

Introduction

We believe that one of the great purposes of God's church is "*The Promotion of Social Righteousness.*" Many folks in our congregation might even be tempted to say "been there, done that" or at least to affirm that we "are there, doing that." Currently our church is involved in promoting the Interfaith Food Shelf for struggling neighbors, the Interfaith Hospitality Network for homeless families, and the Community Meal for socially underprivileged. In February we are going to work in the inner city of Washington D.C. and for generations now we have generously supported social ministry around the country and around the world through our financial generosity. We are doing our best to carry out our Lord's mission to "**bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to set the burdened and battered free?**"

I

Now, as long as the promotion of Social Righteousness is limited to acts of social charity, everyone gets along pretty well. After all, who is going to object to the church collecting canned goods for the food shelf, buying bed-nets to help reduce malaria in Malawi, or donating for the relief of victims still suffering from hurricane Katrina? However, charity is only one part of the picture. The promotion social righteousness involves more than being charitable. As William Sloane Coffin points out, "*the prophet did not say, 'Let charity roll down like mighty waters,' and for good reason; while charity alleviates the effects of poverty, justice seeks to eliminate the causes of it. Charity is a matter of personal attributes, justice is a matter of public policy. Charity ... threatens not at all the status quo... Justice on the other hand, leads directly to political controversy.*" No wonder the church would rather stick to the improvement of private virtues and ignore the promotion of social righteousness. Many people today think of religion as a purely private matter. As a modern Dutch intellectual notes: "*Religion is about uplifting my religious feelings. I want to be in harmony, I want to be in peace with myself, I want to be in peace with nature, I want peace, blah, blah, blah. But it is not the encounter with God... If you still have the Bible, you can go to the Old Testament, read a little bit about the prophets. They had an encounter with God, and they can tell you, it's not a very pleasant one.*" (Rob Riemen) To be perfectly honest with you I don't like controversy. Besides, I know what happened to most of those trouble-making prophets, not to mention that trouble-maker Jesus.

So what do you say that, except for acts of charity, we quietly agree to relegate "*the Promotion of Social Righteousness*" to one of the non-purposes of the church.

II

But then what do you suppose we do about the Bible? What will we do with the one of every sixteen verses in the New Testament which contains a teaching on the question of poverty and wealth? How will we ignore 200 pages worth of scriptural quotes collected in a single volume titled "Cry Justice, The Bible on Hunger and Poverty"? As the editor notes, "*The sheer volume of Biblical material that pertains to questions of hunger, justice and the poor is astonishing. simply to feel and experience the power, volume and frequency of what the Bible says about poverty, justice and hunger forcefully affects one's thought and life. I have been studying Biblical teaching on these themes for years. But the task of bringing all of this Biblical material together reminded me in a new, and forceful way that the God disclosed in Scripture has a very deep concern for the poor, hungry and oppressed.*"

Of course, we would do well to remember that "We who have houses and goods stored in our barns know that these things do not give our lives meaning or keep us off tranquilizers, and when the poor have houses and barns, they will know it too." That's why a social gospel must always be rooted in the good news that "*the One who meets us in Holy Scripture assures us that he loves us just as we are in spite of our weakness, failure and sin. ... Yet the One who discloses Himself as boundless love also reveals Himself as truth, holiness and justice. Therefore He calls those to whom he freely offers his grace to repent, forsake their self-centered ways and begin to love their neighbors as themselves.*" So, I'm afraid there's no getting around it, is there? According the

Bible, love for God is inseparable from love for neighbor. That's why the "Promotion of Social Righteousness" is an indispensable purpose of the church.

III

Of course, we must be careful never to confuse the promotion of social righteousness with promoting particular political platform. Nevertheless, I believe that when God requires us to "do justice" he intends us to advocate our faith formed convictions on contemporary political issues. Christians are correct to be involved in the difficult dialogues over climate change, abortion, same-sex civil rights, welfare, warfare, health care, and capital punishment. Our role is not to support the conservatives or the liberals on the left or the right, rather God requires us to be the movers and shakers. As Coffin puts it, "*When asked 'Where do you stand?' Christians should probably reply, 'We don't; we move.'*" The pro-life/pro-choice harangue is a good example. Listen to where an immovable stand of pro-choice can lead us. In a study on brain function, a group of people was confronted with a true ethical dilemma. "*Imagine an entire village, along with your infant child, are hiding from an enemy army intent on slaughtering every man woman and child. Your child begins to cry and will not stop. Would you kill your own child to save the village or not.*" I was stunned by one young woman's almost casual response. "*I'd kill the baby,*" she said. "*After all it's my child so it's my choice.*" Now listen to where an immovable stand of pro-life can lead us. At age 76, California's oldest death-row inmate asked authorities to let him die if he went into cardiac arrest before his execution. When asked to comment on this request, a prison spokesman replied, "*At no point are we not going to value the sanctity of life. We would resuscitate him.*" So what if someone were to ask, where does your church stand—with pro-choice or pro life, with the right wing or the left, with the Republicans or the Democrats? "We don't." "We move. We don't stand on bumper-sticker answers to complex issues. Rather we stand on the promises of God, moving—prayerfully—in the direction that God is faithfully leading us."

IV

So what does that mean for us as members of First Presbyterian Church Plattsburgh? How is the Lord leading our congregation to be involved in the promotion of social righteousness? Don't ask me, ask God. Together we need to be praying for God's guidance in helping us promote social justice. Which means listening for God's voice through scripture, meditation, and conversation. It means opening the eyes and the ears of our heart to see God and hear God in the plight of our neighbor. It's a question of spiritual discernment followed by personal involvement. We need to pay attention to the desire to help, the passion to reach out, the deep concern to do something that God is stirring up within us. Maybe it's the epidemic of teenage suicide here in Clinton county. Maybe it's the scandalous lack of affordable housing right here in Plattsburgh. Maybe it's isolated the local prison population whom society has written off. Maybe it's the creeping crisis of global climate change.

Maybe it's the nation's military-industrial-political-complex that is stealing lifeblood from the poor in order to feed it's insatiable appetite for weapons of death. Obviously, as a congregation we cannot even begin to promote social righteousness everywhere for every one. But we can seek discern God's will. We can ask: what are the needs? What are our gifts? And how can we best offer our gifts for the love of neighbor and the promotion of God's justice?

VI

You see, the reality is that the more faithful we are about turning inward to listen carefully to God's life-giving Word, the more the Holy Spirit will turn us outward to pay attention to God's suffering world. And then, we will find ourselves blessed. "**Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness**" says Jesus, "**for they shall be filled.**" (Matt 5:6) And it is clear that the righteousness of God is never a purely private blessing. The New English Bible translates this Beatitude: "**How blest are those who hunger and thirst to see right prevail.**" In other words, Kingdom righteousness is all about a passion for social justice. Blessed are those who not only hunger for God in their personal life, but also thirst for right relationships between sexes, generations,

racess, religions, neighbors, nations, and species. As preacher David Read put it, “*the blessing of the Lord is called upon those for whom righteousness is not a private virtue to be cultivated but a campaign to be waged on behalf of others.*” Is there other work we need to be doing to carry on our Lord’s mission to “**bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind , to set the burdened and battered free?**” Don’t ask me. Together, let’s make time to ask the Master, then commit ourselves to follow His lead.

Conclusion

How important is this great end of the church? Amos, the old troublemaking prophet, speaks for God bluntly. “**I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of your fatted best I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.**” (5:1-24)
The promotion of social righteousness is a great purpose of the church that we ignore at our peril. Either we will roll with the waters of righteousness or we will be swept aside.
