“Justice: Words and Actions for Change”
(Part 4 of 8 in the sermon series,
“The Essence of Christianity”)

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From the Pulpit
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A baptismal meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, March 8, 2015, Lent III, dedicated to my daughter Sarah Ruth Sitler Ahrens who was baptized 17 years ago today, to my grandfather Rev. Hugo Carl Kellermeyer who baptized me 57 years ago, March 10, 1958 and for whom I was named, to father and son, James “Trai” Wellington Blanks and Dominick Wellington Blanks who were baptized today and always to the glory of God!

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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.
At the heart of Christianity is a strong desire to bring about “the Kingdom of God.” At the heart of this belief for social and political transformation throughout the Holy Scripture is God’s dream of justice, God’s passion for the earth and its care, and God’s protesting and fighting the nightmare of injustice. The battle against injustice and the unconditional love of humanity and all creation is an essential part of Jesus Christ and his commitment to coming of God’s Kingdom on earth.

God’s passion for justice leads those who follow Christ to get real about this: the Bible is political as well as personal. By this, I do not mean the Bible belongs to a political party, or the “ism” of any one nation or economic system. Rather, the drive of the Bible to bring about the peace and justice of God’s kingdom or “realm” is everywhere present (drawn from Marcus Borg, The Heart of Christianity Harper and Collins, NY, NY, 2003, p. 126).

"The claim that the Bible is political and that the God of the Bible is passionate about justice is surprising, even startling to many Christians”, writes Marcus Borg in The Heart of Christianity (p. 127).

Every Sunday, as we pray the Lord's Prayer, we pray for the coming of God's Kingdom and thus, the end of the reign of human kingdoms as we know them to be. The Gospels tell us that Jesus' vision of God's kingdom coming
is expressed as both a transformational experience of heart and mind within a person AND the transformation of the social order. Changing my spirit and your spirit AND changing our economy and social order so that injustice against God's Earth and against all the other children of God with whom we share God's earth were BOTH focuses for Jesus' ministry. Unfortunately, they are not BOTH focuses for all of us who claim to be Jesus' ministers and disciples who have followed him and continue to proclaim his message.

Let's be honest - when it comes to the transformation of souls or systems, where has the Church Universal pitched its tent? You know the answer. The church has focused on saving souls almost 100% exclusive to the focus of transforming social systems of injustice. Most preachers in America today can't stop talking when it comes to plans and designs for saving your soul and offering you a purpose driven life. However, most of my sisters and brothers in pulpits across this city and nation are mute when faced with injustices created by drones sent by our President and indiscriminately striking innocent victims worldwide, young women being trafficked as sex slaves on the streets of Columbus this weekend during the Arnold Classic, guns out of control in our schools and society in general, a public education system which leaves all too many children
behind (especially boys and young men), policies which split immigrants (whom I call new Americans) and their families as they seek to find a home in the United States of America, putting an end – once and for all time to laws which exclude gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons from marriage in our state or any state, turning around an infant mortality rate in our city which tops most third world nations, addressing the $1.6 trillion dollar student debt crisis sinking an entire generation coming out of college right now and closing forever an economic system in which the gap between rich and poor grows steadily every day leaving a shrinking class in the middle, a growing class of working poor, and a happy class of super rich.

Whose kingdom are we advancing when we are silent in the face of such injustice? Certainly not God's.

This almost singular focus on the salvation of individual souls to the almost total abandonment of transformational social structures has been going on in our faith since around 326 AD. When faced with an uprising among his own ranks, it is reported that the Emperor Constantine saw a vision of Christ in the clouds. After he led his troops to a crushing victory, the Emperor declared that Christianity would become the religion of the state. In this moment, the kingdom of God became the exclusive
right of soul savers and was forsaken by those who believed Jesus was also about changing the society. While that's seemingly simplistic, it is also true.

For Jesus, it is never a kingdom without God and it is never God without a kingdom. In the words of New Testament scholar, John Dominic Crossan, "God's kingdom is what life would be like on earth if God were king and the rulers of this world were not." How would God in Jesus Christ, run the world if God was on Caesar's throne and not Caesar - or Obama, or Netanyahu, or Abbas, or Jinping, or Putin, or any other human leader of any other nation? What would the world look like if all were under the Kingship of God? It would be a just world order! All special interest groups would have to pack up and go home. All lobbyists would have to pray for forgiveness and find new work. In the Kingdom of God, all legislators would have to answer one question - “Is this law that you are creating just and fair for all?”

When Jesus continues his (Lord’s) prayer, he calls for "God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven." In the kingdom coming business of God, we all know that heaven's in great shape and earth is where the problems are. On earth, people (and nations) don't have daily bread. On earth people (and nations) are sunk deep in debt (although many would prefer to focus on trespasses and
sins, for these also sink the human condition). As we read scripture, we know that God is always about the work of building justice, equality, and dignity. God is about righteousness rolling down, not trickling down like a drip of water (ask the prophet Amos about this one).

God's justice is deep in the heart of our Judeo-Christian faith. About one hundred years ago, a Christian activist named Vida Scudder, a contemporary of Washington Gladden in the Social Gospel movement, listed three ways Christians can respond to a growing awareness of human suffering: direct philanthropy, social reform, and social transformation. Scudder said, "Direct philanthropy means giving directly to those who are suffering, social reform means creating and supporting organizations for their care, and social transformation is about justice - changing society so that the structures do not privilege some and cause suffering for others" (Ibid, p. 201).

The first two are about charity. The third is about justice. All three are important. Charity is always good and will always be necessary, but historically Christians have been long on the first two and short on the third. One reason is that charity never offends, while a passion for justices too often offends. To paraphrase Roman Catholic Bishop Dom Helder Camara from Brazil, "When I gave
food to the poor, they called me a saint. When I asked why there are so many poor they called me a communist" (Ibid, p.201).

Charity means helping the victims of injustice (again a very good thing to do). Justice asks, "Why are there so many victims?" and then seeks to change the causes of victimization. Justice works to restructure the way the system is stacked against the poor. Justice is not about Caesar increasing his charitable giving or Pilate increasing his tithe. Justice is about social transformation.

But how do you get to transformation in a church and a world which works against it? I contend you get there one conversation at a time. You get there by talking and listening to others about the reality of their lives. In so doing, you will hear their stories of pain and where injustice has torn their soul and empowers them to act for change.

This is the BREAD model (Building Responsibility Equality And Dignity). BREAD listens to the voices of people speaking to what makes them angry. I have had thousands of these conversations throughout my life. They have changed me. Two of these conversations stand out in my mind. Each happened 18 years ago when BREAD was being born in Columbus.
One was with my brother and friend, The Rev. Jeffery P. Kee, Senior Pastor of New Faith Church of Christ on Oak Street. With a look searching deep into the pain of his memory, Jeffery shared how his brother had been gunned down at a young age and how drugs and crime had claimed the lives of other family members and friends on Columbus' eastside. For him, drugs and crime were death, justice was life. Violence was visceral. Evil was his real enemy. Out of his own personal ashes Jeffery rose to stand for justice.

Another important conversation happened with Jack Bush. Jack had survived the Great Depression and WWII in the European theater - including the Battle of the Bugle where one night his company was pinned down inside a village inside a church. All night Jack prayed the Lord's Prayer. In the morning he dug out of the rubble to find that the only wall still standing in the church was right over him. He turned his life over to Christ that day!

Nevertheless, Jack struggled in life with his own personal battles with depression. With great passion and directness he said to me, "Tim, no man should ever be denied work and the opportunity to feed his family. I saw what it did to my father. I know the struggles I faced for my family. Fighting for the equality and dignity of each working
man is worth the struggle." With this, Jack was resolved to fight for justice.

37 years ago, on the fifth anniversary of the end of Viet Nam War, I heard something that stuck in my heart and soul and made sense. Speaking at a symposium at Macalester College on the fifth anniversary of the end of the war in Vietnam - April 30, 1978 - Dr. Robert MacAfee Brown of Union Seminary in NYC said, “Stand up and speak out on behalf of the poor and those who need your voice in this world. Remember that: 1) where you stand will determine what you will see; 2. whom you stand with and listen to will determine what you hear; 3) and what you see and hear will determine what you say and how you act.”

So how do we do justice? Go to the place where God’s children and our brothers and sisters are crying. Stand in the midst of their tears and listen to their stories. Listen to what makes them sad and angry and I guarantee – if you are truly open and you are listening – you will hear the “Just” and “Still Speaking” Voice of God yearning to breathe and speak and cry and do the right thing for another human being. DO not be afraid – for no less than The Kingdom of God is calling you to “do justice, love with tenderness and walk humbly with our God.” Amen.

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