

Second Sunday of Easter March 30,2008

Sermon #6: The Heart of Justice

Micah 6:6-8; Psalm 116: 1-4, 12-19 ; Matthew 20:1-16

The Kingdom of God is like this: A few years back, three farmers went to the bank to borrow enough money to get through another tough year. One was known in the district as an excellent manager. He farmed with his relatives, and between them, they owned about a quarter of the land in the district. For him, it was a question of input cost: with the rising cost of fuel, he just needed a little extra cash flow to put in a crop – there wasn't much question about whether or not the farmer would eventually be able to pay back the money. So of course, the financial officer approved the loan.

The second farmer had had a bit of a rough year. He hadn't been able to sell many head of cattle, what with BSE and the border closure. But he had been looking into some alternative products to keep up with the changing economic picture. He had a great idea for a value-added industry that might bring some jobs into the community, and provide a market for some of the local crops. There were no guarantees, but the bank was all for expanded industry, so the loan was approved.

The third farmer had a very small operation that always hung pretty close to the margins – barely scraping by each year. He had a young wife and children who worked as hard as he did on the farm, but there never seemed to be enough money. His wife worked in one of the local restaurants, too, bringing in a few dollars, but it just wasn't enough. He had gone to mixed farming, thinking that that would provide a fail-safe if the markets went bad in one area. But lately it seemed like everything was working against him. Canola prices were terrible, he couldn't sell his cattle, and his wheat wasn't bringing much in, what with the high Canadian dollar. He knew that this year could be it for him – and the prospect of losing the family farm hung over his head. With hat in hand, he went to see the bank manager, knowing that the chances of getting another loan were slim to none – the bank was already close to owning everything he had. But to his surprise, the loan officer looked at his papers, chatted with him a bit, and then approved his loan. The young farmer left the bank rejoicing at another chance to make a go of it.

Before Easter we talked a little bit about spiritual transformation as a result of our encounter with Jesus Christ. Today I want to focus on the other side of the coin: “the journey outward” as opposed to the “journey inward”. Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom of God is the key to this journey outward. The Bible is political as well as personal, and nowhere do we see it more clearly than in the way Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of God.

But let's back up a bit first. The place to start is at an understanding of God's justice. In the Hebrew Bible, God's justice is frequently contrasted with human injustice. Humans are repeatedly called to account for abusing widows and children, neglecting the hungry, taking more than their fair share, imprisoning their fellow human beings for unpaid debts, stealing and cheating and using their strength to exploit the weakness of others. Hear the words of the prophets: From Isaiah: "How the faithful city has become a whore! She that was full of justice, righteousness lodged in her – but now murderers! Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend orphans, and the widow's cause does not come before them." (Is 1) From Jeremiah: "Like a cage full of birds, their houses are full of treachery; therefore they have grown great and rich, they have grown fat and sleek. They know no limits in deeds of wickedness; they do not judge with justice the cause of the orphan, to make it prosper, and they do not defend the rights of the needy." (Jer 5) From Amos: "they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals – they who trample the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way." (Amos 2:6-7).

The prophets repeatedly speak God's condemnation of injustice, and call on the people to do what is right: "What does the Lord require of you, but to seek justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" asks Micah the prophet.

Jesus stands squarely within this prophetic tradition. When he speaks of the "kingdom of God", it is not an abstraction. It is a religious and political challenge to the systems of his time, as I've mentioned before. In his day, ordinary people had no voice in the structuring of society. The largest portion of the annual production of wealth ended up in the hands of 1 to 5 % of the population, leaving the peasant class disastrously poor. The social order, from top to bottom, was believed by most to be the will of the Gods, and therefore could not be challenged or changed.

The first public act of Jesus after his baptism, was to preach the coming of the kingdom of God. And the prayer we recite every week, the prayer of Jesus, begins by praying that "God's kingdom come." The kingdom of God is "what life would be like on earth if God were king and the other rulers of that time were not". The image of God's kingdom contrasts God's justice with the injustice of Jesus' time – and our own. Jesus preached primarily to the peasant class, the people who suffered the most under the unjust political and economic system. It's no accident that Jesus used the image of "daily bread" so often – he spoke to people whose bread was daily taken from their mouths by the rich. It's no accident that Jesus prayed, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" – which is the best translation of that line in the Lord's Prayer. Debt could lead to the loss of what little land one had left, and debt slavery was a huge factor of life in Palestine – people were forced to work as slaves in order to pay off their debts. The Beatitudes teach us that blessing and happiness will come to the

poor: they will be filled. When the kingdom comes, the poor will be blessed, the hungry will be filled, those ground down by poverty and suffering will laugh. The Kingdom of God is not a dream of heaven – it is a dream for the earth.

Remember, Jesus was executed for treason – he was killed as a political revolutionary...for challenging the accepted order. The cross was the attempt of the system of his day to conquer the alternative voice of God's justice...and the empty tomb is God's way of saying, "my justice will prevail!" The early church followed this prophetic tradition – it's what got them into trouble! Early Christians proclaimed "Jesus is Lord." It's rather like Christians in Nazi Germany proclaiming, "Jesus is mein Feuhrer" – and thus, Hitler is not.

So then, contrary to what many Christians would like to believe, being a Christian is inherently political. God cares about injustice, about suffering, about poverty – and therefore, so must we. And we are expected to do something about it! This will not be new to any members of the United Church of Canada, I hope. But sometimes we need to be reminded. We can begin to think of our faith as our own private religious preserve – no trespassers allowed. But if our faith is not manifested in public – and yes, in our politics – then we're missing something.

Our political and economic naivete is often our undoing as a church. We don't recognise the strength of systems to maintain themselves. How long it takes to change unconscious beliefs and practices! To give you an example: once I was having a conversation with a good Christian woman - a woman who would bend over backward to help anyone in need. We were talking about First Nations peoples and the history of United Church residential schools. In the course of the conversation she used the expression "it gave me a dirty brown feeling." It rocked me back on my heels. There we were having a conversation about the evils of racism, and she used what was to my ears, a racist expression to describe her discomfort with some of the aspects of our relationship with native peoples. She didn't even know she was doing it! It is very, very hard to change the assumptions and patterns of thoughts that shape our lives. It takes a lot of attention, a lot of education, a lot of self-awareness, a lot of hard work, to challenge the injustice that is simply part of the make-up of the world in which we live.

The same goes for economics: how many of you formerly rural folk have seen a situation like that of the third farmer in our opening parable? How did you judge him? Would you give him another chance, if you were the loan officer? And would it make a difference, knowing that God's economy works differently from ours? The parable of Jesus we read earlier makes it clear that God does not see things the way our present economic system does. Our individualistic society teaches us that if you don't make it, it's your own fault. It doesn't want us to recognise the systems that keep some rich and others poor.

I talked about the gap between rich and poor in first century Palestine; Canada is better, but the rich are still getting richer, and the poorer are getting poorer –

especially children. A study from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives in February 2007 stated that in 2000 the ratio of income between the top one-fifth and the bottom one-fifth of our populations was 8.8 to 1. In November 2007, BC was reported as having the highest child poverty rate in Canada at 21%. On January 15, 2005, the first ever homelessness count in Victoria occurred. On a night when temperatures dropped to -10C, 168 people were found sleeping outside in the freezing temperatures, and another 500, including more than 100 children and parents, were found in emergency shelters and roadside motels throughout the city. I suspect there might be more today, if we did another count. Raising consciousness about these realities is an important first step.

A second is our role as advocates for God's justice. Our politics should reflect the compassion and justice of God. We must keep the goals of "God's kingdom" and the words of the prophets on our society's political agenda. So far, we haven't been doing so well! The church has made some progress with the Canadian government on issues of debt cancellation in the developing world, on availability of medical care, and in aiding those fighting disease in the poorest countries of the world. Locally, the Faith in Action group is busy keeping Homelessness on the forefront of political consciousness, and our Presbytery is involved in a survey of care given to the elderly in our personal care homes and seniors' residences. We are really trying to make a difference for the poorest of the poor, for the widows, the orphans, for those whose lives are desperate and full of suffering. But there is still much to do, on these issues and on others. Unlike the people of Jesus' day, we actually have some say in the systems within which we live. As we become more aware of the interests that keep certain people in positions of privilege and keep others down in the dust, we are more able to make concrete proposals to our governments, to find ways to alleviate the suffering, to make decisions about how we will vote and which individuals, parties and platforms we will support.

A third element in living the "Kingdom of God" is to challenge our materialistic, consumer culture by saying, "I have enough. I am enough." Debt is an enormous issue for us, as it was for the people of Jesus' time. We may not have debt slavery these days, but for those carrying massive debt loads, the weight of that debt can hang with the heaviness of a slave's shackles and chains. What would it mean to take what an old Mission and Service fund slogan calls, "An attitude of gratitude"? To give thanks for what we have, to know that we have enough, is to get right in the face of those who want to keep us slaves to the present economy – to make themselves richer, while we become poorer and poorer. The whole consumer economy is based on making us feel like what we have is inadequate; or even what we are is inadequate. What if, instead, we approached life with thanksgiving for what we have and are? Thanksgiving combines the spiritual and the political. By saying "thank-you" we are saying, "this is good, and life is good, and I have enough that I can share". I can share the joy that lives within me, I can share the confidence I have in Christ, I can share the good things that are a part of my life – I can help others experience the

gratitude of life which is part of “the Kingdom of God”. An attitude of gratitude will bring us all one step closer to life within the Kingdom of God – where God rules. Not the latest consumer trend, not the foreign and domestic markets, not the Liberals or the Conservatives or the NDP, not the World Trade Organization or NATO or the United States of America – GOD.

My observation of Gordon United Church so far is that we’re very compassionate people – we’re people who will go out of our way to help those who are having a tough time in life. But whether we’ll work to change the systems that create the hardship– that I’m not so sure of. Some of you, yes; but as a whole church? I just don’t know. It’s not just Gordon United, by the way. From what I heard at this week’s Presbytery meeting, this is an issue right across the board for churches in Victoria. We love kindness, yes –but justice - justice is a lot harder, especially for those of us who are not the kind to stand up and make a fuss about what we see. But there are many ways to fight injustice. We don’t all have to join protest marches or wave signs. We can write letters, talk to people who have a say in how our systems are ordered, sign petitions, get educated, share our knowledge, vote strategically, go to community gatherings on important issues, get to know people who are caught in the middle of these harsh realities and learn from them what really needs to change. Every little step we take toward making the world a more just place is a step along the path to the kingdom Jesus declared.

Do you know the first word Jesus said to his disciples when he greeted them in the upper room after his resurrection? It was “Shalom”: peace, but more than peace. Shalom is peace with justice, the peace of a world in which life is ordered along God’s principles, not human ones. I set a challenge before you today, to find a way you can contribute to the building of God’s *shalom*. In the meantime, in the in-between time, we continue to pray with Jesus: “God’s kingdom come, God’s will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.Amen.”

