



Sermon for Sunday, February 2, 2020

Making A Difference

BE-ATTITUDES

Liturgically speaking, we find ourselves in a quick interlude of Ordinary Time between Epiphany and Lent. However, as it turns out, these few weeks are anything but “ordinary.” The lectionary texts of the Hebrew Scriptures and of the Gospels talk about justice, justice, and more justice. This topic is fitting as the light of Christ’s birth shines into our lives, piercing all the dark corners of our world, our minds, and our hearts. The topic is also fitting because as God’s light exposes our humanness, we have an opportunity to repent of all the things that weigh us down during Lent, until we are liberated once again on Easter morning.

When it comes to “justice,” the words of the Hebrew prophet Micah are a staple of the Jewish and Christian repertoire. As we learned in Sunday School, we respond in unison to the prophet’s question, “What does the Lord require of us,” with “To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” But what is “justice,” what is “kindness,” and how do we “walk humbly with God” when we continue to struggle with our own humanity in all its glory and all its limitations? Well, according to the prophet Micah, “justice and kindness” have nothing to do with appeasing God through cheap parlor tricks and what the Israelites consider “sacrifices.” When the Hebrew Scriptures speak of “justice and kindness,” they do not speak of a personal ethic. “Justice and kindness” are never only private acts. They are always public: Taking care of widows and orphans, welcoming strangers, and concretely helping those who cannot help themselves is a non-negotiable biblical mandate of what “life together” looks like as a foretaste of God’s Kingdom.

What the Hebrew Scriptures point out over and over again, and Micah is just one example here, is the power differential between people. There are those in power and those who are not. The problem, in the eyes of the prophets, is not just the abuse of power. That’s self-evident. The problem, as the prophets see it—and since they speak on God’s behalf, the problem as God sees it—is that God’s people forget very easily that political and socio-economic realities can change very quickly. “Don’t stand on the side of the oppressors,” they say, “because, remember, you were once oppressed yourselves. Remember your days of slavery in Egypt.” We find this reminder on almost every page of what we used to call the “Old” Testament.

But there is nothing “old” about what God has to say to us. What God says to the Israelites through the prophet Micah, and by extension to us, is that there is no justice without love … love of God and love of neighbor. Gustavo Gutierrez, the Peruvian theologian and Dominican priest, summarized all of the above in one sentence: “True love exists only among equals.” In other words, if our neighbors are not our equals, we cannot truly love them. And injustice is the result of this inequality. Even more so, justice administered without love results in tyranny. History is replete with examples.

I watched the movie “Loving” the other week. Based on a true story, it was an account of the interracial marriage of Mildred and Richard Loving in the 1960’s when such a marriage was illegal. After Mildred was jailed and they both suffered many indignities at the hands of the authorities in the State of Virginia, the Supreme Court ruled their marriage legal in a landmark decision in 1967. When asked by his attorney if he had any comments for the judges, Richard Loving responds: “Just tell them I love my wife.” What this powerful statement brought home to me is something I tell my students at Eden Seminary when I teach an ethics course. Remember, I tell them, that morality is fluid. It gets renegotiated in every generation. What tended to be illegal in the early 1960’s is perfectly legal and more common today. In the Loving case, justice was served because it was the loving, no pun intended, the kind, and the right thing to do.

Now, according to Matthew’s Gospel, when Jesus sits down on the mountainside for the inaugural address of his ministry, he did not forget what he had learned in the synagogue. In the text, we heard that Jesus had just finished reading from Isaiah’s scroll before he launches into what we usually refer to as The Beatitudes. Both the Roman-Catholic and the Protestant traditions have often romanticized Jesus’s words, meaning they interpreted his words as a more personal code of ethics rather than concrete actions to be taken in the world. However, Jesus did not preach to those gathered that day how they could “improve” their souls without taking what he preached to the streets. After all, he made it perfectly clear that he came to fulfill and not to abolish everything the prophets had preached for millennia. According to Jesus, we cannot divorce our “Be-Attitudes” from our actions because who we are informs what we do, and, at the same time, what we do shapes who we are.

Our translations are not necessarily very helpful here. The English word blessed, or sometimes translated as happy, does not even come close to its meaning in the Greek. There is an eager expectation in this word, the hope for God’s kingdom to be established on earth in the here and now, as it already is in heaven. It is an expectation that speaks to a longing for God to be all in all, for our human frailties and limitations to not matter anymore, and for a new reality to be ushered in where we can live together with God and one another in peace, where there are no more tears, mourning, crying or pain. In other words, where the power differentials we build in this world are brought to naught, and where justice, love, and peace kiss each other as the Psalmist proclaims in Psalm 85.

Just as Micah reminds us that there is no justice without love, Jesus reminds us in Matthew’s text that there is no love without justice. That’s how we love one another—by treating each other as true equals created in God’s image. And wherever we see a struggle for power in this world, we can be assured that we find neither true justice nor true love. This, because justice without love ends in tyranny, and love without justice is mere romanticism. Each and every line of Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount speaks of this.

So what might all of this mean for us, concretely, today? Last Wednesday, our Pastor Nominating Committee (PNC for short), based on the surveys you all filled out and on the community conversations you all participated in, presented their Mission Study to our Session and the Board of Deacons for a vote of acceptance … which they did unanimously. A few things came through very clearly from you all. There is a strong desire amongst you for this congregation to “take God’s word out of these walls and into the streets,” to engage more in

issues of social justice, interfaith work, and the dismantling of racism. These are the marching orders you would like to give to the next pastor of this church. This is exciting because it stands in line with the proclamation of the prophets and Jesus himself. The PNC's Mission Study report, by the way, is posted on our website for you to read.

So, in this time of transition and looking forward toward the future, we have an opportunity, as God's people in this place and at this time, to renegotiate our understanding of love and justice, justice and love ... which really are two sides of the same coin. As we continue to walk in God's light of Epiphany and as we prepare our hearts for repentance at Lent's doorstep, we might want to model our "Be-Attitudes" after Richard Loving's, by saying: "O Lord, all we want to do is love you and our neighbor."

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