

## ***Doing Justice***

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*Justice is the order which love requires... an order of life which gives to each member of the community the fullest possible access to the sources of fulfillment. Love needs law. Love without regard for the terms of justice is sentimentality.*

—Daniel Day Williams

*Those who live by compassion are often canonized. Those who live by justice are often crucified.* —John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity*

Reading: Matthew 5:1-10

I continue with my sermon series on themes of the U.C.C. Earlier I spoke of the struggle for *freedom* for religious expression that is hardwired into our history. And I spoke of the *unity* of not just the church but the entire creation that we have felt called to exhibit. Today the subject of my sermon is *justice*.

Daniel Day Williams once wrote that “justice is the order that love requires.” Justice is about how the world is structured and ordered; it is about systems and patterns of how things work. Justice requires not only that we know about *love*, it requires that we know about *the world* and society, the ins and the outs of government, trade policy and the like.

Suffice it to say that the United Church of Christ has been a leader among the other denominations on issues of justice and equality. From abolition, to women’s rights, to the social gospel, to public education, to racial reconciliation, to being open and affirming to gay and lesbian person, the struggle for justice has been a part of our tradition.

Now when I read the Beatitudes earlier, my guess is that you heard them in a way that you hadn’t before. I read, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they shall be satisfied.” And “Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of justice, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” The translation that is more familiar says, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for *righteousness*,” and “Blessed are those who are persecuted for *righteousness*.” So what am I doing?

Well as you know, the New Testament was written in Greek, and the Greek word that is being translated here is *dikaosune*. And almost invariably when *dikaosune* occurs in classical or secular Greek, it gets translated as “justice.”

But here in Matthew 5 it is translated as “righteousness.” Does that indicate some kind of bias on the part of the translators? Perhaps. But let me ask, what connotation does righteousness call to mind as opposed to justice? It calls forth a private morality, a personal piety, as opposed to a social reality, doesn’t it?

But even if we use the right word and acknowledge that justice is essential to the teaching of Jesus, that God requires us to “do justice,” we have the face the issue of the kind of justice God loves. Ever since Augustine, the image of God as a just God has been the image of a God who punishes for sin, I believe. That’s how Augustine talked about God’s justice, and it set the tone for generations to follow in the church. But that way of thinking totally obscures the meaning of God’s loving justice. I don’t see in the Bible where it says God loves to see people writing in punishment for their sins. No, when it says that God loves justice it means something else. It is not about vengeance. It is not about retributive justice; it is about restorative justice.

It is about “the right ordering of life.” Reinhold Niebuhr said that as Christians we are called to struggle with the impersonal social structures of an “immoral society” and the structural, institutional violence of the world. As Paul wrote, we struggle not against flesh and blood, but against rulers and authorities, against powers and principalities. (Ephesians 6:12) Emmanuel Mounier wrote:

*People think too much about the acts of violence, which prevents them from seeing that more often there are states of violence—as when there are millions of [people] out of work and dying and being dehumanized, without the visible barricades and within the established order today.*

To speak of justice in this sense is to view structures of institutions in society which violate and deprive others.

And so, justice involves a *collective* or *corporate responsibility*. It is fine to talk about personal responsibility, but we cannot stop there. Whole communities, entire countries have responsibilities, too. This is what the great prophets were about. They essentially called *nations* into accountability to care for their citizens. They primarily addressed the kings who represented the state. Today, we are the king. “We the people” are held collectively responsible. Justice goes beyond the voluntary good will of the few; it sometimes involves involuntary compliance of unwilling people. Individuals, for example, may not be willing to share some of their abundance for the well being of the common good, and so we have taxes. (I say this with the awareness that much of our taxes are not used for the common good and only a small portion actually benefits the poor, but that’s another sermon.) Another example of justice was requiring some very unwilling people to abolish Jim Crow practices during the Civil Rights movement through legislation.

Another way to look at justice is compassion plus intelligence—the ability and willingness to connect the dots—seeing how the system can work better and how society can act more compassionately as a whole.

Theologian Robert McAfee Brown has written:

*It is thus linguistically proper to speak, for example, about the violence of the slum—not the violence in the slum, but the violence of the slum. The difference between the two phrases is important. It is not enough to say that the violent acts, such as mugging, rape, or robbery take place in a slum environment. The point is that the slum environment, the structure of the slum itself, works violence against those who live within it, even if they never experience the physical harm so often attendant on slum dwelling. They are denied the possibility of achieving full personhood, since living in the slum means that they will probably not get the health care to which human beings are entitled; their children will surely go to inferior schools; because of inferior schooling, their children will almost certainly have to live in inferior neighborhoods; their children, in turn, will most likely have to go to inferior schools—and the vicious cycle will be repeated in each generation. All of this adds up to “violation of personhood” and is a clear example of structural violence.*

Jesus criticized the Pharisees because they could not see that even though they were following the letter of the law, they still participated from the status quo, the *Pax Romana* (the “peace” under Rome), and that they did not see structures that benefit some and hurt others. The message of Jesus is that none of us are “pure” and violence is a condition of which all of us are guilty in some degree, even in apparently peaceful societies.

And so we come to an important distinction that is best seen when we talk about the difference between *justice* and *charity*. As people of faith, we concern ourselves not just with charity, not just with addressing the immediate pain and hunger of others. But we concern ourselves with the *right ordering of life*, with the *root causes* of that pain and hunger, with the *system*. And yet, as Christians, we have not always done this well, and Karl Marx’s critique has some real validity when he said, “You Christians have a vested interest in unjust structures which produce victims, to whom you can then pour out your hearts in charity.” As Christians, we admit we are sometimes all too willing to live with the violence of the *status quo*.

You know, when the Bible talks about justice, over and over it holds up three groups of people: the widows, the aliens and the orphans. Why? Well because these were the little people in ancient Israeli society. These were the marginal people, the people on the edges, the people without voice and without standing. And from this you can see what the Bible means by a just society: *when all the little people are brought back into community*. When all those at the margins are

brought back to the center, are given voice and standing, and share in the goods of the community. A former professor of mine, Nick Wolterstorff, now at Yale, said that if you want to find out whether our contemporary American society is just or not you need to look at how many poor and voiceless people there are. He said:

*The poor and the voiceless in society don't represent opportunities for charity. They represent, most of the time, a collapse of justice.*

At the conclusion of his magnificent book, *The Birth of Christianity*, John Dominic Crossan ends by discussing how justice is central to the character of God and the character of the people of God. Compassion needs to flow into justice. We need both, but justice is the hardest.

*[E]ven in a perfectly just system, there would still be those who would need compassion. But compassion, no matter how immediately necessary or profoundly human, cannot substitute for justice, for the right of all to equal dignity and integrity of life. Those who live by compassion are often canonized. Those who live by justice are often crucified.*

There an old parable about the difference you may have heard:

*One summer in the village, the people in the town gathered for a picnic. As they leisurely shared food and conversation, someone noticed a baby in the river, struggling and crying. The baby was going to drown!*

*Someone rushed to save the baby. They, they noticed another screaming baby in the river, and they pulled that baby out. Soon, more babies were seen drowning in the river, and the townspeople were pulling them out as fast as they could. It took great effort, and they began to organize their activities in order to save the babies as they came down the river. As everyone else was busy in the rescue efforts to save the babies, two of the townspeople started to run away along the shore of the river.*

*"Where are you going?" shouted one of the rescuers. "We need you here to help us save these babies!"*

*"We are going upstream to stop whoever is throwing them in!"*

Certainly we need compassion or charity *and* justice. The compassion of the Good Samaritan is needed to bind up the wounds. But we cannot stop there. As Martin Luther King, Jr. said,

*One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway.*

You see, to be committed to justice is to see that the order of life is not right in our world. It is to see the vast difference between the Kingdom of God and the current state of the world. It is to see the status quo is not acceptable. Arthur Gish said it so well when he wrote,

*[The Christian] can be expected to be in continual conflict with the structures of society, for to be at peace with God means to be in conflict with the world. When a Christian is faithful to Christ and refuses to compromise with the demands of society, it is almost inevitable that s/he will be looked up by the power structures of that society as being disloyal and subversive, and so s/he is. S/He is a person who dares to call the whole society into question. S/He is a revolutionary.*

This is precisely what the society thought of the first communities of Christians. The Jewish leaders said, “Look, these people *have turned the world upside down.*” (Acts 17:6) They were accusing Paul and Silas of revolutionary activity because they were saying things like, “There is another king—Jesus.” You know, we often say “Jesus is Lord,” but to say this is really a very subversive thing. And I suppose that there was more than a grain of truth to those trumped up charges which they brought against Paul and Silas. What they were saying was truer than they knew: They *were* turning the world upside down.

And if you remember, Jesus himself was accused of sedition and revolutionary behavior by the Roman and Jewish authorities, the keepers of the status quo. When Jesus came to Nazareth to preach, he took his cue from another prophet, Isaiah, asserting that the Spirit of the Lord had anointed him “to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captive and to set at liberty those who are oppressed.” (Luke 4:18) This enraged his listeners.

God’s work was always to turn the world upside down. Mary sang that God “had put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich God has sent empty away.” (Luke 2:52-53)

And in choosing Israel, God sided with the “least of all peoples” in the world, the oppressed, the enslaved, the insignificant ones against the powerful and mighty. God’s work for justice has always turned the world upside down.

And we are called to continue to turn the world upside down in our work for justice. “Thy kingdom come...”

A child once said that the New Testament ended with “Revolutions.” And you know, it’s kind of true. When Christianity gets into action it causes a revolution in society.

G. K. Chesterton once said, "You know you are on the right road when you are homesick at home." And this is what it means to be committed to justice—to be homesick at home. It is to see injustice, structures of violence. It is to be sensitive to those things which push people to the margins. It is to be non-defensive and honest about how we benefit and participate in these patterns and institutions of oppression.

Finally, as Bob Brown said, "To be on the side of justice is going to make some people unhappy—particularly those who benefit from the ongoing structures of injustice—and to be on the side of justice is thereby going to create some conflict." Yet in the name of peace and harmony, this conflict is often avoided. But I would submit to you that this is a false peace and superficial harmony, the kind to which Jeremiah referred when he said, "Prophets and priests are frauds, everyone of them. They bind my people's wounds, but only skin deep, when they say 'Peace, peace' and there is no peace."

My friends, we must bind the wounds of all God's people, but we need more than band-aids. We need to go deep, to the root of the pain. We cannot rest, we cannot give up, we cannot give up, until the world is upside down.

#### **Benediction** (written by Clinton Marsh)

*And now, I am supposed to say to you, "Go in peace." But how can I say, "Go in peace," when you are going out into a world where you are insecure, whether at home or on your neighborhood street?*

*-- Out into a world where race is set against race?*

*-- Out into a world where people are hungry and homeless, while their governments squander billions of dollars on instruments of destruction that they dare not use?*

*--- Out into a world where every night millions of mothers watch their children sink into a hungry slumber, only to awaken (if they awaken) to another hungry tomorrow?*

*With a world like that out there, how can I say to you, "Go in peace?"*

*But I dare to say, "Go in peace," because Jesus says "I give you my peace."*

*But - remember - he who says, "I give you my peace" also says, "If you would be my disciple and [thereby] have my peace, take up your cross and follow me!"*

*So I dare to say, "Go in peace!" -- if you dare!*