

FILLING OUR BIBLICAL BACKPACKS FOR THE JOURNEY: JUSTICE

A sermon preached at Broadview Community UCC

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Rev. Gail Crouch

Scriptures: Micah 6: 1-8; Luke 4: 16-21

Last week we talked about the importance of having some essential scriptures to put in our biblical backpacks as we journey through Lent and other paths on our spiritual quests. What scriptures help us claim the name of Christian, a follower of Jesus? And we reminded ourselves how important it is to understand the lens, or window through which we view the bible. I offered this lens:

God loves us and came to us in Jesus to show us how to love that we all might have life and have it abundantly.

So into our packs we placed the Exodus story from our Hebrew tradition and the Incarnational scripture from the first chapter of the Gospel of John. Biblical passages that reflect on that lens of God loving us and coming to us in Jesus that we might learn to love.

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The two scriptures we are considering today are part of a lesson that teaches us about the “how to love so everyone can have abundant life” part of our biblical lens. And these scriptures, while a basis for teaching love, are also grounded in the concept of justice. For learning to love that all might have life abundant cannot be separated from justice.

The concept of justice permeates the bible, both our Hebrew and Christian scriptures. One definition of justice is “the standard by which both the benefits and penalties of living in a society are distributed.” One cannot read the bible without seeing that the justice of God is characterized by a special regard for the poor and disenfranchised. Most of the scriptures that deal with justice state that the demand of God for justice is so central that other responses to God are empty or diminished if they exist without it.

In our Micah scripture the people of Israel are challenged to name what it is that God requires to be faithful. And they totally do not get it. How about some calves? Thousands of rams? 10,000 rivers of oil? How about I give you my first-born son? Israel has missed the point altogether. God does not want “stuff” but a total refocusing of lives. God wants us to:

Do Justice – Be actively engaged in the redistribution of power in the world. Correct the systemic inequalities that marginalize some so others can have excess.

Love kindness – Here kindness tends to be a weak word. What it really means is to be covenantally loyal to one another. We are more than our brother’s/sister’s keeper: we are our brother’s brother and our sister’s sister. We all belong to one another.

Walk humbly with God – abandon the notion of self-sufficiency and acknowledge only God gives us life and means to live.

The Gospel lesson today from Luke is even more pointed when we discuss the important of justice. In his hometown of Nazareth, Jesus goes to church, to the synagogue where he grew up. He is given a scroll with the words of the prophet Isaiah and reads:

“I have come to bring good news to the poor....to proclaim release to the captives....to help the blind recover their sight and to let the oppressed go free.” I am here to fulfill these words from the prophet. There is no question now about the nature or focus of Jesus’ ministry: I am here to proclaim justice for all and those who follow me are called to do the same.

We are used to hearing the language of liberation so it is difficult to understand how daring and urgent this call of Jesus really was. He is suggesting that it is God’s will that that justice be done and we, the followers of Jesus really have no choice.

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So how are we doing as a nation to proclaim justice for all and bring good news to the poor? Not well – not well at all. You have read and heard the dismal numbers: in the U.S. 75% of the wealth is owned by the richest 10% of the people. And as we have climbed out of the recession and economists say our economy is doing better, we know the facts: the richest 1% of our citizens has received 95% of the income gains. If God gave grades for economic justice, the U.S. would clearly get an F!

But what can we possibly do about it? None of us are in that 1%, and even if we are generous in our giving it makes almost no difference in the larger scheme of things. So let’s just say injustice is the way things are and not beat ourselves up over it.

And yet.....what does the Lord REQUIRE of us but to do justice...how can we call ourselves Christians and not concern ourselves with doing justice? I do believe we cannot do it alone; we can only do it in community. It is one of the reasons I think it is so important to belong to a church. I cannot possibly respond to every injustice I see. But with a group of folk, with my church, I can respond to some injustice.

Last week it was reported that some business leaders in our city want to build a gondola that will run from the Convention Center downtown to the waterfront. It will make it so much easier for visitors to get down there – and spend money, of course. Sounds like a lovely idea – gondolas are fun to ride. And the cost? Well, probably just tens of millions of dollars but the money would all come from private sources so it is ok. No taxes would be needed. Ok, I think, that is good.

But then I remember that earlier this year on one night in King county, we tried to count how many folks were homeless. And the number astounds: 3,123 men, women and children were without shelter that one night. And usually the number is assumed to be low as it is impossible to find everyone.

If economic justice is about redistribution of wealth and resources, then how can we possibly reconcile using tens of millions of dollars for a sky-ride when that amount of money could place at least some of those 3000+ people in safe shelters? Yes, I know it is private money and the owners can use it as they please. But I saw no church response, no outcry from any corner suggesting that as long as we have people unable to find a shelter in which to live, any “non-essential” project should be questioned. Can we let millions be spent on non-essentials while our sisters and brothers have no place to live? Can we remain silent about that?

Churches have power in numbers. I am encouraged when I hear that many UCC churches plus numerous other denominations and Catholic communities are supporting a \$15 minimum wage. While not perfect, what the campaign says is that some distribution of wealth must happen if our society is to be just at all. For the truth is that the bible is less concerned with alleviating the effects of injustice than in eliminating the causes of it. And when we deal with causes of poverty and injustice we do get into the realm of politics. And boy oh boy, we do not want to go there as church!

One hears it a lot in churches. Don’t preach politics; just preach the gospel. Well, friends, the word of the gospel is that Jesus came to bring that good news to the poor, to let the oppressed go free. Had Jesus been as non-political as some churches want to describe him you can be sure he would never have been nailed to a cross. Jesus stood in a long line of prophets for the relief and protection of the poor. He saw that the real trouble makers were often those who were intelligent but uninvolved. As William Sloan Coffin has said: “Jesus knew that ‘Love your enemies’ did not mean don’t make any enemies.”

Are we not called to get involved with solutions that help to bring about justice? As Christians we are called not to mirror but to challenge society; to upend the status quo if necessary; to be bold in our support for those experiencing injustice, that ALL may have abundant life.

It can be exhausting – working for justice. But we don’t do it alone and we don’t have to do it all. Oscar Romero was an Archbishop in El Salvador during a tumultuous time when justice-making was a dangerous and fragile effort. Ultimately he gave his life for the effort – assassinated for his role in seeking justice for the poor of that country. But of many gifts he left for us, are these comments which I read often when I get too overwhelmed with the injustice I see. Here are some of his words:

*It helps, now and then, to step back and take the long view.
The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our
Vision.
We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the
Magnificent enterprise that is God’s work. Nothing we do is
Complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always
Lies beyond us.
This is what we are about. We plant the seed that one day will
Grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold*

Future promise.

*We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in
Realizing that. This enable us to do something, and to do it very
Well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning.*

*We may never see the end results but that is the difference between
The master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master
Builders, ministers not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not
Our own.*

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And there is another important word to say about the work of justice. Being just is not something we do for another; it is what we do together. Jesus had power but he used it to empower others, not to gain something himself. The prophet Micah says it well: Do justice and love kindness (Eugene Peterson translates that to say: be compassionate and loyal in your love.) A passion for justice walks hand in hand with compassion.

Some years ago I had a moving conversation with a formerly homeless man named Carl. He told me the story of a Christmas Eve when he wandered into a large church that was beginning the special midnight service. He was cold, bedraggled, and dirty. He looked homeless. The sanctuary was already filled with well-dressed people ready to celebrate Christmas as candles glowed and music played. An usher, suit and tie in place and looking a little upset at Carl's appearance, approached him and said, "Please follow me." Carl was sure that he would be led out of the church. The usher walked down the aisle with Carl up to the front of the sanctuary but there appeared to be no empty seats. As Carl turned to walk out, the usher handed him a bulletin, sat down on the floor in front and said to Carl, "Please join me. The service is beginning." This was love. This was a small act of justice. This fulfilled our scriptural call to be a justice-making, compassionate, loving band of Christians.

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