

## **Getting Back Out to the Streets - The Promotion of Social Righteousness.**

*February 27<sup>th</sup>, 2011 – Jesse B. Larson*

It was 1998 – my junior year of college. Our environmentalist group gathered secretly in a meeting room adjacent to the cafeteria just as the massive lunch rush was beginning. We smeared black paint on our arms and faces to appear as if we were covered in oil. A few of us had drums while many others had signs. At the count of three we charged into the cafeteria drumming and shouting “boycott Shell Oil.” In our 90 second piece of guerrilla theater, we explained that the Shell Oil Company was polluting the lands of the Ogoni people in the Niger Delta of Nigeria. The Ogoni people had been organizing themselves, but their top leaders were unjustly imprisoned and some were killed.

We staged this spectacle so that people would know about this injustice that was happening on the other side of the world. It was our hope that we could, in our own small way, effect a positive change in the part of the world that was hurting and being treated very unfairly. Although most folks simply went back to eating their meal, some folks did approach us for more information. It was a good day and I felt like I was a part of something meaningful.

Sadly, I haven’t been involved in a protest in a quite a while. But my passion for social justice remains a constant in my life. So, I have been very excited to know that I would be preaching about the 5<sup>th</sup> great end of the church – the promotion of social righteousness. Let’s go ahead and read the 6 great ends of the church (slide).

The Great Ends of the Church are:

*The proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind*

*The shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God*

*The maintenance of divine worship*

*The preservation of the truth*

*The promotion of social righteousness*

*The exhibition of the kingdom of Heaven to the world*

Most of us at CPC have a clear understanding of what social justice is, and for many of us, we find social justice to be at the core of the gospel of Jesus Christ, myself included. But I'd like to take a few moments to unpack what we mean when we speak about social righteousness. We tend to think of 'righteousness' as a characteristic of an individual and usually of the private sphere. And we are much more used to hearing an individual being referred to as 'self-righteous' than 'righteous.' On the other hand, we are inclined to consider 'justice' as something public, and it usually takes the form of retribution. For example, if someone is convicted of robbery, there is a trial and he or she is given time in prison to repay society.

Interestingly, in the Bible the word for 'righteousness' and 'justice' are the same word in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. In Hebrew, the word, 'tsadak' is used; and in Greek, the word 'diakiosune' is used.

So, what does this mean? First, it acknowledges strongly that to the authors of the Bible, justice and righteousness are the same thing. Second, it implies that our conception of 'justice' and 'righteousness', by which we give them different meanings, is likely to be wrong – at least theologically speaking.

Paul Marshall, a professor and author who works for the Center for Religious Freedom at the Hudson Institute, offers a helpful definition of justice that, I believe, more accurately describes the term represented by “tsadak” and “diakiosune.” Marshall states that:

“Justice is right relationships among all things in the created order of things.”

Whereas our conventional conception of ‘righteousness’ is centered on an individual and our conventional conception of ‘justice’ is centered on a legal framework, Marshall lodges them as a relationship amongst all created things. I really like this definition as I think it gets at the totality of what Jesus was getting at throughout his life and teachings.

First, Jesus was all about right relationships. He urges us to enter into a right relationship with God, and he urges us to enter into a right relationship with other people, even our enemies. We are to care for the poor, the sick, and the imprisoned. Much of Jesus’ ministry was about making those who were sick or unclean well again, and bringing them back into a right relationship with the community. Those who were reviled – lepers, prostitutes, tax collectors - were welcomed to the table. We are not to judge others. Outsiders are often prominent figures in Jesus’ parables. In “The Good Samaritan” it is a heathen Samaritan who does the right thing. So, we are also to be in right relationships with other groups of people as well.

Second, Jesus rarely, if ever, made distinctions between one's private life and one's public life – or, one's religious life and one's secular life. To be in the right relationship with God and with our fellow human beings, we cannot pick and choose the random times when we ought to be just and upright. We cannot only be fair and honest with our family and friends. Christ wants fundamental, consistent change within our relationships which will permeate our entire being and which will positively influence all we encounter.

Our text for today involves a man with a withered hand who Jesus heals on the Sabbath. Jesus wants this poor man to experience the power and mercy of God. But the Pharisee and religious leaders cared only for traditions and laws, and by doing so, excluded this man from what God wanted to do in his life. Not only that, their hearts were so hard that Jesus breaking such laws compelled them to seek to destroy him.

I like that this text mentions that Jesus was angry! When people are kept in pain or oppressed due to unjust laws, it should boil our blood. Didn't this man, too, deserve to feel God's compassion and abundance? Too often we act as if following Jesus is about getting our religion right, when it is really about getting life right. And for Jesus, sharing God's grace and love trumps any law – even the Sabbath – that denies people from these things.

The author of the book of James writes about the magnitude of social action in chapter 2:14-17. He states:

‘What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? 17 So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.’

This is a demand for action. How can we sit in luxury and be at ease when those around us are hungry and victimized? Like James, I believe Jesus calls us to work for justice and right relationships with all whom we met. However, the end of this passage is tricky for we Presbyterians, as we do not believe that faith without works is dead. We profess that our works, no matter how great, cannot save us. It is only God’s grace through our faith in Christ that saves us. But – and this is a crucial ‘but’ – our good works are still very important; we seek to help others because we feel so compelled and thankful due to this overwhelming grace and love of God that we have received. We yearn for others to experience God’s love and bounty.

It is apropos that I would be preaching about social justice at a most remarkable time when folks throughout the Middle East are taking to the streets and demanding change. They want freedom and opportunity for all, not for just the wealthy and privileged. Although large marches for justice aren’t mentioned in Jesus’ ministry, he was always in the streets, working on behalf of the people. And over the centuries many campaigns for social justice have been rooted in the teachings of Jesus – the abolitionist movement, the Civil Rights Movement, the Anti-apartheid movement, etc. Although I believe earnestly that Jesus would have supported such campaigns, the point Jesus was continually making is that the lives of all people are valuable. Our relationships will all people, not just our family and

friends, are important. Do we seek to include or exclude people from God's bounty and love? Will we go to the streets to make our voices heard, to stand up for the cause of love, and to stand in solidarity with those people who are be denied the full experience of God's grace and love.

Without a doubt, an individual who clearly understood and heeded the Gospel's call for social justice – for right relationships with all – was the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. This being Black History Month, I think it is quite appropriate to read a few poignant sentences from his powerful "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." If you have never read it, do so immediately. It will change your life. In this letter, King passionately explains to white moderate pastors living in the south why the civil rights movement "can't wait." Many pastors were urging King to stop pursuing change as he was putting some people off. King eloquently responds to these critics, saying:

"But more basically, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their "thus saith the Lord" far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.

Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a

single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

Recently, I was having dinner with a few members of this church. As we enjoyed thought-provoking conversation, particularly about the current state of our American society, our host, a loving, older woman and esteemed member of both this church and the larger Ames community, said “I think we need to get back into the streets.” Now, let me reassure you that this woman is one of the most gentle, gracious, open-minded and loving women I have ever met and that is why I was so pleased by her declaration. She sees no disconnect between being loving and gracious and going out into the streets, participating in civil disobedience, and marching for what she believes in. In fact, I believe she, like many of us, consider that we are being most loving and most just when we dedicate ourselves to a cause that we dearly support.

So, in closing, brothers and sisters, despite our busy schedules, I urge you to discern a cause that is lacking of right relationships. Unfortunately, you don't need to look far to find one. I can list a huge range of issues – environmental degradation, discrimination against gays and lesbians, world hunger, gun violence – many of which are not controversial or a part of any political leaning. Take an interest in your cause, learn about it, and then seek ways to support your cause. Let God's great love fill you with passion and energy, so much so that you must respond by sharing this love to others, especially to those groups who are hurting and excluded. As for my older friend and I, we are thinking about getting back out to the streets...care to join us? Amen.