

Seeking Justice – MLK weekend

Amos 5:24; Micah 6:8

Isaiah 42:1-9; Mark 1:9-11

January 15, 2012

Kimby Young

As an adult, I have heard stories from my parents about my growing up years in the south. I was born in Mississippi in 1961 and moved to Memphis in 1966. Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed in Memphis in 1968. My parents have a lot of stories about our lives in the south during that time of racial integration. They told me about their work and things they tried to accomplish. They've told me how our church became integrated and about white flight in our neighborhood. They've told me about individual people they loved, and other people they argued with, and people they lost, and moments of fear or sadness or triumph.

But really, I don't remember any of that. I just remember being a well loved kid in a faith-filled church and a secure home, worrying only about homework and friends and sports. When I was older, I do remember my own stories of tension and negotiation, of confrontation and challenge. I think I was more aware of certain people and certain problems than of big issues. I think there was a lot more going on than I ever knew. And I know that I was naïve and sheltered and protected and innocent; and therefore privileged in my white middle class childhood. I didn't know about the poverty and struggle, the violence and fear, the denial of freedom and the abuse of power, the suffering and the injustice. But I think about those realities now. And I think about my parent's faithfulness in those difficult times.

Today, there are just as many struggles and challenges, perhaps more – along the lines of race, creed, orientation, culture, custom and diversity; concerning issues of health care, employment, poverty, need, acceptance, intolerance, and basic human rights at home and worldwide. There are too many issues to list in this service, and too many diverse ways of facing these challenges and making changes. I don't want to get into that list, and I don't have the answers. But I do want to say, our faith can help us to make wise decisions and to evaluate social justice issues. The Bible is full of passages that call us to work for, live for, struggle for and even fight for Justice. It is probably THE most often specified task of the truly faithful – second only to praising God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. And even then, several passages, like the one from Micah suggest that your worship is worthless to God if it is not accompanied by living in and working for social justice and care for the poor.

The challenge for us is the "how to." The Bible does not spell out what justice means for the modern American – obviously – the challenges we face today and the systems we use today are nothing like those of the ancient middle-eastern world. We have to figure out the specifics for ourselves. Ah... there's the problem. People of good faith have many different solutions – sometimes in direct conflict with others. What exactly is right and fair for everyone?

When the Bible does define justice or mercy specifically, there are some common themes. Over and over and over again the scripture defines justice as protecting or being on the side of "the widow, the outcast and the fatherless." By definition in that day, these were three categories of people who had absolutely no means of support. They were the bottom of the social ladder and had no possible way of helping themselves. They were easily pushed aside, abused, mistreated and burdened, and there was no legal recourse to relieve their suffering. The Bible repeatedly calls for the faithful to stand with these poor and needy, and to lift them out of the depths, to offer relief from suffering and salvation to them in concrete healing ways. Justice meant doing right by, and making things right for, those you didn't have to care for at all, those who could not do for themselves. Justice meant, and means, providing opportunities for the least among us. Providing opportunities – not just giving charity for the moment, but empowering these least among us to discover and fully use gifts of their own.

Let's take today's scripture from Isaiah for instance. It says justice means "to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from darkness." It reminds you of the words from Isaiah 61 which was our scripture a few weeks ago during advent – the words which Jesus repeated in Luke 4 as his mission statement as he began his ministry. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor... to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

The original passages from Isaiah were written to and about the whole people of Israel. As a nation, as a people of God, they were called to do God's will – bringing justice and mercy to those in need, relieving distress, and freeing the oppressed. For generations this has been the job of the faithful, even today. But we have obviously had a lot of trouble pulling it off.

So Jesus came along and took up that task as an individual. God in Christ shows us how one person can receive the Spirit of God and can take on the task of transforming the world. Jesus demonstrates justice for us in concrete ways - feeding the hungry, healing the sick, but also challenging the powers of greed and manipulation and corruption. Standing up for what is right even at great risk. Jesus reveals both God's miraculous power active in the world and God's call to us to share that power in making the world a better place. After Christ's resurrection, Jesus poured that Spirit onto us. Remember Pentecost when the Spirit of God poured out on those who were gathered, empowering them with gifts to do God's will, to carry on Christ's mission. Well we have received that Spirit of God. We are the new people of God on whom Christ's mission rests, For whom God's challenge is alive and well. With generations before us we are now called to seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. How do you walk that walk? And how do we walk that walk collectively? Think about it.

One step at a time. Humbly with God, following Jesus Christ.

I can't wait for the stories your children tell.