

From Charity to Justice

Theme: Action for Justice

Thesis: Working for justice is living out God's love for all creation.

Purpose: To move the congregation to engage issues of justice with God's love

Response: The congregation engages the struggle for justice in the spirit of God's love.

I want to thank your Rector, Mark Kelm, and Mary Ellen Elliot for the privilege of coming back to St. John's to preach the gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and to share the celebration of communion with you. For 23 years I was blessed to serve as the rector of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, St. Paul. The last six years of my time at St. Matthew's I also served as diocesan ecumenical and interfaith officer. Three times I was honored by my colleagues to be elected as a deputy to our church's General Convention. Now, for the last two and half years I have been the Executive Director of the Saint Paul Area Council of Churches. This, too, is a deep honor and privilege and a great responsibility. I hope this morning to bring this experience to bear as we talk together about why congregations must engage in the struggle for justice and offer compassionate service.

Julian Bond, the Chairman of the Board of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the NAACP, tells the following story to illustrate the need for compassion and justice. Two men are on the bank of a river enjoying the beauty of the day and watching the water flow by when a small child floats by floundering in the river and crying at the top of her lungs. The men don't hesitate a minute. Together they jump in the water and pull the child to safety. No sooner have they rescued that child, than another child comes floating down the river. Again they jump in and rescue this second child. To their amazement a third child is in the river. One of the men gets up to jump in again, but the other hesitates. The first man, upset, says to the other, "Aren't you going to jump in and help me?" "No," replies the other, "I'm going down river to see who is throwing these children into the river and stop them."

2000 years ago God saw humanity drowning in a sea of sin. In the person of Jesus Christ he came to rescue humanity from that sin. When he came, he didn't just give us a hand out or even a hand up. He didn't just teach us good moral principles or give us a good moral example, though he did all that. As undeserving as we were, as undeserving as any of those whom we might want to consider the unworthy poor today, he gave not just a good example, he gave his life, so that he could wrestle us free from the grip of sin, evil, and death, so that we could live freely into the eternal life-giving love of God.

In baptism Christians commit themselves to trust fully in the grace and love of God and to follow Jesus as Lord. Jesus gives his disciples one command in John's Gospel, "to love one another as I have loved you." And he tells us in the same Gospel that if we love him we will keep his commandments (John 15). In the First Letter of John the author elaborates on this when he writes, "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not

love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also (1John 4:20-21).” For this reason when Jesus tells his disciples in Matthew 25 that in caring for the least of our brothers and sisters we are caring for him, we obey and reach out to feed the hungry, cloth the naked, welcome the stranger, heal the sick, and visit those in prison. These are acts of Christian compassion we know Christ calls us to do, and we try our best to do them. However, do we really do them to the full extent that Christ would have us do them?

In response to this question some people will quote Jesus when He tells his disciples that the poor will always be with us. The problem with that response is that it doesn't go to the verse of scripture that Jesus is quoting. Often in scripture people will quote a part of scripture knowing that by doing so those to whom they are speaking will complete the quotation in their minds. The verse Jesus is quoting is Deuteronomy 15:11, which reads, “There will always be poor people in the land, *so I command you to give freely to your neighbors and to the poor and needy in your land.*” We will always have the opportunity to extend the charity of God through our actions until the Kingdom of God arrives.

Even if we are doing everything we can in offering charity, are we doing all God is asking of us? The question is put to the prophet Micah as to what God requires of his people. In response Micah says, “Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8).” The prophet Amos tells us that as long as there is injustice in the land God will “take no delight in [our] solemn assemblies,” but “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream (Amos 5:21-24).” Or, in the Book of Proverbs we read, “Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and the needy (31:8-9).” For twenty years my former parish, St. Matthew's, has served “Loaves & Fishes” at the Dorothy Day Center in St. Paul. How long must they do this before they ask, why must we still be doing this after 20 years? When does the time come when those who offer charity must confront the question of justice? When does charity become complicit in supporting unjust structures that cause children to flounder and drown in rivers of injustice and neglect? If we are faithful disciples, we cannot ignore these questions. God cares for all his creatures and wants us to do the same. Again, in our Baptismal Covenant we make five pledges before God. The fourth says that we “will seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves,” and the fifth that we “will strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.” So, the question is not whether we confront questions of justice in church, but how.

Here I would like to offer some pastoral advice from experience that I hope will be helpful. The effort to engage issues of justice must be done with determination, care, and respect. Much of the media exacerbates the differences among us and encourages extreme rhetoric, because it makes for a more exciting story. Who wants to watch people who differ deeply discuss the issue that divides them with respect for the other and with as much a desire to learn as to persuade? But, that is how we must engage critical social issues in the church. Churches are not

political action committees. Churches have people who disagree deeply on means to Christian ends they may share, such as how to end poverty, how to increase public safety, or how to increase the effectiveness of our public schools. When we engage critical social issues in the church, we must make space for everyone. That space must be honored, because the church always has the right to take a position on a public issue it feels compelled to address. When it does that, there must be room for people who disagree to feel that they are still a part of the community. Too often liberal churches simply mirror the conservative churches they rail against by telling their members that true Christians must hold this or that opinion on a particular issue. I propose another approach, and with this I will end.

First, when addressing a particular social issue, explain why this issue is an issue that needs to be addressed by the church. Why is this a religious issue?

Second, state the issue in such a way that people from all perspectives will consider the statement of the issue fair.

Third, give the best arguments on all sides of the issue in such a way that all sides feel they are being fairly represented.

Fourth, show how theological principles apply to this issue, so that people are helped to apply these principles themselves, not only to this issue, but to other issues.

Fifth, underline that good Christians can disagree on issues and that good Christians respect the dignity of others, and underline also the fact that on any position it is possible that we can be wrong and that we might learn something from those with whom we disagree. Mitch Pearlstein, the former director of the Center for the American Experiment and the husband of Diane, who is deacon at St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Minneapolis, and I get together to talk about faith and politics. We disagree on almost all issues. However, we share these two things in common. We believe that we may be wrong, and we believe that we can learn something from the other. Though we never change one another's minds, we come away with a better understanding of the issue we are discussing and greater understanding of why one another holds the position we do.

Sixth, individual Christians, groups of Christians in congregations, and congregations, dioceses, and national churches have the right to take positions on critical social issues, and in many cases should take a stand. Think of what might have happened had the churches taken a stand against Hitler instead of capitulating, or stood against racial discrimination sooner in America? Silence on moral issues on the part of the church is as great a danger to the integrity of the church as engaging those issues is to dividing the church. If done with care, as well as passion, discussing and acting on issues of social justice can strengthen the ministry of the church. I encourage you to do so in the spirit of Micah, "doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with your God."