

“The Prophet of the Social Gospel”

*Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
II Samuel 11:1-15; Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6:1-21*

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July 29, 2018

From the Pulpit

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A baptismal meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, July 29, 2018, Proper 12, the 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time, dedicated to the memory of Manfred Luttinger (1932-2018) who survived the Holocaust to make a difference in this world, to Joshua Lewis (1985-2018), who did not survive the Opioid Epidemic sweeping this nation and died far too long, to Rabbi Michael Ungar for his 16 years as a Rabbi at Congregation Tifereth Israel, to Carsyn Emily Schmitt on her baptismal day, to G. Dene Barnard, who graces us with music today and has done so for 45 years and always to the glory of God!

“The Prophet of the Social Gospel”

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For a moment, I want you to focus on one sentence of all the scripture lessons we have heard today.

From John 6:14, following the miracle of feeding the 5000, we read: *“When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, “This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!”* As I talk about the “Prophet of the Social Gospel” today, we

all need to remember the truest prophet who has come into the world – that is our Prophet, the Son of God, Jesus Christ. He stands out as the one who pointed so many to the fullness of love and justice and continues to do so to this current day. All other prophets before and since pale in comparison.

Nevertheless, **the prophet of God** who preached from our pulpit for 36 years was a gift to this world – coming from the fabric and faith of the prophet Jesus Christ. His name was **Solomon Washington Gladden**. He was called “the prophet of the Social Gospel.” He was our pastor from 1882-1914 and then was our pastor emeritus from 1914-1918. Today I will lift up his teachings and look the movement he inspired – the Social Gospel Movement.

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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What was so singular and extraordinary about the Rev. Dr. Washington Gladden was that he grasped something that was only dimly sensed in his day. Here it is: **The Gospel of Jesus**

Christ is not intended merely for the salvation of individuals but also for the transformation of society.

This is often referred to as “the Social Gospel.” He dedicated his life to this belief. He applied his beliefs in church and society. As a result, he made a world of difference. He didn’t just hold these thoughts to himself. He preached them. He wrote 35 books into which they found expression. He started an entire movement that spread from this pulpit across the world. That’s why many called him “The Father of the Social Gospel Movement.”

The Social Gospel Movement which Walter Rauschenbusch and Washington Gladden wrote about and lit a fire under is none other than the truth of Jesus Christ, the law of Israel and the crying blast of the prophets of old speaking God’s word to us with fire and spirit – **“Care for my poor.”**

The Social Gospel movement was a movement that grew out of the industrial revolution of the late 19th century. It was a movement in which salvation was seen as the symbiotic relationship between the personal and the social. One could not separate one’s own personal salvation from the salvation of the world.

The early voices of this movement were white men and all pastors and theologians: Horace Bushnell, Lyman Abbott,

Graham Taylor, George Gordon, Dean George Hodges, Walter Rauschenbusch and Washington Gladden.

Of much less renown were women social Gospel leaders who, because of their widespread exclusion from ordination in most traditions (not ours) found their outlets elsewhere – through social service, compassionate care and ultimately organizing for suffrage and equal rights. They included: Jane Addams, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Sojourner Truth, Susan B. Anthony, Fannie Chapman and many others.

I would add – from Columbus, Celia Jeffrey and the women of First Church. These women **founded and bolstered** the YWCA, Gladden Community House, The Godman Guild, and Children's Hospital. In fact, I believe we would not be in this building today if it were not for Celia Jeffrey. Make no mistake about it. Women powered the underwriting and undergirding of these stones and these walls. They got it done while the men wrote about it.

In his new book, *Breaking White Supremacy: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Black Social Gospel* (a book which was first introduced from this pulpit as a Gladden Lecture October 27, 2014), Gary Dorrien lifts up the African-Americans who transformed society through their powerful witness, including WEB DuBois Mordecai Johnson, Benjamin Mays, Howard

Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr. I would add Rev. James Poindexter, Second Baptist Church Columbus and Dr. Fred Shuttlesworth, Birmingham, Alabama and so many more....

All these men and women and many more exemplified the convictions that faith and social reform were closely related aspects of Christianity. The social gospel was Christianity lived out every day in the service to others. It was a commitment to social justice for all!

The social gospel movement was not a unified and well-focused movement, as it contained members who disagreed with the conclusions of others within the movement. In fact, they disagreed strongly at times on biblical interpretation and understanding. It was Rauschenbusch that stated that the movement needed “a theology to make it effective” and likewise, “Theology needs the social gospel to vitalize it.”

In *The Theology for the Social Gospel* (published in 1917, one year before Gladden died), Rauschenbusch took up the task of creating “a systematic theology large enough to match [our social gospel] and vital enough to back it.” He believed that the social gospel would be “a permanent addition to our spiritual outlook and that its arrival constitutes a state in the development of the Christian religion,” and thus a systematic tool for using it was necessary.

In *The Theology for the Social Gospel*, he wrote that for John the Baptist, baptism was “not a ritual act of individual salvation but an act of dedication to a religious and social movement.” Concerning the social depth and breadth of Christ’s atoning work, Rauschenbusch writes: “*Jesus did not in any real sense bear the sin of some ancient Briton who beat up his wife in BC 56, or of some mountaineer in Tennessee who got drunk in AD 1917. But he did in a very real sense bear the weight of the public sins of organized society, and they in turn are causally connected with all private sins.*”

Rauschenbusch enumerated “six sins, all of a public nature, which combined to kill Jesus. He bore their crushing attack in his body and soul. He bore them, not by sympathy, but by direct experience. Insofar as the personal sins of men have contributed to the existence of these public sins, he came into collision with the totality of evil in mankind. It requires no legal fiction of imputation to explain that, as the Psalmist says, ‘*he was wounded for our transgressions; he was bruised for our iniquities.*’ Solidarity explains it.”

These six “social sins” which Jesus bore on the cross were: “*Religious bigotry, the combination of graft and political power, the corruption of justice, the mob spirit (being ‘the social group gone mad’) and mob action, militarism, and class contempt – every student of history will recognize that these*

sum up constitutional forces in the Kingdom of Evil. Jesus bore these sins in no legal or artificial sense, but in their impact on his own body and soul. He had not contributed to them, as we have, and yet they were laid on him. They were not only the sins of Caiaphas, Pilate, or Judas, but the social sin of all mankind, to which all who ever lived have contributed, and under which all who ever lived have suffered.”

The idea of the Kingdom of God was crucial to Gladden and Rauschenbusch's theology of the social gospel. Rauschenbusch states that the ideology and “doctrine of the Kingdom of God,” of which Jesus Christ reportedly “always spoke” has been gradually replaced by that of the Church.

This was done at first by the early church out of what appeared to be necessity, but Rauschenbusch calls Christians to return to the doctrine of the Kingdom of God. Of course, such a replacement has cost theology and Christians at large a great deal: the way we view Jesus and the synoptic gospels, the ethical principles of Jesus, and worship rituals have all been affected by this replacement. In promoting a return to the doctrine of the Kingdom of God, he clarified that the Kingdom of God: is not subject to the pitfalls of the Church; it can test and correct the Church; is a prophetic, future-focused ideology and a revolutionary, social and political force

that understands all creation to be sacred; and it can help save the problematic, sinful social order.

While Rauschenbusch sought to systematize this theology, it was Washington Gladden who literally “brought it home.” Rauschenbusch was a Baptist from New York City who cut his teeth in Hell’s Kitchen. Gladden was a Congregationalist farm boy from Rural New York who delivered the social gospel in the pastoral ministry of First Congregational Church.

Washington Gladden was a pastor for 58 years, although he never completed a theological degree. By the end of his life, he had received 35 honorary doctorates. In addition, without a theological degree, he had lectured at Harvard twice, and Yale and Oxford Universities once. He actually turned down another lecture series at Harvard because he felt he needed to be home caring for his ailing wife and pastoring his congregation, then located at 74 East Broad (on the ground of what is now the Key Bank Parking lot).

Washington Gladden arrived in Columbus, Ohio, in December 1882 – 136 years ago, and he preached his first sermon on Christmas Eve. Dr. Gladden was an unapologetic evangelical liberal - biblically grounded and scripturally centered and lived (and died) with the belief that we always need to adjust Christianity to modern times. He spoke of

moral evolution – meaning we needed to get away from being troubled by original sin and deal with the sins of our current times. On Atonement he said, “Christ bore our sins in fellowship with us, not in substitution for us.” The creeds he said should not be tests of faith. Rather, we need to live our personal testimonies of faith that demonstrate our abilities to care for our fellow human beings. He did not see Jesus as the founder of a religious system, but simply the revelation to humanity of the Living God, the Life of God, and the duties growing out of those relations. Gladden placed great emphasis on Jesus’ ethical teachings as central and normative for Christian faith and experience. The Sermon on the Mount was at the center of his teachings as the way to live the Christian life. Gladden also believed that Christianity was not the only way to God. Other religions could lead people to God as well. However, Gladden felt that Christ was the head of the body of humanity. As the head, he could guide all the rest of the body through a better way to God.

As many of you know, I could talk about Dr. Gladden all day long. But, what has driven me to begin a book about him is how he became who he was. How did he become “the father of the social gospel movement?” What formed him and informed him? How did Gladden become Gladden?

He was named for General George Washington because his great-grandfather was one of General Washington's body guards during the Revolutionary War. He grew up through his childhood on the banks of the Susquehanna River. Born in Pottsgrove, Pa to two school teachers, his father died suddenly when he was six years old. He was raised by his mother's family on their farm in Owego, NY. His mother remarried when he was 10. But, the man she married was an abusive alcoholic, so she returned Wash to the family farm after a short time for his own protection. He went to work at 14 for a newspaper and was such an amazing writer that an anonymous supporter recognized his talent and gifts and completely underwrote his four years at Williams College. He faced considerable challenges throughout his lifetime - including an emotional breakdown which left him severely depressed at the outbreak of war in 1861. He became reclusive for two years during which time his church in New York City stuck with him and helped him back to full recovery from his depression. His only brother was killed in battle at Cold Harbor in June 1864. George was only 25 when he died. He went to bring George's body home for burial and then ended up serving as a chaplain to others until the end of the war.

As husband and father, he had four children, daughter Helen died at 23, leaving his only grandchild, Alice (whom he always called "Baby"). Washington and Jennie Gladden were significantly involved in raising Alice, beginning at 54 years old. George did alright as a lawyer but divorced and struggled throughout his life. Frederick struggled mightily with alcohol and mental health problems. Each died young. He buried three of his four children. Alice was the successful headmistress of The Columbus School for Girls. She never married and lived with her parents. She cared for her mother and father until their final days. His wife Jennie was a wonderful woman, but she suffered greatly from Parkinson's Disease and eventually dementia and he cared for her unto death in 1908. Her last four years were a daily struggle as she battled for to stay alive.

Out of the challenges of childhood, and the ashes of war and personal hardship, Gladden rose - like the Phoenix - so much so that he by life's end he was hailed as "Columbus' First Citizen."

I believe Washington Gladden took the suffering and pain of his life and gave it to God. Out of his suffering, he sought to alleviate the suffering of others and help them heal. His gift was writing and speaking. His gift was his heart and soul. Each one of us, each day, need to discover our gifts and then give

them to God for God's use and transformation in this world. Each one of us can make a difference, each in our own ways. He figured that out and gave himself to such fulfillment.

One final story before we go...

Just before he died and following a stroke in the winter of 1918 which had left him partially paralyzed, he was riding one night through Columbus with Dr. Irving Mauer – who was first his associate pastor and then became our 9th Senior Minister. Wash was talking, with halting speech, about the people of First Church whom he loved deeply. He was filling in his pastor with news of their lives. Dr. Mauer asked, “How did you do it?” “Do what?” Gladden answered. “How did you stand up and speak out about social justice issues throughout your life?” After a brief pause, Gladden answered, “It was the hardest thing I did – to speak out on social injustice in our city and world. Every time I spoke it took something out of me. But, every time I was silent, I could hear the voices of those who had no voices crying out. So, I would speak again. My silence was killing those who no one spoke for.” With that, both men were silent and their ride continued...

Maybe that is the Social Gospel in a nutshell. “My silence kills those who no one speaks for.”

Here above us in the west transept, we have a stained-glass window dedicated to Dr. Gladden. Standing 15 feet high are the figures of Charity and Justice. Charity holds a cornucopia in his hand. Justice holds a sword (one of the biggest swords I have ever seen in Stained Glass). We are reminded each week to live lives of Charity and Justice. Charity calls us to feed the hungry. Justice calls us to set up systems of care that guarantee no one will go hungry today or tomorrow or ever again.

So, this is the Social Gospel... The prophet of this movement was one of us. I pray that you will discover your gifts. I pray that you will speak and act out of your experience to alleviate the suffering of others. I pray that you live this faith we call Christian as a social justice faith. Amen.

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* Some quotes from Rauschenbusch are drawn from Wikipedia, which quotes freely from The Theology of the Social Gospel, 1917.

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