



Sunday, September 29, 2024

***Do Unto Others* Kindness Campaign: JUSTICE**
“Do Justice” | Luke 6:31-36, Micah 6:6-8 | Jess Scholten

Our Scripture passage this morning is a continuation from last week of our lesson from Luke 6, beginning with where we ended: Do unto others. Hear what God is saying to the church today:

Do to others as you would have them do to you. ‘If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

-Luke 6:31-36

Oof. Jesus just cuts right to it sometimes, doesn't he? It's easy to love those who love you. Everybody can do that. But what about those who won't love you back? That's just... so. much. harder. It's actual sacrifice.

Spot me for lunch – I'll get you back next time? Also, easy. But what about the person who will never spot you back. That coworker that's racking up a Panera debt or the friend who just lets you pick up the tab every single time.

There are all sorts of real-life examples of these kinds of things. The person you generously let in in a traffic jam who cuts off the next person, and you immediately regret being considerate in the first place... well, that's one thing. But what about the family member who keeps stealing things from you? Or the person at your job who actively undermines your work or chronically takes credit for yours? You can start to feel that angst in your very bones. Extending kindness starts to feel impossible in some

of these situations. Turning the other cheek? No thank you.

What about the person whose political signs make you fear for your own future or the future of your friends? How can we possibly extend warmth and consideration when it feels so threatening?

Because we are called to – because the kingdom of heaven doesn't often come blowing through in with stunning and immediate change. It comes in small rays of sunlight... like a little bit of compassion or a good listening ear or an unexpected kindness on a terrible day.

Why do we share kindness when it feels like almost nothing in the face of hopeless difficulty or an endless reign of injustice? Because we care for others, it's how we live out our faith, and most of all, because it's the model we have from God. "For [God] is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful just as your Father is merciful." It's actual sacrifice.

Do to others as you would have them to do you isn't simply a pie in the sky notion – it's the real nitty gritty of our faith. It's building muscles of flexibility and tolerance and caring for others. It's a deeply compassionate ability to see things from another person's perspective, to honor another person's hope. Do unto others is a justice practice – like offering support that allows all three people to watch the baseball game. (reference to slide from children's message)

Piero Ferucci wrote a beautiful book on kindness several years ago where he compares kindness to a diamond – hold it to the light, and you will see the many facets of kindness that make it sparkle. In our Kindness campaign, we are looking at some of these facets of kindness, and today, the side that shines is justice.

Justice. Some of you are waiting with bated breath for me to light a fire under this congregation for justice. Let's end racism, fix the housing problems, get all 1400 Covenant hands on deck to feed the homeless. Let's stop sitting around already and reading books and put boots to the ground. I feel you. I see you.

And some of you are anxious that this is even the topic of the day. Maybe you're dreading that it's gonna be the kind of sermon that makes you feel guilty or hopeless or tired when you're already feeling thin, sort of stretched like Bilbo as if you're "butter scraped over too much bread." I feel you. I see you.

There's this saying that a good sermon comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. But that's now how the call to justice works – the call to justice is always an invitation to becoming a more faithful disciple.

Each one of us is seeking to make a difference in our world for the better.

- How can we do so each day and more faithfully as we grow into maturity?
- How can we increase our capacity for justice as we increase in our love for Jesus?

Until life here on earth feels fully like the kingdom of heaven, we all have this important calling. How are we working towards the full **goodness** of God on earth like exists in heaven? As author and activist Adrienne Maree Brown reflects in her book, *Emergent Strategy*, based on the writings of Octavia Butler, "There is always enough time for the right work." <https://noelito.medium.com/emergent-strategy-ed9cc66a25c5>

Sometime in the last few months, I added yet another Bible to my collection: The Poverty and Justice Bible published by World Vision. It comes pre-highlighted – every passage that speaks to providing for the poor, the widow, the strangers, the foreigner among you, the sick – all of them, already pre-ordained. I knew there would be more passages than I thought – I didn't realize quite how many more there would be.

So many more. The prophet Micah in the Old Testament spends some time addressing what our priorities should be as people of faith.

'With what shall I come before the Lord,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings,/ with calves a year old?
Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?'
He has told you, O mortal, what is good;/ and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,/and to walk humbly with your God?
-Micah 6:6-8

Micah was addressing the people of God about 700 years before Jesus, and he did not

tolerate the immoral behavior of the day. He writes about how the people were committing sins God hates: fraud, greed, oppression, hypocrisy, heresy, injustice, extortion, lying, and murder.

Which is how chapter six begins in a courtroom with God taking the people to trial: “Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice... the Lord has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel.” I don’t know about you, but I would prefer not to go to court with the Almighty. And yet, in this trial, God reminds the people again and again of the ways Almighty God has always been with them – guiding them through the wilderness, wearying them with constant blessing.

God rebukes the people, but God also provides the door to reconciliation. reminding the people of the deepest call for our lives: it’s not something God wants—it’s us. It’s not our *sacrifice* but our **hearts** that God most desires. The Lord has told us—all humans—what is required: do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God. Our very lives are a sacrifice bent toward justice, reconciliation, and creating a little more heaven on earth.

Like little altars everywhere, you are the offering – what is it God calls you to do with your life?

There isn’t any more pointed of a call for justice we can find than in Matthew 25 when Jesus says, “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you [like this].” And Jesus responds: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

We have committed along with Presbyterian churches across the country to this kind of life of justice. In the PCUSA, that means we work for justice by building congregational vitality, dismantling structural racism, and eradicating systemic poverty. Some of you can say that along with me – you’ve been to Matthew 25 conferences, and you’re actively engaged in doing the very things that the Spirit is nudging us to do to be a vibrant church seeking to make a real difference in the world.

Building congregational vitality means we are actively working for stronger

community. People who care about making their communities safer for all people and are working toward equity for all people ***need vital communities*** that pray for their work, support one another, listen deeply to stories of the work and for the Spirit, and help people to know God's love so fully *that we can't help* but share that with others.

All those announcements that we get lost in sometimes? Each one is an invitation for ways to connect to God and to one another, so that we can do the good work that is before us, so we are strengthened and nourished with a foundation from which to do good work.

Good work like dismantling structural racism.

In his book on *One Blood: Parting Words to the Church on Race and Love*, John Perkins speaks truth to the Church. He writes: "Perhaps the strongest indictment against us as the Church is that we have settled for an Americanized version of the Church that mirrors whatever culture says, and there is no sense of collective loss, no sense of remorse. We have sinned deeply. The problem is that we haven't got a taste for the sinfulness of racism. We don't see the wickedness of color-coding. We don't see the wickedness of profiling God's people that [God] created to be one and that [God has created in [God's own] image" (p.75).

We lament racism. We see it, and we're holding up a mirror to ourselves through groups like Racist Anonymous Fellowship and by participating in Nehemiah's "Black History for a New Day" course *slide*, so that we are fully aware of the systemic roots of racism and are moved to make a difference. If you've been curious about this course, mark off Monday nights in February and March – we'll be sponsoring a group of us next spring to participate.

Nehemiah is one of our mission partners, groups in the community and beyond that we financially support as a congregation. But the mission committee is actively moving beyond simply being a group that donates money; we want partnership – relationships with these groups so that in the process of mission, we are changed as well. We're meeting with these groups and listening to their needs. When we talked with folks from Nehemiah, we asked – what else can we do to help? They had two answers: have more people take Justified Anger's "Black History for a New Day" course and teach your children how to not be racist. We're committed to making a difference.

It's the same for the ways we work for eradicating systemic poverty. Organizations like

Habitat, the Road Home, Triangle Ministries, and Porchlight are places working to meet immediate needs of people who are homeless with long-term impact to eliminate the need for shelter services. We give tens of thousands of dollars to these organizations, but we're also moved by churches like St. John's on the square, a Lutheran church that razed their building to use their space to host both the church and 110 units of affordable housing.

We're dreaming and wondering what kind of impact Covenant could make when we really seek to listen to what the community needs and where the Spirit is leading us. Don't worry, we haven't rented a wrecking ball. That was St. John's calling.

But what is our calling?

Dismantling racism and eradicating poverty are ongoing until the kingdom of heaven really is here on earth. They are not a check box of one and done. And they do involve more than giving away money – more than simply charity. Charity has its place, especially now with the deep injustices of the world. But more and more, we are being called to **more than *doing for***; we are called to ***being with*** – the space of transformation.

Our Guatemala mission partnership is a great example of this. We have trip coming up in February, if you've been curious – drop me an email. It's a work trip – but the work isn't simply building or manual labor. Some of the work is listening to stories, being present to the challenges of day-to-day life, crafting or playing soccer with kids – simple reminders that we are all **being human** together. *Doing for* is an easy way to feel good about ourselves, but *being with* leads to solidarity and deep listening, to partnership and the real work of transformation.

It's not something God wants – it's you – your presence, your listening ear, your open hands, your heart. You are the offering. Thanks be to God. Amen.

As our affirmation of faith for today, we have an excerpt from the Belhar Confession, a confession that is a gift to the church that came out of the struggle against apartheid and racism in South Africa. Reformed churches have adopted it in solidarity to our call to dismantle structural racism across the globe. Let us join together as a reminder of who we claim to be as the people of God. Join me:

“We believe that the church must...stand by people in any form of suffering and need,

which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream;

We believe that the church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others.”

May we live into that which we profess. Amen.