17, 1,000 protesters marched through the streets of New York City. As of today "Occupy" protests modeled after Occupy Wall Street have occurred in over 900 cities worldwide. For example this past week protesters in Oakland, California shut down the Port of Oakland, the fifth busiest port in the nation. Police estimated that about 3,000 demonstrators were gathered at the port and 4,500 had marched across the city.

On October 24, the Roman Catholic Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace called for a new world economic order based on ethics and the "achievement of a universal common good." With more than 68 million members, the Roman Catholic Church is the largest single religious denomination in the United States, comprising about 22 percent of the population. Obviously, if the 200,00 Unitarian Universalists can join in a religious coalition with the Jews, the Roman

Catholics and other religious groups, we can be more effective in bringing about change.

We make changes only when our dissatisfaction and unhappiness with what we have is greater than our fear of change. Many of us are deeply unhappy living in a world with extremes of poverty and wealth. Many of us cannot completely block off or deny our feelings of unfairness about the way things are. We have religious questions about the meaning of life. We acquire a house, we acquire a car, we take our vacations; but we feel in our hearts that we cannot be truly happy when others are going hungry. Feeling a basic religious sense that homelessness and poverty are wrong, we help at shelters and at soup kitchens and urge our government leaders to make changes. Perhaps now with the help of the Occupy Wall Street movement, and the support of religious leaders, we will see progress in ending this income inequality.

According to the web site Occupy Sarasota there was an event here yesterday at 5-Points Park (In front of Selby Library.) I understand that 30 people attended. I do not know if this movement will grow or fade over time. I do know that one year from today, Tuesday, November 6, 2012 there will be a national election. Elections remain our best hope to make changes in our country.

In this church I see the generosity of members of this congregation in organizing to help the poor in this community and in the larger world. What you do is good and important work. But I have a dream that some day the policies of our government and our society will change so that all the homeless shelters and soup kitchens will be history. I have a dream that the scandalous extremes in income and wealth will disappear, and some day, liberals and conservatives, Christians religious humanists and others will all join hands and walk together through the eye of the needle.

Primary Source:

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