

A Sermon for Peace and Justice Sunday

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Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said: “Any religion that professes to be concerned about the souls of people and is not concerned about the social and economic conditions that can scar the soul is a religion waiting for the day to be buried.”

Today is Peace with Justice Sunday. I have to be honest, this was a difficult sermon to prepare and it may be a difficult sermon to hear. The Bible we read is filled with words that not only console us and encourage us, but also confront us with God’s passionate concern for the poor, with God’s demanding of justice and God’s uncompromising expectation of peace. In the Bible there are thousands of verses about peace, justice and poverty and when you read it you will discover that our God has a bias toward the poor, the oppressed and the alien. The prophet Amos goes as far as saying that worship and offerings are offensive to God if we do not do all we can for those who suffer from injustice.

For some reason we seem to think that questions related to peace and justice are really political questions that we should leave to political people because after all, we are a people of faith. If that is the way you feel it is time you take a long look at this book. It is one of the most political, challenging and demanding books ever written. So today I want you to listen to these words not as Democrats or Republicans, not as conservatives or liberals, but simply as Christians who seek to be faithful to Jesus.

Our God has a bias toward the poor, the oppressed and the alien. In our gospel reading today Jesus lays out very clearly his mission when at the synagogue at Nazareth he opened the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and read: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release for the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Jesus

was all about caring for those in need and seeking justice and if we are his followers that is our mission too. But how do we do justice?

Let me share two important ways I think that can happen.

First of all, I believe that as followers of Jesus we need to get involved. When we hear of those who are poor or hungry our first inclination is to give money. When we are able to financially help someone in need it makes us feel good but it is too easy for us to give a little money and think we have done our bit. If it were only that simple. Charity is important but it is a temporary fix. Here at First Church one of our most important ministries is feeding those who are hungry. Each month we prepare several hundred meals for people in our community and that is admirable. But here is the problem, in a few hours they are hungry again. It is important that we care for them by providing food but what if we worked together to truthfully critique the present unjust system that keeps them poor and hungry and find new ways to change the system so they may have their share of the world's resources? Wouldn't it be better if they didn't need our food, if they could feed themselves and their families without having to stand in a line and receive a handout? We need to ask ourselves "what is it that is keeping them poor and hungry? Is it a lack of education? Is it because they are unemployed? Is it because they don't earn a living wage? What is at the root of their problem and what can we do fix it?" So doing justice means getting involved, asking hard questions and finding solutions.

Secondly I believe that to do justice we need to speak out. The poor, the oppressed and the alien have no voice in this world. It is up to us to speak for them. Before we speak out many of us ask ourselves two questions: "is it safe, is it popular?" Maybe the question we should be asking is "is it right?" There comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe nor popular. We must take a position because our conscience tells us it is right. Let me share with you a little of my own story. I am the first to admit that I have often not spoken out when I have seen injustice and to be honest, I am ashamed of that. But when I returned from our mission trip to Israel/Palestine something had happened to me. I met a friend for coffee and she asked me about the trip. I didn't talk about all of the amazing places we visited, all I could talk about was the daily injustices experienced by the Palestinian people. There is nothing fair or just about the situation in which they find themselves. Their land has been stolen, their movement restricted, their homes and crops destroyed, their water cut off, their young children

arrested and detained. The injustices they face on a day to day basis are unimaginable to us. After sharing these stories my friend started crying. I thought she was moved by their plight but when I asked her what was wrong and she told me in all the years she has known me, she had never seen me so passionate about the cause of justice. I hadn't realized it myself but it was then I knew that working in my own small way to bring justice to this people so oppressed was a new calling for me. Speaking on behalf of Palestinians in many circles is not popular. I have been called anti-Semitic and if I'm truthful it has caused a strain in some personal and family relationships but I am not backing down and I am not going to be quiet. I am learning that speaking out often has a cost but as a Christian not speaking out has a greater cost. I'm in good company. If we look at Jesus' life there were times when he was a hero and times he was not. He was not liked by the people of Nazareth his own home town but I know that ministry from God is not a matter of popularity, it is about saying the truth as you understand it and as you think God wants you to say it.

Just a few weeks ago each of us had the opportunity to write a letter to our congressional representatives regarding the issue of hunger. It's a great injustice that many people here in the US, in the land of plenty go to bed not knowing where their next meal is coming from. We had a chance to speak out, to tell those who have the power to make changes that we are concerned about the hungry and yet we only sent 34 letters. Many of us missed the opportunity to do justice.

The world we live in is full of people who suffer injustice. We don't have to look very hard or very far. Who will you speak out for? Will it be the aliens who are looked upon with suspicion, will it be the young black men who are targeted simply because of the color of their skin and who are filling our prisons? Will it be a gay or lesbian person often seen as less than? Will it be the children who are bullied at school? Those who are suffering from injustice are all around us and they are waiting for us to take a stand and speak out on their behalf. If you are a follower of Jesus and are about doing his work in the world, you must speak out.

Today is Peace with Justice Sunday. I realize I have spent most of my time talking about justice but here is the thing. Without justice, there can be no peace. Until everyone receives the justice they deserve we will not have peace. We often look at those in our own communities who are

rioting or Palestinians who throw rocks and launch mortars and judge but desperation leads to violence and those who are without justice become desperate. An ancient Greek philosopher once said “Justice will not come to Athens until those who are not injured are as indignant as those who are injured.” When was the last time you were indignant about the way someone was being treated? When was the last time you spoke out?

Every human being matters. If you are a follower of the man called Jesus you have been given the charge to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release for the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. Do you know the old hymn “Once to every man and nation?” The first stanza reads “Once to every man and nation, comes the moment to decide, In the strife of truth with falsehood, for the good or evil side;

Some great cause, some great decision, offering each the bloom or blight, And the choice goes by forever, ’twixt that darkness and that light.”

Well as you can imagine when you begin to read in preparation for a sermon on justice and peace quotes by Dr. King surface frequently. I began this sermon with one and I want to close with another. “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.” I think many of us have been far too silent or if not silent then we have been speaking with a whisper about the things that matter. It is time to speak out about injustice wherever we find it. Our brothers and sisters are waiting eagerly for our response. Should we say “we can’t win that battle?” Shall we say the struggle is too hard? Will we send our deepest regrets or will we send a message of hope, of solidarity with their yearnings, of commitment to their cause whatever the cost? Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide.

Benediction – God sends you out from this place into a world that is hurting. Go and work for justice and seek a pathway to peace. Amen.

