

From the Pastor's Desk

Christ's Work of Social Justice

There is a story about a village that was holding a social gathering one summer, when a person noticed a child struggling and crying for help in the river. As someone rushed to save the him, they looked upstream and saw more children coming down the river crying for help. So the people worked very hard to save them. As others were busy with their rescue efforts, two people went upstream to stop whoever was throwing these children in the river.

Saving these children is charitable work. Stopping whatever was responsible for them ending up in the river is justice work. Both are Christ's work: "*Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.*" Matthew 25:40

"They seem happy enough", the slave owner said. "I hear them down by the river singing. I don't know what they're complaining about. I make sure they have enough food and water. I know! I will add dessert to their evening meal. Maybe then they will see what a reasonable man I am. That idiot Lincoln wants to free them!"

The slave owner extended charity by giving his slaves dessert. Lincoln, on the other hand, was involved in justice work that changed societal structures by freeing slaves when he issued his executive order, The Emancipation Proclamation. He paid a heavy price for this work when he was assassinated on Good Friday, April 14, 1865.

At first, the idea that women should vote was seen as so ridiculous that no one attempted to oppose it. But, when activists like Susan B. Anthony began to win support in 1890, the opposition took them more seriously. These are some of the talking points the opposition used: "Most women don't want to vote because they are already represented by their husband's vote." "Women don't fight in the military, so they shouldn't be able to vote." "Women will be corrupted by politics, stop marrying, having children, and the human race will die out." "Women are emotional creatures", they said, "and incapable of making sound political decisions." The women who stood up to this and persevered were instruments of Christ's justice, bringing important changes to how society was structured.

Many of these women received new cooking stoves, furniture, and other things given by men who hoped they would drop their demand for equality. But these activists saw this charity for what it was—a cheap substitute for justice.

Getting involved to change unjust social structures is dangerous. In my lifetime, Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. were assassinated because they were engaged in Christ's difficult work of justice by leveling the playing field between black and white people.

It's important to remember that the abolition of slavery, civil rights movement, labor unions and other social justice activities often originated in churches throughout the United States.

Today, it's easy to embrace the abolition of slavery, equal rights for women, and civil rights for all people. That's because we stand on the shoulders of people like Abraham Lincoln, Susan B. Anthony, Martin Luther King, Bobby Kennedy and others who changed society because they took serious Christ's words: *Whatever you do for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you do for me.*" Matthew 25:40

The challenging issues for us today are also controversial and will require changes to the structures of our society: Equal rights for gay and lesbian people, affordable healthcare for all, compassionate legislation for illegal immigrants, and the leveling of the playing field between the 1% and 99% as seen in the Occupy Wall Street movement. Perhaps you would include other issues. The point is that Christ's work of justice goes on and there are many important issues these days from which to choose.

It's easy to get "reptilian brained" when discussing issues such as these. We have all experienced it. It happens when anger arises, which causes an increased flow of blood from our frontal lobes where rational thought occurs, down into our brain stems (referred to as the reptilian brain), where "fight or flight" responses occur. As we allow fear and anger into our hearts, rational thought is diminished and so is Christ. Most, if not all of the death and destruction in our world today is done by people who have regressed into their reptilian brain.

Wherever there is fear and anger, it is easy to slip out of the frontal lobes. One needs to be vigilant to avoid it. I remember seeing a bumper sticker that said: "Don't believe everything you think." It's similar to the old saying "Sow a thought, reap an action." In the case of fear and anger, the action all too often is to regress into the reptilian brain and it is almost involuntary. This is needed when saving drowning children, rescuing people from a burning building or fighting in the military. But it can be a hindrance in other settings.

Epiphany is about the presence of Christ penetrating all aspects of our lives, culture, society and world. He is the light shining in the darkness. So, when faced with challenging social issues, as Christians we ask: "What would Jesus do?" and "How can I bring his light into this situation?" and "What structures can I help to change to make a more just society?"

Christmas can be like watching a television show. It's all happening "out there", bouncing along the top of our lives with little effect. Certainly not a "Wow!" experience. We may find ourselves thinking, "Christmas. Here we are again. Is this it? I'm really thirsting for more depth in my spiritual life."

To cross the threshold and penetrate the mystery, I suggest you consider something that early Christians found as the doorway into the sacred. It is summed up in the words of Saint Athanasius who wrote in 297 AD:

The divine became human so humans could become divine.

“Is it true? Can humans really become divine?” you may think. But, isn’t this what Pentecost is all about – the sending of the Holy Spirit upon us? Perhaps this is why Pentecost is the forgotten festival. *Don’t you know that you are a temple of the Holy Spirit?* 1 Corinthians 3:19 The problem is that we really don’t believe it. Or if we do, we don’t take it seriously.

In John’s Gospel, “Eternal Life” (Aionios Zoe) is a *present* reality that does not stop at death. We are spiritual beings having a human experience. This is the consciousness we need to cultivate. When we do, we may find ourselves engulfed in ecstasy, even if the experience is fleeting.

It’s an odd thought, God wanting to incarnate through you and me. Put more clearly, God wants to use your body. Are you interested? There is only one problem, it may get you crucified. Like children who are captivated by Christmas, we adults can be too, but there is a cost. You no longer live any more. *I live, no, not I, Christ lives in me.* Galatians 2:20

With this consciousness cultivated, or perhaps reawakened, you may find yourself compelled to speak out or act in a way different than before. Christ’s work of social justice begins to take on a renewed urgency as his values become your values.

When we look at the problems our society is facing, it is easy to blame others. But, it is time we look in the mirror and realize that to some degree, we have sold out to the values of our world rather than embracing the values of the Gospel. And I’m not talking about something as superficial as saying “Merry Christmas” rather than “Happy Holidays”. This external facade of religion is a cheap substitute for the hard work of bringing about God’s Kingdom on earth. It’s a little like washing the outside of the cup, while the inside is what needs the attention.

History has proven that those who have worked to change unjust social systems have been standing with Christ, even if it meant death. How do we change our world to be more just? It’s up to us to allow the Gospel to inform our consciences so we can choose our issues and work out the details. One thing is for sure, we will need to stay in the frontal lobes.

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” John 8:12

“You are the light of the world.” Matthew 5:14

~ PB