

Living Justice

Gene McAfee
Faith United Church of Christ
Richmond Heights, Ohio

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Holy Communion
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Acts 11:1-18; Revelation 21:1-6; Matthew 22:23-40

Text: "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." -- Matthew 22:40

A couple of weeks ago, in an effort to help the new members class associate names with faces, I brought them into the sanctuary with the church directory in their hands and pointed out where people tend to sit. The Lorentzes over there, the Nedrows about here, Kathy Gambatese and Cheryl Goggins over there. It wasn't a perfect solution to the problem of not having a pictorial directory – we're working on that – but it was a reasonable work-around because most of us are creatures of habit. We tend to do the same things, in the same way, for the same reasons, over and over again, and those habits – some of them small, some of them large – make up the bulk of our lives.

If you think of your daily routine – how the coffee gets made and by whom and when, how the pets get fed, what route you take to work, what you do when you get to your desk, how supper gets on the table, what happens at bed time – if you think about that routine you'll discover that much of our lives are the same thing repeated many times with relatively minor variations. To paraphrase Edna St. Vincent Millay, it isn't true that life is one thing after another; it's the same thing over and over.

When Jesus told the Pharisaic lawyer in our gospel lesson that the greatest commandment is to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and that we should love our neighbors as we love ourselves, he was talking, I think, as much about habits as about efforts.

I think most of us, when we hear this passage from the gospels – and it occurs in all three of the synoptic gospels – we immediately think: hard work. Lots of strenuous effort. Struggling to herd all the cats in my life into the service of God's realm. Vastly complex. Brain overload.

And then we fairly quickly get to the point of saying to ourselves, perhaps unconsciously: too hard. Can't do it. I give up. I'm a bad person.

That was my experience growing up in fundamentalist Christianity. There was a tremendous importance placed on the really, really hard work of being a Christian. The Christian life was a struggle. It was difficult. It was painful. It required sacrifice. One constantly had to be on one's guard against the wiles of the devil. Temptation was lurking everywhere. One could not be too careful of one's soul. The stakes were high. In fact, they were eternal.

As I've grown older, I'm beginning to think, more and more, that this model of Christianity has some serious problems, not the least of which is that it tends to drain all the joy out of living. Life becomes an endless cycle of struggle and failure, like those diets so many of us try and fail at. We lose the weight for a while, then we gain it back for a much longer while. We go through life accumulating failures, and as the failures pile up, our esteem sinks down. We feel worse and worse about ourselves and worse and worse about life in general. And we become the sort of gloomy Christian no one wants to be around and no one wants to emulate. And then we wonder why our churches aren't

growing.

And those of us who struggle for justice in the world are particularly prone to this sort of vicious cycle, because there's so much injustice out there. As I said to you last week, in the second of these three sermons on justice, we in America tend to take a few steps forward and several steps back when it comes to moving toward justice. While the UCC, for example, is passing a resolution in its General Synod favoring marriage rights for all consenting adults, regardless of their sex or sexual orientation, a number of states at the same time are passing laws limiting marriage to one heterosexual man and one heterosexual woman. One step forward, two steps back. It can make one cranky.

So Jesus' counsel to the lawyer and to us, to love God with everything we've got and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, can feel like an awfully heavy burden, more, in fact, than most of us can bear.

But if we look at Jesus' words from another angle, it may be that he was talking less about adding an additional burden to our already overtaxed lives, and was rather talking about taking those ways that we already have of getting through the daily grind – those patterns of living that we call habits – and directing those away from ourselves and toward God and toward our neighbors.

Remember the old days, when you roared into the supermarket parking lot on two wheels, screeched to a stop, dashed into the store, grabbed whatever it was you needed for supper that night, threw the plastic bag of groceries into the back seat, and tore home to get dinner on the table before the family mutinied? We didn't give a thought, in those days, to what happened to that plastic bag into which our groceries were dumped. We just accepted as a matter of convenience that the bag would be there when we needed and wanted it and then it would be gone when we didn't need it or want it any longer and we didn't think much about where it came from or where it went.

We don't think that way anymore. Or most of us in this congregation don't. We've made a mess of the back seats or trunks of our cars with canvas shopping bags of every sort – the back of my car looks like a traveling circus – and we try very hard to remember to take them with us when we go shopping. Many of us are trying to make shopping with re-usable bags a habit – breaking the old habit of shopping with plastic that ends up in someone's back yard – and developing a new habit of shopping with bags that we use again and again. It's a small step for each one of us to take, but multiplied 330 million times, which is roughly how many of us there are in this country, it's a huge step toward not only caring better for God's creation, which is eco-justice, but caring better for those far away from us into whose backyard our waste often winds up.

Breaking the throw-away habit is a huge step toward living justice, which is what this sermon is about. I've spoken to you already about understanding justice and establishing justice, and today I want to conclude this series by reminding you of a central truth of the Christian faith, which is that we believe the ultimate truths about life are not taught, they're caught, which is to say, they're transmitted from one person who lives them to another person who also lives them.

That's what we mean by the doctrine of the incarnation. The doctrine of the incarnation is that God's ultimate truths have become lived reality in Jesus and in us. God becoming human isn't much more than a clever trick unless we see in that act of divine mercy and grace a profound truth *about* life that *transcends* life. Incarnation means that the ultimate truths about life must be lived – by us or by something – in order for their truth to become real.

We embody the truths of our faith in our daily living – which is largely made up of habits – or we have no faith at all. We can talk all we want about God or Jesus or love or justice, but if we are not incarnating those words in our deeds – not the great, heroic deeds that are rare and noteworthy, but the ordinary deeds that make up the habits of our lives – if the truths of our faith are not found there, they will not be found anywhere.

Living justice means just that: we live justice every day, in all of our actions, great

and small. And when we know that our actions contribute to injustice through unjust systems, we work, by whatever means God give us, to change those systems.

It's not my job to tell you how to do that because I don't know any of you well enough to know those small daily routines that make up your life. You know them and God knows them, and God wants you to use those little routines, those ordinary paths that take us through the journey we call life, for the advancement of God's realm – that way of being in the world in which justice is the rule and not the exception, in which peace is the way of life and not the period between outbreaks of violence. All those little deeds that impact the lives of others, especially those far out on the periphery of our vision, those are the deeds that will bring justice to our world or it will not come at all.

Let me conclude with a story from the rabbis. The Hassidic teacher Zusia once told his students of a vision he had of heaven. In that vision, he saw what the angels would one day ask him as he stood before the throne of grace. The angels would not ask him, "Zusia, why were you not Moses, leading your people from bondage?" The angels would not ask him, "Zusia, why were you not Joshua, leading your people into the land of promise?" The angels would ask him, "Zusia, why were you not Zusia, the one thing that nothing in heaven or on earth could have prevented you from being. Why were you not Zusia?"

My friends, many centuries ago in our own tradition, theologians asked the question, Why did God become human? and the answer they gave was, So that we might become divine. Our divinity grows as our compassion grows, as our peace grows, as our justice grows, as Richard of Chichester said, day by day. We grow more and more into the divine image of our creator as we direct, more and more, those daily habits of daily living more toward the God who made us, loves us, and has shown us the path to eternal life. And as we live God, we live justice. Thanks be to God.