THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

When I did my doctoral studies in organizational revitalization, we were taught a simple way to bring about transformation in the church. All you have to do is change the name of a committee – or create brand new structures to do new things in new ways. In one of the parishes I served, the Vision Task Force agreed to propose a new name for our outreach committee - changing it from the Mission Committee to the Social Justice Committee. They were sure, however, that this would get shot down when the Session got to voting on the plan. And, by golly, they were right! With unanimous energy and voice, the Session removed the word “justice.” Clearly, according to those elders, no politically sensitive jargon belongs in any organizational plan.

I wonder what is it about the word “justice” that turns us off? Is it because it sounds like a law enforcement agency? Is it because of constant conflict among the Justices of the Supreme Court that remind us of how political the word justice can become? Or is it merely the fact that we come to church to escape all that worldly, divisive stuff? Yes, we come to church because we want to feel loved, not guilty - to experience comfort, not challenge. We come to hear the Good News of the Gospel – not the bad news of the world.

And yet, the word justice appears 83 times in the Hebrew scriptures and 34 times in the New Testament. This word “justice” in the Hebrew language literally means rightness – rightness with God and rightness with one another. It is both a means and an end. Justice is the way we move toward the kingdom of God, and justice is the shape of the kingdom once we get there.

Now, there are other places in scripture where the word justice is not actually used – but where its reality is eloquently expressed. Our gospel lesson for this morning is one of those places. Robert McAfee Brown, a Presbyterian theologian, has said that just as the Exodus story is the paradigm for all Hebrew scripture, so this passage from Luke is the paradigm for all of Christian scripture. Today Jesus tells us who he is. He tells us what his purpose is, and by so doing, he tells us what the purpose of the church is. He presents to us his job description as Savior of the world – which also turns out to be our job description as the resurrected Body of Christ alive today.

In this Luke passage, Jesus is still feeling his baptismal blessing. He is still recovering from his forty days of temptation in the wilderness. And he has come back home – to the town of Nazareth - where he is known as Joe and Mary’s boy. The home-town folk are so glad to see Jesus that they give him the honor of reading scripture in worship. They are very pleased when Jesus chooses to read words of promise from Isaiah – favorite words about the hoped for Messiah – about a time in the future when good news will be preached to the poor and the oppressed - yes, a time when rightness with God will be established for all – a time in the future when the original justice of creation will be restored.
One phrase in this reading are words about the Messiah proclaiming “the acceptable year of the Lord.” This is not just a poetic phrase. It is a religious concept rooted in history and radical in its political and social implications. The acceptable year of the Lord refers to the jubilee year – a social model described in detail in the Hebrew book of Leviticus.

What is a jubilee year? It is this. As an act of thanksgiving, God commands that every fifty years the people of God are to let the soil lie fallow and renew the earth, they are to forgive all debts – that means all material loans – they are to release all the slaves, and – most radical of all – they are to redistribute the capital and the land so that everyone has enough, so that no one has too much. A jubilee year – this radical reordering of political and economic reality – this is what the acceptable year of the Lord means. It is the good news that Isaiah says the Messiah will bring. And it is the scripture which Jesus chooses to read in his hometown synagogue.

But the reading of this scripture is not the end of what Jesus does this day. When he finishes reading, he rolls up the scroll – pauses dramatically – and then he announces that the words of the prophet have come true. They are no longer future words – they are present words. This is not about tomorrow – it is about today. Yes, he, the home-town boy, he, Jesus, is the Messiah – and so, the work of justice has begun. The jubilee year is now, the good news for the poor is now, the redistribution of wealth is now, the release of the captives and the freedom for all the oppressed is now – the new creation of rightness with God is now. And so, the mission of Jesus – the mission of the church – is the work of justice – and that work is right now.

Well, the people of Nazareth do not want to hear this anymore than we do. And so, in the verses following our morning lesson, those who once admired Jesus get angry – very angry. They literally run Jesus out of town and try to push him off a cliff. Yes, indeed, they are incensed that Jesus interjects uncomfortable justice demands into the warm comfort of their faith. Justice is not the main thing in our gospel faith, but it IS an important thing.

It seems to me that our scripture for today has political implications. It is not a political story – it is not about partisan politics and the divisions between Democrats and Republicans. But it does have political implications – perhaps redistributing our taxes in order to bring good news to the poor, maybe rethinking our criminal justice system that emphasizes punishment instead of redemption, or reimagining our economic system that pits the privileges of the wealthy against the needs of the poor?

When I was considering the call to become your Interim Pastor, I was warned by several people – both in the presbytery and in this congregation – that I would need to swallow my social justice instincts – and keep my mouth shut. Like the majority of Presbyterian congregations, Ladue Chapel is a Purple Church - full of faithful people – but a congregation that blends both red and blue political inclinations. And so, Ladue Chapel, like many worshipping communities, is a congregation that generally stays away from any controversial social justice issues in order to keep the peace.

And indeed, in the survey you filled out last summer and in the fall Community Conversations, there were several comments about keeping “politics” out of the church. But my friends, there were an equal number of comments from folks who are yearning for the church to explore the
relevant and pressing issues that are tearing our country and the world apart – not to be political, but to figure out what our biblical faith calls us to do and say about all aspects of our living. And a majority of all of you value the fact that you can talk and disagree about things and still love one another. And what is very good news, the majority of you value the fact that you can talk and disagree about things, and still love one another.

So, I have come to understand that a very large “elephant in the room” for Ladue Chapel is figuring out this connection between Jesus and justice, figuring out the connection between our personal faith and the social systems that define our country and our world. Both our scripture passages for today are pretty clear that these connections matter.

So, let me share just a few connections that other congregations have made. One congregation I know has made the connection between preaching good news to the poor and advocating to expand Medicaid for poor families in Missouri.

A congregation I served in the 1990s spent weeks studying issues of war and peace from a biblical perspective – just like you all are doing in one of your January adult education seminar. That other congregation became convicted by the faith perspective of just war theory – and so, that Session voted to publicly oppose the first Gulf War. Did that cause controversy in the congregation? You bet it did – but everyone grew in understanding through the intense, honest dialogue that followed. And they were able to agree to disagree – in love.

The presbytery I served for 9 years had 14 prisons within its boundaries, and so it started a prison ministry that included visiting those in prison, as well as advocating for changing punitive drug sentencing laws in the state of New York. Why? Because Jesus calls us to proclaim release to the captives.

And as for the jubilee year vision of renewing the earth? Three congregations I have served created earth care teams – passing recycling policies, changing to eco-friendly cleaning supplies and fertilizers, installing energy efficient windows and light bulbs, and banning all plastic bottles and Styrofoam containers from congregational life. Currently, as a volunteer outside of my work with you, I am engaged in a national campaign to bring an overture to the July General Assembly in Baltimore to encourage our denominational agencies to divest from all fossil fuel companies, and to instead invest in renewable energy companies. Why? Because my personal Christian commitment to God’s vision of justice and shalom for all of creation has called me into this advocacy work. And because the future of my grandsons is at stake.

Whether it feels good or not, I believe that the Bible gives us a justice Jesus – and as such, calls us to be justice people – loving and just in our personal faith, as well as advocates for love and justice in our larger social and political systems. Some of you may well disagree with me about this, and that is as it should be. Our Presbyterian constitution makes it clear that God alone is Lord of the conscience. But let’s at least talk about it – because in our efforts to connect faith and service and mission and justice, we will all grow, we will deepen our relationships, and we will find fresh joy and purpose in our Christian living.
My friends, it doesn’t matter what we name our committees. It doesn’t matter what name we give to the love of God. All that matters is that we do it.

May it be so – for you and for me. Amen.

A sermon preached by Susan Andrews
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