

WEEK 3: Social Justice

For the past two weeks we have been focusing on what it means for us to be isolated; to be in Exile or the Wilderness. This week we will explore what it means when others are isolated and more importantly what does the Bible say our response should be when that happens. What today we commonly refer to as social justice.

According to that great source of all human knowledge, Wikipedia, social justice is the “concept of fair and just relations between the individual and society, as measured by the distribution of wealth, opportunities for personal activity, and social privileges.” Thanks to all you Gen-Zers (and I really do mean that for it gives me hope) this idea is being forced back into our conscious lately; however, the core issue has been with humankind for centuries.

The Old and New Testaments are full of verses that deal with the concept of justice. In the Old Testament we are constantly reminded that our God is a just God. In the New Testament, more specifically the gospels, Jesus continually reached out to those who were neglected and overlooked: the poor, the sick, the widow, the orphan. Unfortunately, on an issue you would think would unite the Christian community, we often disagree as to how these issues should be addressed. What is the role of the church, of government, of society and of the individual? This week we are going to be exploring those verses and what they say to us today. Here are the readings we will explore if you want to get ahead and start thinking about them.

Monday

Micah 6:6-8

Tuesday

Zechariah 7:9-10
Isaiah 1:17
Matthew 25:42-43

Wednesday

Leviticus 19:9-10;
33-34
Jeremiah 22:3

Thursday

Matthew 5:1-16

Friday

Proverbs 31:8-9
Matthew 5:14-
16

Monday

*'With what shall I come before the Lord,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings,
with calves a year old?
Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?'
He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:6-8)*

Micah 6:8 is probably the “go-to” verse when we talk about the topic of social justice. The first response to the question of what the Lord requires of us is “to do justice.” I am such a fan of this verse that I have it tattooed on my body: doing justice next to my hand, loving kindness next to my heart, and walking humbly next to my foot – clever, huh? Well, I at least think so! However, we often overlook the other verses in that part of the chapter or even the context in which Micah is speaking. Micah is talking about a faith in God that moves beyond ritual into daily practice. A third century Rabbi said that Micah boiled all 613 laws of the Torah into three basic points with the first one being to “do justice.” But what does justice mean in this context?

There are several words for justice in Hebrew, the one most referenced being tzedak. It is where we get the word tzedakah which is associated with acts of charity in Judaism. If you were to go into a synagogue or Jewish home today, you might see little blue boxes called tzedakah boxes. They are for collecting money for charity; kind of like the little cardboard fish banks that you got when you were in children's Sunday School. All I remember about those things was how near impossible they were to build! Anyway, back to the Hebrew.

Tzedak is one of the more beautiful concepts in the Hebrew language and many Jewish social initiatives incorporate that word in their name. There is only one problem: the word Micah chooses to use is not the feel good tzedak word, it is the word misphat which is commonly defined as judgement. I don't know about you, but to me “doing judgement” is different than “doing justice.” I get these images of legal action and courts of law and not reaching out to help the oppressed. So, why that word and why should I really care?

As we will discover later this week tzedakah – acts of charity – were interpreted by the Israelites as being something you did for your fellow Jew. The idea of justice was really being used as “just us.” We see that playing out today. When we talk of taking care of others, we first focus on people who are like us. Do

you see where that could be problematic? Jesus himself challenged the Israelites to rethink who they called their neighbor (us) when he told the parable of the Good Samaritan and it was exactly to challenge this idea: justice is not for just us.

Now, here is the cool part! The Hebrew word *misphat* is related to legal judgement but the beauty of that is, in legal terms, true justice is blind. The Hebrew concept of *misphat*, however, has a universal application to it. It applied to and still applies to all, and not just those who are with the circle we feel comfortable helping. Hold on to that idea as we explore this idea further.

Peace (Shalom)

Tuesday

Thus says the Lord of hosts: 'Render true judgements, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another'.

(Zechariah 7:9-10)

"learn to do good;

seek justice,

rescue the oppressed,

defend the orphan,

plead for the widow". (Isaiah 1:17)

"for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me. (Matthew 25:42-43)

Our scripture passages today deal with the "who" when we talk about social justice. In terms of background, each of these verses pointed to a time when God was telling the people what they had done wrong. The Old Testament prophets are reminding the people of Judah why God had allowed Assyria and Babylon to lay siege to the land and ultimately destroy the temple in Jerusalem. In the reference from the gospel of Matthew, Jesus is telling a parable about those whose actions prevented them from entering his kingdom. What was their failure? It was neglecting those who were marginalized by society. Referenced are the poor, the widow, the orphan – those in ancient times who were dependent on the generosity of others to maintain existence. Zachariah further extends it to include the resident alien (someone not native to the land) and Jesus to the sick and those imprisoned.

All these groups have one thing in common: they have no voice. There is no one to speak or stand for them figuratively or even literally in the case of the sick who may not be able to speak and the alien who does not speak the local language. Today you hear of another word that is mentioned in association with

social justice and that is “advocacy.” As we found with yesterday’s word for justice, the word advocate also finds its origins in legal affairs. In the middle ages, an advocate was someone who spoke on your behalf in a court of law. The idea of today’s attorney comes from this same concept. What Zachariah and Jesus reminds us is that advocacy can go beyond those who are in dire physical need and can reach to those oppressed because of origin, appearance, belief and behavior.

I was in a class a couple of years ago at the Jewish Community Center here in Dallas and the teacher and I happened to be talking after class about Abraham. She asked me what the most remembered story of Abraham was (setting aside the covenant) in the Christian tradition. I told her probably the sacrifice of Isaac because of the model of faith and the allusion to the sacrifice of Christ. She told me that in the Jewish faith it is Abraham’s pleading on the behalf of the peoples of Sodom and Gomorrah. I remember thinking that was very odd, and when I asked why, she responded that Abraham was willing to give voice to those who had strayed from God in a fleeing attempt to save their lives. She said first and foremost, Jews are meant to be a people of social justice and advocacy living into that example to be a light to all peoples as was first spoken to Abraham.

That image has always stuck with me and I have to say that I too am proud to be part of a faith community that sees so much importance in this work. Advocacy and social justice are cornerstones of the work of many PCUSA Mission agencies. The Office of Public Witness works to lobby Congress in areas such environmental justice, fair trade practices, fair food distribution, and against the scourge of human trafficking. The Presbyterian Peacemaking Program promotes peace and justice around the world and in times of disaster; Presbyterian Disaster Assistance steps in to help with recovery and long-term needs. Presbyterian Self-Development of People provides grants to those living in poverty to help improve their lives and our Office of Faith-Based Investing and Corporate Engagement strives to advocate in the corporate arena on social and environment issues. The list goes on and if you are interested in what we are doing at PHPC, reach out to Rev. Kathy Lee-Cornell. Tomorrow we will get into the what and the why of social justice!

Until thenPeace (Shalom)!

Wednesday

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God... When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.
Leviticus 19: 9-10; 33-34)

Give justice to the weak and the orphan;

maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.

Rescue the weak and the needy;

deliver them from the hand of the wicked. (Psalm 82:3)

Chapter 19 of Leviticus, and for that matter all of Leviticus, is a part of the Old Testament that you might not have spent much time reading. Chapter 19 is in a section of Leviticus often referred to as the Holiness Code, and it was the practical guide to Jews on living a righteous life. In the first part of the passage we hear about the concept of “gleaning.” In some parts of the world gleaning is still practiced because it allows the poor to enter a field of crops after it has been harvested and gather anything left behind. In the book of Leviticus, it was required that the people of Israel leave the corners of a field unharvested so that the poor had easy and quick access to food. The second passage from the same chapter refers to the fair treatment of the resident alien (someone who was from another country or region). As an aside, I wonder what it would be like if we treated all resident aliens as if they were citizens – just a thought. What is important about this passage is the way each of the verses close: “I am the Lord your God.” A little Old Testament 101: When you see the phrase, “I am the Lord your God,” it means what should be considered law. The people of Israel were required by God to adhere to these two laws (commandments) just as much as any other law in the Torah. Furthermore, these principles of holiness are part of that concept of tzedakah that I mentioned in Monday’s devotional. Unfortunately, the word tzedakah has lost some of its original meaning given its loose translation to the word charity. These days we often look at charity as an act of benevolence. It has shifted from the Hebrew principle that we are commanded to care for those who are oppressed to something that we do because we are good people. Acts of charity have, over time, put the focus more on the giver than on the recipient.

The second scripture passage from the Book of Psalms seems to imply that these acts need to go one step further. In other words, don’t just feed the hungry but rescue them from the situation in which they are trapped. In Judaism, there is a text that defines eight degrees of tzedakah, each one superior to the other. The highest degree is the action of a person who “enters into a partnership with, or finds work for him (the recipient), in order to strengthen his hand, so that he will have no need to beg from other people”.

Now I know this can seem like a daunting task – caring for all the world's afflicted while also trying to break the cycles of poverty and oppression. Unfortunately, these are tasks that will always be in front of us and it can sometimes be overwhelming to think: Where do I start, how do I help? Hopefully, you can take solace in another reading from an ancient Jewish saying, “You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to ignore it.” Or, as Mother Teresa paraphrased in her own words, “God does not require you to succeed, He only requires you to try.” This issue is not going to be solved by any singular act, but each of us trying can lead to something miraculous.

Peace (Shalom)

Thursday

‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

(Matthew 5:3-6)

‘Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

‘Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

‘Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. (Luke 6:20-21)

Today's discussion around social justice is a complex one that will not resolve itself in a couple of paragraphs. However, it is an issue that needs to be addressed when talking about the Christian response to social justice. It is sad to say that one area the Christian community has struggled with is its response to social justice issues. Since the beginning of the early church, scripture has been used to provide justification for oppressive practices. The Bible was used to justify slavery, it was used to justify gender inequality and still today on same sex marriage and the rights of the LGBTQ+ community. There were those who said the African American slave should not be mistreated or that women had a role, but the issue was that they were not to have an equal role or equal voice in society. While these issues have been mostly dealt with by society, there are still parts of the Christian community who hold on to the underlying debate – that of the actual meaning of the words of scripture.

The questions that are debated back and forth between more liberal and conservative voices with Christianity have to do with the issue of focus. Has today's social justice movement within the Church gone too far and moved from the biblical to the secular in focus? Has the movement gone beyond setting right that which was wronged and more into acts that polarize those seen as oppressed against those who are labeled the oppressors? Has the Christian community lost its focus in terms of its primary mission? That is: Do we spend time helping the refugees and forming immigration policies instead of

proclaiming the gospel to unbelievers and making disciples? I have spend periods of my life on both sides of these arguments, given I was brought up in a very fundamental evangelical church but now choose to worship with the more liberal structure of the PCUSA. The point is: the debate rages and sometimes we lose sight of each other because of how we approach this specific issue.

Now we get to today's scripture passages from two different gospels, Matthew and Luke, in which Jesus talks about the poor and hungry. At first glance, the words look similar but a closer inspection shows a bit of each author's bias regarding the retelling. Matthew forms statements as big-picture, spiritual concepts: hungering and thirsting for righteousness. Luke takes the same message and makes it about those who are physically hungry, in pain, or suffering.

This reflects how each of these gospel writers is trying to portray Jesus and what they see as the more important part of his message. Think about it: If you were trying to explain a concept to the members of your soccer team, you might use different language and analogies than you would to your four-year-old sister. Matthew structures his gospel to position Jesus as a second Moses, bringing a new law to the people of Israel. It's no surprise that the Magi are the ones who are in the birth story in Matthew. Luke's focus is, as a travel log of sorts, first starting with the poor and downtrodden who live in the rural areas of Galilee. Likewise, no surprise that it is the shepherds, the lowliest class of society, who first visit Jesus at his birth. Both gospels come at the same truth but from a different perspective.

So, do those on the liberal side go too far into the societal and political realm of justice with their cause? – perhaps. Do those on the conservative side confront a real problem when discerning who defines what is “right” from a biblical perspective? – absolutely. As much as this will continue to be debated, what we as the Church, the body of Christ, should never do is seek to rescue the soul of the poor, the widow, the orphan, the sick, and the resident alien, only to leave them physically in need. Often, the greatest witness of Christ's love is offering a helping hand to someone in need.

Peace (Shalom)

Friday

*Speak out for those who cannot speak,
for the rights of all the destitute.*

*Speak out, judge righteously,
defend the rights of the poor and needy. (Proverbs 31:8-9)*

'You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:14-16)

Today's discussion topic on social justice is also a tough one! We are going to explore the topic of when we should speak out versus letting our actions speak for us. Our scripture passages come from two very different sections of the Bible. The first is from the book of Proverbs, which is a collection of wisdom sayings in the Old Testament. The 31st chapter of Proverbs is often referred to as the "sayings of the Wise Mother." The mother of a King is telling her son what he should do when it comes to the treatment of the downtrodden and oppressed. The advice is pretty clear: give voice to those who have none.

The second is from the same section of Matthew that we looked at yesterday. At first glance it is not easy to see how this aligns to speaking out in the way we see in the first passage. What it does is show you where the basic lyric from "This Little Light of Mine" came from; but that is beside the point. This is one of those parts of Jesus' teachings where what he says seems to pose more questions than answer them. Even the disciples had to hear the message several times before they got it, and even then it was highly doubtful they got the full meaning of what Jesus was trying to say.

In these verses we have three statements which all seem to be a bit fragmented:

- (1) light of the world;
- (2) city on a hill that cannot be hidden; and
- (3) don't light a lamp and place it under a bushel or bed.

So first off, the light to the world is Jesus (God). There are many passages in the New Testament that point to that fact. So what Jesus is talking about is how the disciples are a reflection or window through which the light is seen. So, the focus of the remaining part of the verses has to do more with how the light should be reflected (or carried).

There are times when we as the church should be invisible; where we are a pane of glass, so to speak, and all that is important is that the light of Christ is seen. This is the city on the hill. When the watch tower of a city is lit, it can be seen in all directions. You might not be able to make out the type of city that it is or what is actually emitting the light, but you can see it and if you are lost it is a guidepost for

direction. Other times, we as the church need to be the lampstand that Jesus referred to in the final part of the statement. Light and lamp cannot be separated and if you try to do so the light will no longer be visible. There are those moments when it is important that we take the advice of the Wise Mother from Proverbs and let our individual voices be heard.

The hard part is knowing when it is time to speak up. When is it time to risk potential embarrassment or alienation and ridicule from others, maybe even the loss of a relationship because it was the right thing to do? Those are all very hard decisions. But you know what? Jesus left us with something to be our guide in those moments: the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit in Hebrew (ruach hakodesh) is literally translated as the "breath/voice of holiness." It is that voice that speaks to us to tell us when it is time to lend our voice to those who do not have one. It was the ruach hakodesh that moved Martin Luther King Jr. to speak out on civil rights. It was the ruach hakodesh that moved Malala Yousafzai to speak for the rights of women and children in war-torn Pakistan. I also believe it was the ruach hakodesh that spoke to Parkland Florida high school students David Hogg and Emma González allowing them to be the national face of gun-control as they led the nation-wide March for Our Lives.

Not all of us will become world renown champions for justice, but all of us can listen for the still small voice of God whispering in our ear when it is the time and place, as again the Wise Mother said, to speak out for those who cannot speak for themselves.

Peace (Shalom)