

“Survey Said: Social Justice”

James 2:1-8, 14-17; Matthew 22:35-40

“Social Justice is the **basis** of the **New Testament.**” As I read this suggestion for consideration as a sermon topic, that statement jumped off the page. *“Social justice is the basis for the New Testament.”* The ‘BASIS?’ My visceral reaction was, ‘Well, what about another ‘J’ word... like **JESUS?!**’ My mind went back to my days at Columbia Seminary in Atlanta, when I was a pretty conservative ‘swimmer’ in a predominantly liberal ‘pool’... where ‘social justice’ was the buzzword most often associated with the issues of sexual orientation. A time when I really grappled with my concern that we could spend so much effort talking about **‘Justice’** that we didn’t give enough attention to **‘Jesus.’**

As I considered what this **idea** of ‘social justice’ is to mean to us as Christians, I thought about just what this **term** of ‘social’ justice’ means to us. So I decided to go to a couple sources to define it. First, to our electronic version of Britannica and World Book (you remember those, right?), Wikipedia... that ‘companion’ of our other ‘fount of wisdom,’ GOOGLE... ☺ It defined **“Social Justice”** as the “concept of **fair and just relations** between the **individual** and **society**... measured by ... the **distribution of wealth, opportunities** for **personal activity**, and **social privileges.**” ‘Fair and just’ economic, personal, and societal opportunities.

This definition could certainly serve to guide the efforts of our civic and governmental organizations in their efforts to provide equal opportunities for all mankind in ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.’ But is it enough for us who call ourselves followers of Jesus?

And so, as we happen to have come to ‘build our nest’ on this particular ‘branch’ of Christianity known as **Presbyterian**, I went to one of our denominational online resources, through the Presbyterian Mission Agency. I would encourage ALL of you, when in the midst of checking FaceBook, or your email, or just aimlessly ‘surfing the web,’ to go onto our PCUSA.org website, and click on “Pres Mission Agency.” (Particularly check out “What We Believe.” You just might be surprised to find out ‘WHAT’ it is that ‘WE’ believe! ☺)

But particularly with regards to our denominational perspective to issues of 'Social Justice,' in a statement that dates back to **1958** (when I was the ripe old age of TWO), the **General Assembly** (our highest governing body) wrote that it "affirms its conviction that **neither the Church as the body of Christ, nor Christians as individuals, can be neutral or indifferent toward evil in the world; affirms its responsibility to speak on social and moral issues ...seeking earnestly BOTH to know the mind of Christ AND to speak always in humility and love... ...and further, that "the churches' DUTY is not only to encourage and train their members in daily obedience to God's will, but corporately to reveal God's grace in places of suffering and need, to resist the forces that tyrannize, and to support the forces that restore the dignity of all men as the children of God, for only so is the gospel most fully proclaimed."" (PC(USA), p. 537).**

As 'good Presbyterians'... moreover, as faithful CHRISTIANS... it is our "**responsibility to speak on social and moral issues... seeking earnestly BOTH to know the mind of Christ AND to speak always in humility and love..."** In the words of one of my favorite mission statements of another Presbytery I once served, we are called "*To KNOW Christ and to MAKE Christ KNOWN.*" By 'speaking the truth in love.' It is our DUTY to both **individually** seek to Obey God's will for our lives... AND to **corporately** (as the body of Christ that IS His church) "**reveal God's grace in places of suffering and need.**" It is by BOTH 'knowing Christ' AND 'making Him known' that we fulfill the last part of the 'charge' of our 'church': "**...for only so is the gospel most fully proclaimed.**" (So maybe there IS something to that statement that 'Social justice is the core of the New Testament). What we BELIEVE must be connected to what we DO. For, in James words, "***faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.***" (*James 2:17*)

The inextricable nature of faith and works... of **salvation** and **service**... is declared, AND demonstrated, in the words, and deeds, of Christ. Simply "saving souls" is not in fact a complete description of what the Bible says Jesus came to accomplish. In Luke's Gospel Jesus quotes from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah in his first public description of what his ministry is about. Think of the people's excitement, the anticipation, over what this mysterious man of God was going to say: of how he was going to overturn the oppressive Roman government... how he was going to deliver them from all their struggles. And this is what He told them:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4:18-19)

There is clearly something more going on here than a simple transformation of inward spirituality, or even a promise of heaven in ‘the sweet by and by.’ Jesus is telling His disciples, then and now, that He was anointed by God’s Spirit in order to reach a particular ‘target market’: the poor, the captives, the blind, the oppressed. Is he speaking of SPIRITUAL poverty, captivity, blindness, oppression? SURE. In that way He is talking to US! But we cannot LIMIT His meaning to just the more ‘ethereal,’ eternal realm... but most certainly, also to this physical, earthly habitat. Jesus, the promised ‘Messiah’... the ‘anointed one’... did not come to merely point to sometime in the future when all pain and suffering would be no more, but to bring hurting people healing and hope in the **here-and-now!**

Whatever he was on his way to do, Jesus always took time for ‘interruptions’... demonstrating by the time he took to listen and care for those who were marginalized by society that they were important in His eyes. Important in the eyes of God. That no matter what ‘baggage’ that they may come with... their past mistakes, their background, where they were from... he didn’t judge them by that. He treated all with equity and justice... including those self-pious ones of whom He was ‘justly’ critical. In the words of Jesus’ brother James... aka, ‘James the JUST’... the question is posed that we must all look honestly in the mirror: ***“Do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?” (James 2:1)*** Where do we fall in the ‘continuum’ between Godly and human behavior as declared in the OT book of Samuel: ***“Man looks at the outward appearance; God looks at the heart.” (1 Samuel 16:7)*** As we look at those different than us... in race, in gender, in socio-economic class, in education, in language skills, or social skills... how would we answer James further question: ***“Have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges...?”***

‘Favoritism.’ Looking at ‘outward appearance’ rather than the heart. Making ‘distinctions’ between ourselves and others... becoming ‘judges.’ How do we handle issues like this? How are we to fulfill our responsibility to speak out on social issues with ‘the mind of Christ,’ in ‘humility and love?’

You are likely aware of a very controversial figure in the news lately associated with addressing the issues of racial 'favoritism'... making 'distinctions' and 'judging' based on the 'outward appearance.' His name: **Colin Kapernick**. If you DON'T know the name, you will likely know the 'trend' that he started in taking a knee during the singing of the National Anthem. He is also currently the focal point of a very controversial ad campaign by Nike. Our son and I had a LONG conversation about the merits, and de-merits, of this man's *stance*... or lack of same ... with regards to racial injustice.

As you might imagine, I personally stood more on the DE-merits side of this discussion. I, like so many others, saw his actions as **disrespect** for the most recognizable symbol of our great nation, the flag. While I understood his **purpose**... to call attention to the need for better race relations, which in some ways is no better than it was in the 1960's (which many of our more recent demonstrations bear a frightening resemblance to)... I question the **efficacy** of his **method**. I think that in many ways this practice has done as much to **divide** us as it has to **bring us together** to address these concerns.

But as I listened to my son's arguments in favor of such 'peaceful' demonstration... and while I know all about that 'holy ratio' of ears to mouth, indicating how we should **listen twice as much** as we **speak**, sometimes that is really HARD!... some of what he said really hit home. That though one could question his choice of 'statement' addressing the concern, Kapernick's action yet came out of a place of **conviction**, not **convenience**. He chose to put his career on the line because of what he believed in. To borrow from our denominational directive, he chose NOT to remain '**neutral or indifferent**' toward a perceived '**evil in the world**', but instead 'affirmed his **responsibility**' to '**speak**' to an important '**social and moral issue**.'

Maybe instead of the unintended result of disrespecting our flag, and so much of what it stands for, perhaps we should focus on the concern that caused that kneeling in the first place: "*Liberty and justice for all.*" Most certainly one of the bedrock principles that our flag DOES stand for. Maybe in addition to concerns about law enforcement, we should pay attention to the root causes of crime... economic disadvantages, lack of education, decline in the family structures and moral fiber that holds communities together. All of which can be positively impacted by communities of FAITH. Ones that are themselves held together by the 'tie that

binds our hearts in Christian love'... JESUS CHRIST. **How are you and I following Jesus' lead in standing up for what we believe... by taking a stand for others... to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.**" (Luke 4:18-19)

Bringing our concern for others closer to home, last Sunday there was a rather scathing letter to the Lake Charles *American Press* by a woman named 'Roxanne' who was really hurting, and obviously felt quite 'marginalized' by her community. Now I don't know anything about the accuracy of her story, but there is no doubt that she was a very bitter, angry person. As the paper entitled her letter, **"Society should care for the needy more."** There was no doubt that 'Roxanne' was 'needy'... in body, in mind, and in spirit. And there are a lot of 'Roxannes' out there who are in need, and bitter, and feel like no one cares. And perhaps she is right: 'society SHOULD care for the needy more.' And who IS 'society?' **The Church of Jesus Christ.** Not merely a government program or a civic organization. The Church who **"loves the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength... and loves our neighbor as ourselves."** May we be a church that **shows its faith... BY its works... to NOT be dead.** But **ALIVE!** Alive in Christ... that Suffering Servant and Savior who always took time to stop and show that He cared. AMEN?!