

“Radical Hospitality, Part IV: Practice Social Justice”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, August 26, 2012

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Amos 5: 21-24

The prophet Amos said:

21 I hate, I despise your festivals,

and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

22 Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,

I will not accept them;

and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals

I will not look upon.

23 Take away from me the noise of your songs;

I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

24 But let justice roll down like waters,

and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. --Amos 5: 21-

*“Let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”*

Or, “What does fried chicken say?”

More on that in a couple minutes.

Today’s biblically-based message on social action, social justice,
and the social gospel

begins, naturally, with the question, *“What is acceptable
worship?”*

Starting from a premise that we are born from original blessing,
that all people are made and created in the image of
God,
authentic worship is a spiritual discipline
that reconnects, re-engages and reorients us
to the divine power of love that created and
creates.

When we gather together to ask the Lord's blessings

worship happens and transforms lives.

Authentic worship may be experienced

through prayer and praise of God.

During worship we may focus on the divine gift of life and life everlasting.

True worship serves the purposes of God

by comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable.

I read a bumper sticker that said,

*"I don't know about your church,
but mine disturbs the comfortable
and comforts the disturbed."*

We know what it is like to be comforted in worship,

and we know how it feels to be afflicted, as well.

During worship one morning a family had a little boy

who got so squirmy and wiggly in the pew, his father picked him up.

As they moved down the aisle, the little boy looked over his father's shoulder

and shouted, *"Y'all pray for me now!"*

He may have thought he was about to be afflicted;

what better saving power is there than prayer in community?

Authentic Christian worship connects people with God and one another.

We worship *so that* and *until* we are ready and raring to go forth

into the world to be the living Word God needs us to become

and our neighbors need to experience.

With this understanding

we turn to the Scriptures for a Living Word.

Your scriptural trivia is that these words from Amos

are the earliest collection of the words of a prophet into a book.

Your spiritual insight from these words of Amos

is that these words may transform your life.

While listening to the preaching and teaching of Amos,

we won't find a man of faith who, before he spoke,

used a thermometer to check the temperature of his

cultural climate.

Amos was more of a thermostat kind of
guy.

Amos stood up in front of the worshipping community of faith
and called for the people of God to live into *mispat* and
sedaqa.

He called for justice, *mispat* in Hebrew, and for righteousness,
sedaqa.

Righteousness may be defined as those standards for what
is right,

standards by which God has instructed Israel how to
live.

Justice is the realization of those standards of life.

Amos linked mispat and sedaqa beautifully and
powerfully.

He said to his beloved community:

14 Seek good and not evil, that you may live;

and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you,

just as you have said.

15 Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate;

it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts,

will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph. (Amos 5: 14-15)

21 I hate, I despise your festivals,

and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

22 Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,

I will not accept them;

and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals

I will not look upon.

23 Take away from me the noise of your songs;

I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

24 But let justice roll down like waters,

and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5: 21-22)

Amos made his point:

God was more than just a little bit upset;

the Lord was about to bring down judgment upon Israel.

The people of God had sacrificed concern for the poor and afflicted at their own gates

in exchange of worship services that were ultimately meaningless.

Karl Barth taught his students to preach and worship God

with the Holy Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other.

Worship and social action are inseparable.

They go hand in hand; each one feeds and is fed by the other.

Worship without social action is empty,

full of platitudes, plenty of nothing.

Social action without worship, without a spiritual foundation,

without looking to the hills from whence our help comes,

is void of prayer and praise for the one from whom all blessings flow.

Amos's charge echoes across time and space:

worship God and practice a social Gospel.

This, he says, is the setting that God calls for

in order to *“let justice roll down like waters,*

and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

A friend recently called from the Southwest.

She had just moved and was looking for a church.

She visited one called The Sanctuary of Saintly Light.

The pastor showed her their lovely stained glass windows,

and pointed to a new pipe organ.

My friend noticed in the sanctuary that there was a dusty box on the side radiator,

covered in cobwebs, with a small sign that read, *Missions*.

She also visited a congregation called Community Fellowship of Good Deeds.

She was invited to get involved in their soup kitchen and protest rallies,

then handed a petition to sign and a church activities list.

Emblazoned across the front was their mission statement:

“No matter how much you are doing it’s not enough.”

She called afterward, saying,

“What I’m looking for is a congregation

that connects hospitality with social action, worship with justice.

I read once where Henri Nouwen said something about

the role of the church in the world is that of “hospice”.

Nouwen recognized that the church

*is to take all that we experience as threatening and hostile,
and transform it into “hospice”,
a place of shelter and rest.*

I have this nagging spiritual sense,” she said,

*“that our communal worship and our community service
should connect.*

*What happens in the sanctuary and community should inform and
engage each other.”*

Could this be what God calls for in order

to ***“let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream?”***

Duke ethicist Stanley Hauerwas finds most Christians
far too spiritual in the practice of their faith.

Christianity “is not a set of beliefs or doctrines
one believes in order to be a Christian,” he says,
but rather Christianity is to have one’s body shaped,
one’s habits determined,
in such a way that the worship of

God is unavoidable.”

In An Alter in the World, Barbara Brown Taylor said,

“In our embodied life together, the words of our doctrines take on flesh.” (p. 45)

Taylor points out

that the greatest danger to the life of the church

is not, as some folks love to point out,

inept clergy, mean congregations, bad music,

or preoccupation with institutional maintenance.

Our greatest danger, she says, is “the intellectualization of faith.” (p. 45)

We don’t need more information about God;

we need incarnation.

We don’t need more raw data to employ;

we need to Christ to be embodied.

Taylor said, “Not more *about* God. *More* God.” (p. 45)

Embody Emmanuel, God-with-us;

be the Spirit with some skin on it.

This is the setting that God calls for in order

to “*let justice roll down like waters,*

and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

A word of caution:

We have a cultural and Christian tendency

to set the words and meaning of justice, of *mispat*, as something “out there”,

as something unattainable, ever.

Have we accepted the perception that social justice is a fantasy?

Is God’s demand for mispat and sedaqa, for justice and righteousness unpractical,

unrealistic, imperceptible, unattainable in our presence or lifetime?

Do we perceive our social responsibility to practice social justice as a concept,

an amorphous idea, a far-off vision,

a calling which we can too easily dismiss

due to its difficulty and distance from reality?

Or is the practice of justice that God calls for

as simple and realistic as addressing the needs of the neighbor at our gate?

Seen in this light, the practice of hospitality

is the first – and greatest – step

to **“let justice roll down like waters,**

and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.”

Now, what does fried chicken say?

In 1962, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference

under the guidance of its president, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.,

were invited to Albany, Georgia to help make social change.

Persecution and oppression along racial and class lines were a regular part of life.

Dr. King met with the Albany Ministerial Association,

whose president was a young Christian Church pastor named Don Brewer.

From 1959-1965, Nancy and Don Brewer served at First Christian Church

in Albany, Georgia, raising Betty and her brother Bob,

who, by the way, was named after Bob Boyte (a former

pastor here).

Soon after they settled in the Albany Movement began.

There were large demonstrations and many arrests, yet little change.

Well, some lives were changed and altered, and were never the same again.

One hot summer day Nancy was washing dishes in her kitchen.

She thought about her neighbors in jail,

arrested simply because they walked downtown to register to vote.

She imagined them in jail being served cold grits and tepid tea.

[Lord, in the south surely that is a sin!]

She thought,

“What is it Southern women do

when they see someone in trouble, sick, or grieving,

*and they really don't know what to say but they
want to do something?*

You know what they do. They cook!

*My husband and I wondered if some of my United Church Women
friends*

would be willing to fry some chicken to send to the jails.

“It took only a couple of calls to get a calling chain going.

Almost to a woman, the answer was, “I'd like to do that.”

And almost to a woman, the firm statement was added,

“But let's not tell my husband.”

It wouldn't be a problem NOT to tell the men.

They wouldn't even ask,

for they were used to their wives frying chicken,

*or baking cakes, or assembling casseroles for
somebody they knew.*

“By Tuesday morning

*there were trays and baskets and boxes of fried chicken
gathered,*

*the pieces wrapped individually, and ready for
delivery.*

*The logical place to find out how to deliver the chicken was the
police department*

*....which turned out to not be logical at all, since the
response was,*

*“Now, little lady, why would you want to do
that?”*

*Fortunately we knew the name of a prominent [African American]
minister,*

from newspaper write-ups when Dr. King had been there the week before.

And my pastor husband asked his help

and he said he'd be glad to deliver the chicken for us

....and I'm sure he did.” (Nancy Brewer, “What Does Fried Chicken Say?”)

My friends, what is it we do when we see someone in need of comfort?

Or in need of a companion?

Or in need of support and kindness?

We cook.

We empathize and we act.

We yoke ourselves to their blessed soul.

We wipe away their tears.

We see ourselves in one another's shoes, and we seek to ease pain and loss. [1]

At the Christian core of our acts of hospitality

is the offering of empathy.

When we do so, we ***“...let justice roll down like waters,***

and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

God gives strength and stands with those who do justice,
who love mercy, who walk humbly with their Lord.

This is what it means to be the Word incarnate:

to build and become the beloved community,

one act of hospitality at a time.

*All power to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy
Spirit. Amen!*

Extra Material:

A couple years ago we posted on YouTube

a video of our church's mission work in downtown Atlanta.

200 Disciples from across the city

shared God's love and joy in a day of street ministry

called More Hands for God.

My brother David Calvert saw the video on the internet,

and wrote a note to First Christian Church, saying:

Nice job, [Disciples of Christ].

In a [new] world, and oh let it come raining down on us

and refreshing and healing,

one can already see connections

across racial lines, class lines improving...

the old divisions falling away.

I remember the brilliant theme song of the World Council of Churches,

from back in my Geneva days, and with its catchy tune and chorus:

“Break down the walls that separate us And unite us in a single body.”

And I recall also the refrain of the climactic ditty

from the classic musical “Purlie”

...the one my character, Charlie, sang with a guitar

on the Church of the Living Hope stage 35 years ago in East Harlem:

“The world ain't coming to an end, my friend, The world's just coming to a start...

I feel it in my heart...

The world is coming to a start!”

This year, HOPE, which has been around but at times barely alive, is making a major comeback!

Keep up the good work...First Christian Church,

[and] the world just might keep pace! (David Calvert, October 2008)

[1] Barbara Brown Taylor says, "Deep suffering makes theologians of us all. The questions people ask about God in Sunday school rarely compare with the questions we ask while we are in the hospital. This goes for those stuck in waiting rooms as well as those in actual [hospital] beds. To love someone who is suffering is to learn the visceral definition of *pathetic*:

1) affecting or exciting emotions, especially the tender emotions of pity or sorrow;

2) so inadequate as to be laughable or contemptible." (B.B. Taylor, "An Alter in the World", 2009, pp. 42-43)