

Understanding Justice

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Richmond Heights, Ohio

The Third Sunday of Easter
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Proverbs 28:1-9; Romans 12:13-21; Matthew 23:1-24

Text: "The evil do not understand justice, but those who seek the Lord understand it completely." -- Proverbs 28:5

This is a sermon about justice. It's also a sermon about religion, because justice and religion, in our tradition, go together, as all of our readings this morning make clear.

Now I know that religion's reputation isn't at its highest point right now, and lots of folks have taken to calling themselves spiritual but not religious, but I'm not ready to give up on religion just yet, at least not on Christianity. The Christian faith, for all its problems – and it has plenty – remains one of the greatest potential forces for good the world has ever known, and if we must spend our lives doing something – and we must – we could all do much worse than spend them trying to bring all that potential good to actual good.

We all know that religion is one of the two topics we avoid at holiday gatherings, the other being politics. People feel passionately about how we should live our lives as individuals – that's usually how we think of religion – and how we should order our lives as groups, which is how we usually think of politics. It doesn't take long for strong opinions to surface when you start talking about things like Sarah Palin or Barak Obama or gay marriage or "only Christians can go to heaven" or "The Tea Party" or "born again" or "health care reform" or "socialism" or "he's not my president."

I saw a bumper sticker the other day that says "Religion kills," and although I initially wanted to protest, I paused for a moment to think about why someone would hold that view with sufficient conviction that they'd plaster it on their car, and I realized that many people don't associate those of us who are religious with the best in human nature. They associate us, rather, with the worst.

And that's one of the reasons the United Church of Christ has always laid great stress on justice. From our very beginning, we have been a church that is committed not only to distributing charity – caring for those near at hand – but more fundamentally to establishing justice – extending that care through space and time.

We are a church that goes beyond the superficial pieties -- "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved" -- and says that there is no believing on the Lord Jesus Christ unless there is justice for those for whom the Lord Jesus Christ came into this world, lived and taught in this world, died in this world, and was raised in this world.

Believing on the Lord Jesus Christ is not thinking that Jesus was the messiah or God's son; believing on the Lord Jesus Christ is trusting Jesus Christ enough to live the life that he lived, a life of service, of giving, of compassion, and of justice for those most in need of justice. That's what it means to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Those who say they love Jesus but do not love as Jesus loved are fooling no one but themselves, and they're certainly not fooling the person with the bumper sticker that says "Religion kills."

That person with that stinging bumper sticker knows what religious hypocrisy looks and sounds and smells and feels like, as did the book of James, which is why the church, in its wisdom, insisted on keeping the book of James, with its emphasis on good works, in the Christian canon.

“What good is it, my brothers and sisters,” James 2 says, “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? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”

There are a lot of dead people out there. They're not zombies – they're church-goers. And synagogue-goers and temple-goers and mosque-goers. They're people who want the ideas of religion, the warm and fuzzy thoughts about religion, the trappings of religion, the smells and bells of religion, but not the lifestyle that actually IS religion.

That's what Jesus was hammering the Pharisees and Saducees about in that passage from Matthew that I read. “You tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced, without neglecting the others.”

You'll often hear Christians say that Jesus did away with the ceremonial law of Judaism; no, actually, he didn't, as this verse makes clear. Jesus did not gut his own religion of its ritual. What he did was insist that people not try to make the physical ritual a substitute for the hard demands of the spiritual values that gave rise to the rituals in the first place. It's easy to go through the motions of a religion; it's much harder to live one. And living a true religion means attending to the ritual no less than to the justice.

Again, from the book of James: “If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” That's Christianity – real Christianity.

Christianity is rooted in Judaism, from whose sacred scriptures the text for this morning's sermon comes. It's from the book of Proverbs, that ancient collection of wise sayings that still has a great deal to teach us. Here's what it says: “The evil do not understand justice, but those who seek the Lord understand it completely.”

That's Proverbs 28:5, and it links the two things I've been saying this sermon is about: justice and religion. Seeking the Lord is religion, and those who seek God seek justice. You can't have one without the other, because justice is simply another name for compassion, and that's what we say God is – compassion.

“Pure, unbounded love thou art” is the way we sing it when we sing Wesley's hymn, and the first epistle of John tells us that God is love, and justice is nothing more than love in the public sphere. Justice is the love we bring to those with whom we share this planet. Justice is the love we bring to the planet itself. Justice is love writ large. Justice is love for everyone and everything, not just those few in our immediate circle of concern. That's charity, and while there's always a place for charity in the Christian life, we can never let charity blind us to the need for justice.

For the next two weeks after church, any of you who wish will be given an opportunity to put your Christian love in action through justice. Our Bread for the World Offering of Letters is an attempt to take the vast resources that we already have in this country in the form of tax credits and to direct them a little more precisely in the direction of love. We're not trying to get government handouts or to impose our beliefs on others. We're trying to build on what this country already says about itself – that it shows compassion for those who need it – and we're trying to encourage that effort, support it, and help give it greater definition and efficiency – not apart from our faith, but precisely because of it. Because we seek the Lord.

Remember that Chinese proverb? Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime. That's the difference between charity and justice, and St. Augustine warned us many centuries ago not to try to substitute the one for the other when he said that "Charity is no substitute for justice withheld."

People who seek the Lord understand perfectly well that they cannot allow injustices to be perpetuated in their names while providing the victims of those injustices with charity. We've tried that and we know it doesn't work. It doesn't work because it's evil. Withholding justice while dispensing charity was the dynamic of the twin evils of slavery and colonialism, and for too long, we Christians closed our eyes to what was happening to the people and the animals and the land around us on the big scale while we were spreading the gospel in our missionary societies and Bible studies.

"When the missionaries came to Africa," Archbishop Tutu reminds us, "they had the Bible and we had the land. They said, 'Let us pray.' We closed our eyes. When we opened them we had the Bible and they had the land."

We know that great evils have accompanied religion. We know that great evils have been perpetuated in the name of religion. We know that, and the person with the bumper sticker "Religion kills" knows that, and that's one of the reasons we in the Reformed tradition of the church take as one of our touchstones, "The church reformed and always reforming," according to the Word of God. The Word of God revealed to us in Scripture, the Word of God revealed to us in tradition, reason, and experience, and the living Word of God revealed to us in the Holy Spirit of the risen Jesus Christ, whose life of love and whose passion for justice we celebrate this and every Lord's day.

Those who seek that Lord – the Lord of the dance, the Lord whose love knew no bounds, the Lord who demanded not justice for himself but that his followers give themselves away for the sake of the world – those who seek that Lord understand justice completely. Thanks be to God.