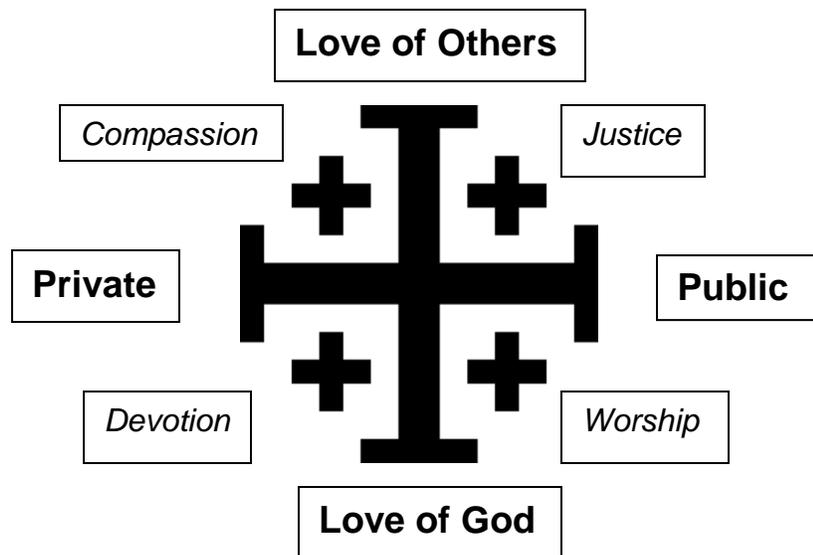


22 March 2015

Acts of Justice
Matthew 5:38-48

In some ways, I've been dreading this sermon. In the outline I've been using throughout Lent, I've set us up to talk about four different areas of spiritual growth, as illustrated by the cross on the front of your bulletin. You see how it's designed: love for God in the lower half and love for neighbor on the upper half, private behavior on the left side and public behavior on the right side, which gives us four quadrants. We've talked about public love for God (that is, worship) and private love for God (that is, personal devotion). Last week we talked about private love for others, which is the one-on-one act of mercy and compassion. Now, today, we get to public expressions of love for our neighbor. That means that today we talk about loving others not just by giving them a hand up or sharing their private burdens but by looking at the larger picture and trying to change their circumstances. This quadrant we call this "justice." Compassion is giving the poor family couple a bag of toilet paper and soap; justice is asking why that single mother who works two jobs still can't afford those things herself – and then trying to change it. Compassion is trying to transform lives with love one at a time; justice is trying to change the world.



And I've been dreading this, because I don't do this well. I've never done it well, or tried very hard. For a lot of good reasons, mind you: reasons I'm sure you can understand. For starters, doing justice involves politics, and as a pastor it is *way* safer to avoid that subject entirely. We have people in this congregation from just about every point on the political spectrum, and I want to be pastor to all of you. I don't want to alienate anyone. Moreover, working for justice is *hard*. You can work for years on an issue without seeing any tangible results. So much more rewarding to help someone in person, who can say thank you. Besides, Jesus didn't get involved in politics or social change, did he? He refused to get drawn into the political disputes of his day but instead went around feeding people, healing people, teaching people. So maybe we *shouldn't* spend our time in this justice stuff, right? At least, those are some of the reasons I've given myself for avoiding it. We should focus on individuals, not society.

But that doesn't work. It's never worked. Focusing on the individual and ignoring society is how the established church in Germany in the 1930s became complicit in the Nazi murders of millions of Jews, Roma people, and gay people. Focusing on individuals instead of society is how the established white church in the US during the Civil Rights movement became complicit in segregation and lynchings. It doesn't work biblically, either. Jesus may have stayed out of politics, but the Hebrew prophets dove into them headfirst and spent their lives calling on kings and priests and princes to trust in God and live up to God's expectations of them: to care for the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner – not just one on one but as a society. But most of all, while Jesus may not have gotten involved in social issues himself during his brief ministry, his teachings don't allow us to avoid them.

In fact, Jesus' teachings show us how to work justice. Look again at our first reading, Matthew 5:38-42. *'You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. Jesus says, "You've heard it said, 'An eye for an eye.' But I say to you, do not retaliate. Stand firm, but without returning violence for violence."* In other words, Jesus wrote the script for the Civil Rights movement. And before that, the script for Gandhi's non-violent revolution in India, and the outline for the Peace and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa that, in a miracle beyond comparison, managed to bring that broken nation together after Apartheid without a bloodbath. What all of those represent is Jesus' words applied to society.

Then there's our second reading, Matthew 5:43-48. *'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.* There is no harder teaching in all scripture. But, on the bright side, at least it's clear. No way to explain this away, though many have tried. It's crystal clear. Too clear for comfort, really. Because this can't just apply to personal grudges. It has to apply as well to the zealots of the so-called Islamic State and Al Qaeda. And black rioters in Missouri and New York, and white riot police. And Senate Democrats and Tea Party Republicans.

I could go on naming enemies. We have lots of enemies in our society, in fact. More being invented every day. So once more, I'm asking for your input, using the colored slips in your bulletin. This week, though, instead of asking what you yourself are doing in the area of justice, I would like to ask the broader question: Where do you see injustice in our society? Worldwide, nationwide, statewide, local. I'm not looking for political arguments or specific policy proposals, really – though it may not be possible to avoid them. I'm looking for deep, underlying injustice.

[Pause, then collect the slips and ask if anyone would like to share aloud. Discuss.]

All right. Here I speak for myself, not necessarily for anyone else in this room and not for any institution or group I represent, but here are a few of the injustices that weigh on me. In the 1960s and 1970s we made great progress toward racial and gender equality. But we are not there yet. Women still learn early on that they have to work twice as hard as their male coworkers to achieve the same recognition and pay. Black men still learn early on not to walk behind a white woman alone and that they simply have to expect to be pulled over by the police at any moment for what they call a DWB: Driving While Black. The recent Department of Justice report on Ferguson, Missouri, has made it clear how justified their concern is. I am deeply disturbed by the way that our criminal justice system has slanted in recent years toward vengeance and punishment and away from rehabilitation. Our prisons are overflowing, and treatment there has become an afterthought. We have a fifteen-year-old boy in Wausau being tried as an adult for murder. Yes, if he's guilty, he did a terrible thing. But do we want him in prison for life? Is there no hope that this life, at least, could be saved and transformed? Where are the people speaking for Jesus, calling for us not to retaliate but to love our enemies?

I haven't seen it yet, but I've been reading a lot about the movie *American Sniper*, and the man whose story it tells, Chris Kyle. He was a devout Christian who saw himself as a crusader for Christ. Indeed he had a crusader's cross tattooed on his arm. As you probably know, Kyle became the most lethal sniper in American history, killing at least 160 Iraqis from his sniper's posts. I am not trying to stain Kyle's memory. He was a man of great courage, and as many lives as he took, he saved many others. He was a soldier, doing the job he was given. But I am still troubled. In his memoir, Kyle says, "I wasn't allowed to kill everyone I saw carrying a Quran, but I wanted to." And here's what troubles me: since the movie opened, Kyle has become a hero to many American Christians, who proclaim throughout the internet their support for killing Muslims in Christ's name. What Christ are they talking about? I do not know that Christ.

I don't know what to do, and even the few things I can think of to do seem feeble in comparison with the problems. Here's one small thing. On May 3, there will be a "Black Lives Matter" march leaving from the First Unitarian Universalist Church after Sunday services. I think I'll go. Will it make any difference? Will it just be a straggling line of well-intentioned middle class white people walking around for a bit? I don't know. I just know that Jesus taught us better than we've been doing. He taught us to stand against violence, but without resorting to it. He taught us to have no enemies, to make no distinction, but simply to love. He taught us to do what is hardest, and then he showed us how. And he changed the world. Just not all the way. Not yet. That's what I know.