

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio at Trinity Episcopal Church, Capitol Square, Columbus, July 2, 2012, on the occasion of Washington Gladden, Jacob Riis and Walter Rauschenbusch's "Saint's Day." Dedicated to the memory of Washington, Jacob and Walter, and always to the glory of God!

“May People Blossom in the Cities” *

***Isaiah 46: 8-11; Psalm 72:12-17;
Matthew 7:7-12***

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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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Today we gather to worship – and in our worship lift up three men who dedicate their lives to see that justice was done for the poor in this nation. The Rev. Drs. Walter Rauschenbusch and Washington Gladden were pastors in New York and Columbus. Famed New York photographer and police reporter Jacob Riis was the man whose photographs of the slums of New York exposed the terrible truths of the pain and suffering of the poor. Today, the Episcopal Church in America officially recognizes these three men as “holy men” in the church. Thanks be to God!

Our scripture texts today take us into the heart of the social gospel. These ancient words delivered thousands of years ago speak of life in the heart of the city. Isaiah 46 declares, *“I bring near my deliverance. It is not far off and my salvation will not tarry. I will put salvation in Zion, for Israel my glory.”* The Psalmist cries

to us in Psalm 72:12-14: *“God will deliver the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. God has pity on the weak and the needy and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he redeems their life. And precious is their blood in his sight....may people blossom in the cities like the grass of the field.”* Finally, Jesus speaks in Matthew 7:12: *“Do to others as you would have them do to you.”*

The fact that the Holy Scriptures call all of us to social action and social justice should surprise none of us! Over 2,000 passages of scripture speak of care for the poor, the oppressed, the forgotten, the forsaken, the orphan, the widow and those who suffer because of injustice. In fact, the Bible cares more about the poor and addressing poverty than anything other topic. While we place too much energy in our writing, our speaking, our media coverage of religion on wedge issues and single issues which divide us, our God in the Holy Scriptures cries out to us verse after verse, chapter after chapter, book after book – care for my poor in your midst!

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.”

So what was the social gospel movement?

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 leading proponents of the movement were Horace Bushnell, Lyman Abbott, Graham Taylor, George Gordon, Dean George Hodges, Walter Rauschenbusch and Washington Gladden. Each man 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. 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 *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (published in 1917, three years after Riis' death and 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 *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 B. C. 56, or of some mountaineer in Tennessee who got drunk in A. D. 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 'he was wounded for our transgressions; he was bruised for our iniquities.' Solidarity explains it.”*

These six "social sins" which Jesus, according to Rauschenbusch, 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 Rauschenbusch's proposed theology of the social gospel. He 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 Jacob Riis forced our nation to see and hear the voices of the poor, and Walter Rauschenbusch gave a theological grounding for the social gospel, it was Columbus' own Washington

Gladden who was, indeed, the father of the social gospel movement.

This man 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 pastoring his congregation, First Congregational Church, Columbus, located at 74 East Broad (on the ground of what is now the Key Bank Parking lot). *This is Gladden's pulpit.*

Washington Gladden arrived in Columbus, Ohio, in December 1882 – 130 years ago, and he preached his first sermon on Christmas Eve. Dr. Gladden was an unapologetic evangelical liberal - biblically grounded and scripturally centered, but always believing in the 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.

It is “Friendship” that Really Matters

Near the end of life, Washington Gladden wrote these words in his autobiography:

“When I was a boy, the main reason urged for being a Christian was a selfish reason. It was insurance against loss; it was the personal gain, the personal happiness, the future blessedness of which it put you in possession, that were constantly kept before your mind. That motive has been steadily retreating into the background; the motive of unselfish service has been increasingly emphasized. Because the Christian life is the noblest life, because it is more blessed to give than to receive; and better to minister than be ministered unto, because the good life is not found in separating yourself from your fellows, but by identifying yourself with them - therefore, let us be Christians.”

He continued, *“ When it all comes down to it, religion is nothing more than friendship – friendship with God and friendship with our fellow men and women. We need to dedicate each day to growth in our friendship with God and with one another.”*

I really love this understanding spoken by a wise and holy man late in his life! !

The other day, Rector Richard Burnett, my friend of almost 30 years, asked what this all means. What should we do in this day and age to live out the vision of the social gospel movement?

I believe we need to **organize** people of all faiths to work for justice for the poor. We need to **legislate** policies that guarantee the poor are supported and uplifted from birth to adulthood. We need to make sure we do not forsake those who are poor in this city, in

this state and in this nation. We have to insure that children do not go to bed sick and wake up sicker; that mother's have the best care as they prepare to give birth – that Nationwide Children's Hospital doesn't just look beautiful but delivers first class health care to our children.

As we organize and legislate, as work together to make change, we must always do this with love AND justice in our hearts. Our steps forward in love and justice need to be guided by one of the A+ students of the social gospel movement, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who once said, *“What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.”*

At First Congregational Church, 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. We need to feed the poor. We also need to set up systems of care that guarantee they will not go hungry tomorrow.

So let us be friends as Jacob Riis, Walter Rauschenbusch and Washington Gladden were friends. Thanks be to God for their memories and inspiration of faith in action. May their memories inspire us in the words of the prophet Micah “to do justice, love tenderly and walk humbly with our God.” And in the words of the Psalmist, “May People Blossom in the Cities.” Amen.

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

