

“Thank God That Doesn’t Happen Here”

4th Sunday of Eastertide

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From the Pulpit

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Please pray with me: May the words of my mouth and meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight oh Lord our strength and our salvation.

It is an honor and a privilege to be speaking to you today. Frankly I am proud of this church for being the first church in the United Church of Christ to designate a Commissioned Minister for Social Justice. I understand that there are now something around 30 such ministers in the UCC.

So why social justice ministry? Why take that time and make the effort? Let us look at three main questions: Are there justice issues in our society? Should the church and its members be involved with justice issues? And if so, what can we do about them?

So here we are in Columbus, Ohio. It's a pretty nice place to live, so what could possibly be wrong here?

Growing up we all have those memories of things that gave us pause or asked us to question our present reality. One such memory for me, and it is probably one that stimulated my interest in social justice, was something that occurred on a regular basis during the civil rights struggles 1960s.

My Aunt Bea, who was in poor health, had moved in with my parents and little brother and sister. I recall her as a rather grumpy old lady though in reality she was much younger than I am today. As those of you who are old enough will recall the

news in the 60s was filled with images of unrest, racial tensions, civil rights marches and the like. My Aunt would sit and watch the television and mutter “Thank God that doesn’t happen here.”

I believe that Aunt Bea meant that to mean both the underlying problem and the demonstration wherein folks were crying out for change. We had these epic arguments that always ended up 3 to 1 – Mom, Dad and myself on one side and Aunt Bea on the other. You see I knew better for I’d seen it for myself. I’m sure that Aunt Bea had seen things too but had not allowed them to register.

When I was seven, this would’ve been 1950, dad and I were out on a Saturday morning working at his office and then running errands. We stopped for lunch at a diner on North High near Goodale. We went in and sat down at the counter, and ordered our lunch. After a few minutes an elderly black man came in and sat down next to dad. As he looked over the menu, the owner approached and said, “you’ll have to go around back, boy.” The man said, “yes sir,” and got up and left. I don’t know whether he went around back or not, but I do know that the next thing that happened was that my father stood up and asked the owner what we owed for our lunch.

The owner replied that we hadn't eaten our lunch yet. And I remember dad saying, "No, and we won't be eating anywhere where any of God's children are not welcome." He paid. We left.

Sure, Aunt Bea, we can "Thank God that discrimination in public accommodation doesn't happen here," but only if we choose to ignore it.

When I was in my 20s and found that I had no money for college, couldn't borrow it, and couldn't work enough hours to pay for and attend college while helping the family, where my father had become an invalid, I sought work in the new field of data processing. I convinced the local manager for IBM to allow me to take some of their training courses. I thought that it would give me a leg up as I applied for these new and exciting jobs. I did very well in the courses, but unfortunately all of the companies I talked to wanted someone with at least a year's experience, and I had none. But I kept interviewing whenever I had the chance.

One day I went to interview for a programmer/operator job at a local plastics company. They were advertising for someone to operate and program equipment that IBM had allowed me to train on, so I was pretty excited. Then, as I sat waiting in the lobby of the office of the company, I met another young man who would be applying for the same job. This fellow had 16

years experience working in data processing in the United States Army. He had experience on all of the equipment and with all of the processes that this company was using. He was a very cheerful man, and I knew right away that I didn't have a chance. I went through with the interview anyhow.

A couple of days later I received a call from the personnel director at the company notifying me that they had decided to hire me. I was surprised, so I asked him "Why do you want to hire me? There was someone who interviewed the same day I did who seemed far better qualified than I am. Why didn't you pick him?" The personnel director paused and then responded, "You must mean the black fella... We don't hire his kind." I told him that he doesn't hire my kind either, and hung up.

Yes Aunt Bea, we can "thank God that job discrimination doesn't happen here," but only if we refuse to see it.

During the presidential election of 2004, I was a poll watcher for America Votes. I stood with prospective, mostly black, voters at an east side elementary school for hours on end in the pouring rain. I spoke with many who had to leave because they couldn't take more time from work or child care. I heard from some who had voted that only two of the four voting machines were working, and that nothing was being done. I called for one of our attorneys to come and see what was wrong.

When our attorney arrived, it was a little past 11:30 in the morning. She went in and found that the reason that the machines weren't working was the power cords were missing. Oddly, when she told the poll workers that she was heading down to federal court to file for relief for the voters, suitable power cords were immediately found.

Yes, Aunt Bea, thank God that voting rights abuses don't happen here, unless, of course you look.

I have a friend among social justice activists here in Columbus who is an ordained United Methodist Church pastor who hails from Texas. He is a third-generation Mexican American. As he drives in Columbus, he is often stopped by the police, the probable cause being "driving while looking Latin American."

Once again, let's thank God that profiling doesn't happen here, unless, of course we don't hide from the truth.

John O'Donoghue in his book *To Bless the Space Between Us* writes this blessing for the citizen:

In these times when anger
Is turned into anxiety
And someone has stolen
The horizons and mountains,

Our small emperors on parade
Never expect our indifference

To disturb their nakedness.

They keep their heads down
And their eyes gleam with reflection
From aluminum economic ground,

The media wraps everything
In a cellophane of sound
And the ghost surface of the virtual
Overlays the breathing earth.

The industry of distraction
Makes us forget
That we live in a universe.

We have become converts
To the religion of stress
And its deity of progress;

That we may have courage
To turn aside from it all

And come to kneel down before the poor,
To discover what we must do,
How to turn anxiety

Back into anger,
How to find our way home.

If we do turn our anxiety back into anger at injustice as O'Donohue suggests, what is next? These examples, and many, many more, point to problems that require systemic change in our society. But who should be involved. Should the church involve itself in these struggles? Should we as individual Christians feel an obligation to try to fix these problems? In today's Gospel lesson from John we hear Jesus say to those in authority that we are his sheep, that we recognize his voice, and we follow him. Just what, then, does it mean to follow Jesus? Several years ago I preached in worship in a suburban UCC church. My sermon used an Old Testament lesson from Amos where Amos was exhorting leaders to quit building armaments to fight unnecessary wars with the neighbors and instead to take care the poor the alien in their midst and the orphan. The New Testament lesson was Jesus' well known exchange from Luke 10, at the beginning of the parable of the good Samaritan: "Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' He said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' He answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.'"

In the fellowship time following the service a fellow came up to me and said “Do you really believe all that justice stuff that you preached about?” I must admit it was tempting to give a flippant answer such as “Well I saw the sermon title and had to come up with something”, but I restrained myself and pursued his question further. It turned out that what he really wanted to know was why following the example of Peter and Paul, in Acts of the Apostles, where we Christians are no longer required to follow the Jewish dietary restrictions, purity laws, dress codes etc. we were still required to listen to and follow the exhortations of the prophets from the Old Testament. It’s a fair question.

For me, the answer to this question is found in many places in Jesus teachings, but it is most profoundly expressed in three places. First in Romans 5:20-21, where Paul says “But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” According to theologian Paul Tillich, in his Sermon “You Are Accepted”, this is where we come to understand that all are accepted by God.

Second, Rev. Ahrens suggested the following from Acts of The Apostles 10:34 “Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality.”

And third, from Matthew 40, “He said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

In these three statements we find that all are accepted by God, God shows no partiality and all of the law and the prophets are to be understood as resulting from Love by and of God, love of self, and love of neighbor.

If my neighbor, the widow, the orphan, someone who has no food, no clothing, no shelter, is sick or imprisoned, and who, coincidentally, is accepted by our impartial God, how may I deem them unacceptable or undeserving? If I follow Jesus, I cannot turn my back on injustice.

Yet I am only one. I am so very small and the problems are so very big. What can I do? How can I help? Where do I turn?

I write letters. I attend rallies for peace. I’m careful about what products I buy so as to avoid rewarding companies who treat the environment and/or their employees unfairly. I represent First Church and the Central Southeast Ohio Association on several boards whose activities support justice and mercy, but that’s simply not enough.

So the best answer, my friends, is that I turn to you. The answer is that together we are many. The answer is that

together we have power to change systems and to hold officials accountable. At times, the path can be dreary, the tasks tiresome and the conflict disheartening, but no more dreary, tiresome and disheartening than the lives of persons held back by injustice. My discomfort pales before the lifetime of **discomfort for someone who cannot find a job, who can't find a decent meal, who doesn't live in a decent home or who cannot afford to have good health.**

That my friends is why I will be at BREAD's Nehemiah Action on the evening of May 9. I will stand in solidarity with those who need a powerful voice to create jobs, to end violence, to cease profiling and to treat mental illness. We, in the UCC, call that **"Sacred Presence,"** and I hope and I pray that many of you will be there with me, as we have entered here to worship, and will depart this place to serve God. Amen.

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