

“A New Social Gospel”

Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Song of Solomon 2:8-13; James 1:17-27;

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

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From the Pulpit

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A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, September 2, 2018, 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Proper 17, Dedicated to the memory of Senator John McCain and to Drs. Karen Mozingo and Robbe Delcamp who have given so much to lead our community of faith in significant ways and always to the glory of God!

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(Part VI of VI in the sermon series, “The New Social Gospel”)

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With the coming of the Washington Gladden Social Justice Park, the first social justice park in the United States now set to open in October, I felt it was important to reflect on themes of the social gospel this summer. We do so by bringing three guest preachers and Rev. Corzine to the pulpit of First Church in August. Rev. John Aeschbury, the Rev. Dr. Renee Wormack-Keels and the Rev. Dr. J. Bennett Guess did not disappoint. Each brought their powerful and unique

perspectives to bear on the Sundays of August. We were blessed by them. Today, I hope to point us forward as I take one last look at the New Social Gospel.

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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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For several months, I have been thinking about this sermon today. I have jotted words on pieces of paper and in my iphone notebook. Here are a few: “Justice and Dignity. Love and anger. Protect and defend the children of God – at our southern borders, in our churches and in their classrooms. And ‘What WOULD Jesus Do?’ right beside, ‘What Would MLK, Jr. Do?’”

I have listened as our gifted preachers delivered sermons on freedom, justice, God’s requirements for our lives, the way of Jesus in the work of justice and “hearing in church” (and taking action for justice when we depart to serve each week). Through all these months, I have been thinking about this day. This moment. You see, being the Senior Minister of First

Congregational Church keeps you up at night and wakes you up early thinking about justice.

Three weeks ago, I found myself sitting under a wide oak in Kinderhook, NY, looking at the home of our eighth President, Martin Van Buren who in his March 1837 inaugural address actually blamed the inflammation of the “slavery issue” on the abolitionists.

Let that soak in.

Fuming, I wrote these words from Rev. Theodore Parker, a Unitarian Minister and a leading abolitionist: *“The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”* These words, often attributed to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. – who revived them from the dead one hundred years later- were first delivered by Parker in the hall of the State house, before the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Convention, on Friday night, January 29, 1858. That night he delivered a powerful message, “The present aspect of slavery in America and the immediate duty of the North.”

Through all these months, I have thought each day about our unique place in the Christian church in this nation and in this world in these often God-forsaking times. What is God calling us to do for justice? What does God require of you and me in our daily walk with Jesus? How are you and I reflections of the

New Social Gospel - which is really just the “old social gospel” in these days in which we live and move and have our being?

What is God calling us to do for justice?

I believe God is calling us to read and listen to Holy Scripture with eyes and ears that see and hear “the other.” Jewish Philosopher, Martin Buber said it well in his classic, “**I and Thou.**” We need to have an “I-Thou” relationship with God. We need to be in relationship with God in personal and intimate ways in our daily prayer. But, we also need to have “I-Thou” relationships with one another. We need to see the God presence in each other. Without that spark of the Divine in our relationships, we treat others in transactional ways. So, instead of an “I-Thou” relationship, we relate to others as “I-You.” When we deteriorate into I-You relationships, we forget why and how we are human – not to mention why and how we are Christian. When our relationships are sacred, our relationships are just. When our relationships are unsacred, our relationships can easily devolve into unjust and often inhumane interactions.

Martin Buber writes: “*Love does not cling to the I in such a way as to have the Thou only for its ‘content,’ or its object; but love is between I and Thou. The man who does not know this, with his very being knowing this, does not know love...*” Another way to

express this (in Buber's words) *"A great relationship ... breaches the barriers of a lofty solitude, subdues its strict law, and throws a bridge from self-being to self-being across the abyss of dread of the universe."*

A New Social Gospel begins when we love one another – truly love one another. Each of us can express this in our closest circle and move out from there. We can “read” each other and read Holy Scripture in new ways.

How do we receive the blessing of God's word in our daily lives? Sometimes the meaning of scripture is hard to hear (have you listened in church to what is being read?). Having listened and absorbed God's word for our own individual lives, we then become mindful and extrapolate God's word as it relates to our neighbor in need, for the stranger at our doors, for the children and adults who are crying for family, food, justice and home.

A New Social Gospel begins in this ancient Gospel truth found in John 3:16 and interpreted in a fresh new way by Eugene Peterson in [The Message](#):

"This is how much God loved the world: God gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life."

In the months that led up to this sermon, my heart and mind have been spinning with the news of this world. Children trapped in a cave in Thailand were saved by International workers working round the clock and amazingly all were saved by this heroic effort, while children intentionally separated from their parents at legal border crossings into our nation were held in captivity and then couldn't be reunited because we had lost track of where the parents were. **Heroic Justice and Horrific Injustice.**

Such instances of Heroic Justice and Horrific Injustice surround us daily in these times. As we live into the New Social Gospel of our calling, we need to remember the source of our strength and the one who gives us focus and purpose for living - Jesus the Christ.

In his 1906 book, The Quest for the Historical Jesus, 1952 Nobel Peace Prize winner, Dr. Albert Schweitzer writes this about our savior, the first one to fully live the social gospel in this world:

“He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside,

He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same words: "Follow thou me!" and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time.

He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple,

He will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.”

As we step into our daily calling to live a new social gospel, I pray that we will carry the spirit of Jesus with us in all that we say and do. As we come to His table of grace, I pray that we will be touched and filled once again with his mystery, his love, his grace and his passion to do justice, to love tenderly and walk humbly with our God. In the mystery of this hour, I invite you to please join me at Christ’s table of grace. Amen.

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