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9:00 a.m. Christian Education

10:00 a.m. Worship

Children's Sunday School during Worship



“Promotion of Social Justice”

Micah 6:8

May 16, 2010

Rev. Barbara Royle



Today we are taking a look at the Promotion of Social Righteousness, the fifth of six Great Ends of the church. These are the principles of the church that help us integrate what we believe, with the more difficult task of actually living what we believe.

These six Great Ends of the Church are not requirements; rather they are convictions that help us weigh our faith against our actions; like what we choose for our investments; or how we treat others; or our motivations for giving our time and money. What we claim to believe is often very different from what our culture promotes and it is all too easy set our beliefs aside. These Great Ends provide a standard for us to uphold, living in a world that does not always model the teachings of Christ. They protect us from the risk of slipping into believing the majority opinion is correct; or a well written editorial is right; or a talk show host, who states what we want to believe, is speaking truth. It is a slippery slope to place our faith in other people or systems, without also comparing it to the leading of Christ.

In short, these principles are helping us tell the story of Jesus, as a church and as an individual, in both our words and our actions. We are called to proclaim the Gospel, provide shelter, nurture and fellowship for all who enter here. We are serious about offering divine worship in this place, and how to continue that worship with the way we live our lives. We are clear about preserving the truth, living honest lives and standing up for what we know is right.

Upholding the Great Ends of the church is not something we are able to do alone. They are a collective call to the church. Being aware that we need the church to teach and strengthen us, is not a case of being weak or needy, as some mistakenly believe. To live what we believe is not a state of weakness, but rather a sign of great strength. Standing alone can destroy us; but to stand in

community with other believers is to become strong in God's plan for us. Declaring we don't need God is to limit ourselves to our own human frailties. Despite our worship of independence, we are not self sufficient. God has purposely given us some wisdom, some abilities, some foresight, but not all. It is when we gather as believers, in worship, or a small group or class, or enter into a faith conversation, that we are exposed to the fuller wisdom of God.

Standing for social righteousness is difficult. The areas are gray, we do not have the full story, and we are easily swayed by our own needs. To promote social righteousness is to stand for equality; God's form of equality, that is. As humans we limit justice to those who deserve it. We understand people whose worth is based on their finances, education or accomplishments. But God looks at our worth not as something we earn.

We often hear others ask "Why don't the poor do something about their situation?" because the poor make us uncomfortable. Getting involved might mean we have less for ourselves and we are fearful. It might take our time or energy. But I think we can lose out thinking that way, for God chooses to speak to us through the marginalized of our world in ways that can change our lives. Maybe God has something to say to us, through the poor that we need to hear. Perhaps God is seeking to soften our hearts in ways that make us strong.

I remember the first time I volunteered at a food pantry. I was uncomfortable. What would I say? How would I bridge our worlds? As I gingerly stepped into the conversation, my discomfort was teaching me. It was an experience of humility and pain for the man who stood before me, forced to admit he could not provide for his family; forced to ask a stranger for help; forced to risk how I might respond. It was a valuable experience of humility and pain for me too, that connected us for just a moment. I was humbled knowing that circumstances out of my control could have brought me to the same place. Being comfortable is not always the best goal.

When we walk with another, God is busy transforming our faith; a faith that serves as our protection for our own bad times. Faith isn't just about coming to worship, or being a student of the Bible. It's not something we take out now and then, when nothing else works. Jim Wallis puts it this way: "Faith is not something you possess but rather something you practice. You have to put it into action or it really doesn't mean anything. Faith changes things. It's the energy of transformation, both for individuals and for a society."

Our Scripture today is deceptively simple: "What does the Lord require? to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." Notice these are verbs of action; "do", "love" "walk" that imply being there. It is the involvement of our heart and body, not separation. Promoting social righteousness is more than writing a check; it's about being there, walking beside, making a difference if only for a moment. I think this passage calls us to not only help out, but to show up, as well.

Even in the darkest of places, God is there calling for justice, love and humility. Recently, an article in the paper framed this for me. Prison guards who often

have the reputation of sometimes being as violent as the inmates, decided to "do justice" in a new way, adding a dose of kindness and humility to a dangerous job. The prison guards in Buena Vista decided to meet to pray, read Scripture, and discuss ways to apply their faith, in a place where the risk of violence is always present for both the inmates and the guards. They agreed to exchange their judgment of the inmates for dignity and respect, without sacrificing the discipline and boundaries needed to maintain order. They decided to treat the person, not the crime, for the courts had already done that. They balanced keeping order with a commitment to pray for the inmates every day. Realizing that they too could be an inmate, gave them a new way to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with their God, as they did their job.

On the other side of the world is the Israeli/Palestinian conflict that has raged for centuries. The struggle over the division of land, water and equality has intensified to violence and death for thousands. Fear on both sides prohibits resolution and injustice prevails. Yet we believe that in the sight of God, both Israelis and Palestinians are of equal worth. So what does it mean here, to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God? Yet, in this place that seems hopeless, hope is emerging. Two hospital CEO's one Palestinian, the other Israeli, have joined forces to heal the victims of terrorism without concern for nationality or the political situation.

For some time now, I have been drawn to Jerusalem where the three major world religions began and reside. As a Christian, I have yearned to immerse myself in the land where Jesus lived, worked and died. Last year I began to consider going there, hoping for a place where both clergy and laity learn about Jesus in this place of conflict. I sought a program that allowed time for worship, reflection and journaling instead of a tour. Last fall I found such a place that fit the criteria.

This August I will be living in Jerusalem, attending St. George's College, in a class entitled "Jesus and Palestine". Depending on the political situation, I will be moving through both Israeli and Palestinian land, from the Dead Sea, north through Galilee. After registration, I entered a time of discernment on my own, wondering how I should prepare. Reread the Bible? Study the atlas? Conquer the reading list? Or tackle the social righteousness of the political situation? It soon became overwhelming and I prayed for direction.

Discernment is an exciting process. What started out as an academic endeavor, shifted. I spoke with two people who have impacted my spiritual development. One asked, "What is your focus to avoid being scattered?" I didn't know. The second, stated, "Perhaps the academic approach is not what God has in mind for you. Maybe instead of planning what you will learn, you need to go and find out what God has already prepared for you." He went on to say, "I suspect this trip isn't about your church or what you can produce. I think it might be about your journey of faith." This was profound for me.

Without telling them about this previous encounter, I then took the question to my Companion's small group who just happened be in the midst of a book entitled, The Way of Discernment. Discernment an exciting process but suffice it to say discernment is about discovering God's answers, not coming up with our

own. The process is about asking God for direction with a question but not discussion; to pray silently for direction, and then sit quietly listening for answers. The question was: "How do I possibly prepare for this trip?" What they heard for me was, "Set your burdens down" and "Jesus is already waiting for you there." I felt a great sense of peace and confirmation of my direction. Now my focus seems to be integrating the historical Jesus I have studied so long, with the personal Jesus always emerging.

I trust this intimate experience of faith with you because I know you care about me and I for you. I know God speaks to me through you. I am so very grateful for this opportunity that you make possible. I ask you to pray for the preparation of my heart; that I may be able to listen for God before I leave, and to be present for Jesus when I am there.

When I think of promoting social righteousness here and so very far away, the words of Jesus have new meaning for me. You know them. "...for I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was naked and you gave me clothing; I was sick and you took care of me; I was in prison and you visited me." When someone lives these words of love with us, it is Jesus in the other. When we offer these things to others in their tough times, it is Christ leading the way in us.

When the uncomfortable issues surface we often try to address or dismiss them forgetting to ask, what does the Lord require? What does justice look like in this situation? What is the shape of kindness? How do we set aside our demands in order to walk humbly with our God? These are uncomfortable questions for all of us. They are gray areas without easy answers. So it seems more helpful to raise the questions with God, carving out some silence to listen.

Cynthia Rigby, professor of theology @ Austin Presbyterian Seminary, in her book entitled, Promotion of Social Righteousness, is not for the faint-hearted, but chock full of helpful ways to look at this faith struggle for us. She weaves social righteousness, grounded in Scripture, with the Lord's Prayer. She asks, "How can we pray the Lord's Prayer and ignore what we are saying?" She points out that "Give us this day our daily bread" is stated in the plural. It is for all people we pray these words, not just for ourselves. In praying "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors", we pray to be forgiven and pledge to forgive others. We are forgiven without deserving it and therefore enabled to forgive others.

She points out that promoting social righteousness for others is based on whether we think they deserve it or not. We see it as a matter of rights. But Rigby helpfully reminds us that for God, it is not about rights that can be bartered for better health care, better housing or better food. It is rather about worth. In the eyes of God the worth of the person is equal, regardless of their status in society.

Rigby summarizes this by saying, "All our talk of promises, grace and love; justice, mercy and humility, must pan out somehow in relation to those matters that concern us most. In the final analysis theorizing about justice is pointless if bread is not distributed. Hoping for mercy, if one does not forgive, is hypocritical.

And posturing humility, when one is vying for more power in this world, is profoundly deceptive."

It seems to me this is what the Lord requires: promote social righteousness wherever you are; taking justice, kindness and humility along with you. It's what we believe. **Amen**