



Social Righteousness

James 1:27; 2:15-17
Matthew 5:43-48

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May 9, 2010

How many times have you walked up to a street person and said, “If you’d taken Business Administration instead of Philosophy back in your sophomore year, you wouldn’t be in this position!”

Never, right? Hopefully never. But you may have been making an assumption much like it – that the reason they are in those circumstances is entirely their fault.

My grandmother on my father’s side was widowed in 1919, in the great Spanish Flu epidemic. We have my grandfather’s log book, where he recorded his daily work as a foundryman: it says that in the last week of his life, on Monday, he made 5 pieces, Tuesday, 5 pieces; Wednesday 3 pieces, Thursday, 1; and on Friday, my grandmother wrote in his book: “Today God took my dear one.”

She then had no income, except for doing some washing for people, and four children. My grandfather had been doing piece work at the foundry; they had no savings, they lived very nearly day to day. Her whole life had changed. To survive, and for her children to survive, all she could do was send the children – including my father – off to relatives, and remarry. She died a few months later, also from the flu.

Her church helped her as much as it could: we have the letters. But there wasn’t much else she could do, at least not much that was legal or moral.

People tried to help, people she knew; but that was a particularly hard time, right after World War One. The economy was shaky after the war boom; lots of families – millions – were hit by the flu. What help she got could only be short-term.

None of this was her fault, nothing of what happened to her and her family. So a family already broken by the death of the father was shattered by the need to survive. That was the ordinary course of events back then. Something very similar happened on my mother’s side, and my grandfather was shipped off to another family as a child as well.

In the ninth chapter of John, Jesus and his disciples encounter a man born blind. The disciples ask him, “Is his blindness due to his sin, or his parents?” Jesus’ answer is, neither; neither his fault nor his parents: God doesn’t work that way.

It used to be that more often than not we knew the people we were helping, the people in need. We knew and recognized their circumstances, and we also knew it could have been us that got sick, that broke a leg, that had a horse roll over on them. You helped them as they would help you.

And we saw more needy people whom we didn’t know – the tramp coming up to the kitchen door for a sandwich, the child begging on the street. Doing the right thing as a society used to be one-on-one, mostly; but as the world changed with the rise of cities and industry, and especially in our lifetimes, that’s changed.

Our nation was founded on the principles of human dignity and worth. It’s a measure of the success we’ve had here in the United States striving for social righteousness that our compassionate aid to others has become impersonal. We met the challenge of the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression, with needs that overwhelmed whole communities, with new support systems. You and I don’t have to meet the people in need anymore – at least, not the obvious ones. They’re not right in front of us unless you live in a city, they’re certainly not here in Green Valley, and so we’re able to assume that if that person – that deadbeat or welfare mom – simply tried harder, or made better choices, or had done something else which we can pass off as their fault, they’d be fine like us. They only have themselves to blame, and are not worthy of assistance.

It’s very, very easy to slip into the habit of taking care of ourselves, and assuming that those who aren’t doing as well as we are just aren’t on God’s “good” list.

The nation of Israel was called into being by God to be a holy people, to transform the world by its holiness. A large part of that holiness was caring for people, and not just themselves. God gave them extensive and explicit laws about how to act as a community, a society, a nation, many of which specifically mandated care for the disadvantaged – the poor, the widows, the orphans, the foreigner. They didn’t do well. One summary of the Old Testament has it that one half is about taking care of each other, and the other half is scolding people for failing to live up to that holy purpose. That’s not at all surprising.

Have you ever noticed that kids tend to be meaner when they’re in a group? I don’t know about you, but I well remember being teased and bullied by groups of kids with whom, one on one, I got along very well, or joining them to pick on someone else. I’ve watched a few generations after me go through the same thing. That’s human nature.

The theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote a great book about this in 1932: “Moral Man, Immoral Society.” The heart of his argument is just this: good people do bad things when they’re together. 1932 – before the Holocaust and the slaughter of millions of Russians, before the atrocities of Japan, before the genocides of the last fifty years.

Even good people can be selfish, mean, and petty sometimes—even worse when they're given political power. King David of Israel, celebrated for his dedication to God and God's love of him, messed up badly – and repeatedly, as a person and as leader of God's people.

This is what makes the promotion of social righteousness an important end of the Church. The Church is sent into the world to be salt and light, pointing to what God has told God's people from the very beginning is the right thing to do. It is not called to create a social system, any more than we can create the Kingdom of God. We describe it, we point to what it looks like – not that we always get it right. The Bible once was used to justify slavery.

The promotion of social righteousness, a good and just society, is a strong part of our Presbyterian heritage. John Calvin practiced his understanding of it, which meant making sure that his home city of Geneva kept the Sabbath (so people could rest) and put in an effective sewer system (so they could stay healthy), among other things. He looked to God's laws on the one hand, and looked out for people's welfare (which isn't so different) on the other, all the time keeping in mind that people are people and mess up. Even the Sabbath can be misused!

Societies are going to hurt someone, because they are human and imperfect. Calvin's Geneva was no different. But we keep trying. The prophet Amos told the leaders of his time, the leaders of Israel responsible for implementing God's love, care, and justice: “[you] sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals...trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed...turn justice into bitterness and cast righteousness to the ground...oppress the righteous and take bribes and deprive the poor of justice in the courts. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream.”(Amos 2:6c-7a; 5:7, 12b, 24)

Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, tells the crowds that “the sun rises on the evil and the good, and rain falls on the righteous and the unrighteous.” Just because God loves you doesn't mean you always be safe and happy, or vice versa.

Jesus tells us that the two greatest commandments of God are “to love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind” and “love your neighbor as yourself.” When challenged to define “neighbor,” he tells us that everyone, every other person is our neighbor. Love your enemies, do good to those who persecute you – not to mention those who you don't know and haven't done you any harm at all. And, of course, from James: “Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, ‘Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?”

Our aid is human, administered by humans, and there will always be problems and loss, those who get more than their share, and those who are mishandled and cheated and misused. But the Church remains called to stand up and say what we believe to be right, to behave righteously.

And so, just as our lives ought to point to Jesus Christ in our dealings with others, so the Church is to hold up God's standard for how we as a people, a

society, a nation, should go about our life. Feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, shelter to the exposed, clothes to the naked, comfort to the grieving, love the loveless, teach the children, and lift up those at the bottom – because whenever we do these things, we do them to and for Jesus Christ himself.

There was a man in my home town, who everybody knew was on the wrong side of everything. We kids weren't to talk to him, not that he'd try to talk to us; we heard that he was in fights and drank a lot and was as close to the classic criminal element as our town had.

We called him "Tonto." I have no idea why. But the summer I worked in my home church, after my first year of seminary, I came to the church office one day just as he was leaving.

"What's Tonto doing here?" I asked. "What did he want?"

Jim Ulrich, my pastor, looked at me in a way that wasn't particularly comfortable, and said, "He came to see me. He does, from time to time. Did you know his middle name is Deogracias?"

I didn't know his real first or last name, let alone the middle, and I was astounded that my pastor did. Deogracias means "Thanks be to God." I learned later that Tonto used to come in to see Jim to talk about faith and to give him some money for the church. He never felt like he could come like anyone else, because of who he was, or at least, who and what we thought he was. But in the end, he was a child of God. And in a town that judged him, that kept him at arm's length, that didn't trust him and would be quite happy if he just disappeared, because "everyone knew" about him, he did his piece, despite all that.

Tonto reminds us that even the church can be taught something about social righteousness. Deogracias—thanks be to God, indeed.