

A sermon delivered by Tom Brownfield, commissioned minister for social justice, and Emily Bennett at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, August 26, 2012, Pentecost 13, dedicated to the glory of God!

“The Scales of Justice”

Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-59

Part V of VI in the Sermon Series

“Shining God’s Light

on Hidden Christian Virtues”

Tom:

Please pray with us: Lord, in this time of sharing, let us speak openly, let us hear respectfully, and may we discern faithfully. Amen

Emily:

This is the fifth Sunday of the series highlighting the Christian symbols embedded in our wonderful (but hidden) Rose Window. Our symbol today is the scales of justice. As we look at that Rose Window symbol of justice, a couple of questions may come to mind. The first is why did the artist use a balance scale to represent justice, and the second question is why should a symbol for “justice” appear in the window of a church, anyhow?

Tom:

In our modern criminal justice system the balance scale is often used to represent blindfolded justice, impartially and carefully weighing the evidence to establish innocence or guilt. In Genesis, Abraham suggests such care in balancing guilt and innocence as he argues with God over how many righteous ones there must be in Sodom for God to spare the whole town from his wrath for the wicked ones.

The scale also suggests that there must be a balance between the severity of a crime and the punishment that is meted out to whomever committed it. It is easy to notice the severity of the biblical “eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth” punishments, and not remember that the limits set by them were astonishing in an ancient society. It was no longer “both of your eyes” or “all of your teeth” or death. For the first time limits to retribution were imposed! In Genesis arises the suggestion of the proportionality of punishment to the severity of crime.

Emily:

In a broader sense, however, justice is not only criminal justice, but deals with such questions as fairness of access to health care, access to education, access to a job and transportation to the job, and many other aspects of our relations with one another. It deals with protecting the rights of those who have little power from those who have much greater power. It objects to economic elites ruling over those with little, while taking into account the idea that “majority rule” must not be allowed to result in “minorities oppressed.” These ideas are often called “social justice.”

The National Association of Social Workers says, “Social justice is the view that everyone deserves equal economic, political and social rights and opportunities.” It has become useful to refer to that side of justice as social justice to differentiate it from criminal justice, but in a religious context such a distinction is meaningless. Micah saw it all as simply justice.

But, if justice can refer to our criminal justice system and social justice is defined and accepted broadly as a part of our society, why refer to justice as a Christian virtue? Isn't it a social rather than a religious virtue?

Tom:

That's a good question. But you see, here we're talking about justice in the context of a church where we're reminded of it through a symbol in our Rose Window. We're also looking at justice in the context of Christianity, which informed that

window and formed this church. We seek to understand it as indicated in our reading from Micah as a call to do justice, not just to observe that justice is a good idea or that we probably should be nice. But God, according to Micah, says that justice is something that one must do in order to be acceptable to God. Thus, the ancient Jewish people learned that they must do things in their society to ease the pain of those who had pain and to take care of those who had no one to take care of them: the sick, the oppressed, the widow, the orphan and the alien in their midst. Thus, justice became an imperative for followers of Judaism, then later for Christianity and Islam. Historians tell us that it was through the application, however haltingly, of that religious imperative to do justice that those principles became integral in Western society.

Emily:

Yes, and later Jesus came into the world and expanded that mandate by saying that not only must we take care of those in need, we must love them, and that it is out of that love that we provide care. So our concern here is how Christians seek to do justice in our world. Several times St. Paul suggested that Christians need to be examples for the rest of the world. So our question must be, “How is the church doing at demonstrating the love that Jesus said was its responsibility?” Are we taking care of those who need care, and working to remedy the systemic problems that create poverty, or are we just ignoring the cries of those in pain?

So, Grandpa, that was the original source for the drive to build hospitals, soup kitchens and orphanages in our society. But how do we personally demonstrate such love? We don’t just go around hugging everybody!

Tom:

Well, that’s true, although my brother-in-law, Van, is trying to give away as many of his hugs and smiles as he possibly can to as many people as he can. But I recall many examples of people expressing God’s love throughout my life, and they have helped me to learn what it means to be a loving, justice seeking person.

For example, my dad used to take my two brothers and me to work with him on some Saturday mornings when we were little. We usually started our day with a doughnut and hot chocolate at the White Castle, spent the morning at his office while he worked, and then had lunch and ran errands into the afternoon. Since we three little boys were always fighting with each other Dad only took one of us at a time. We each regarded that periodic Saturday as our special day.

One Saturday in the fall when I was about seven it was my turn. Dad and I shared a pretty uneventful morning after which we went looking for somewhere to have our lunch. We ended up on N. High St. near Goodale Boulevard at a diner that had been there for a long time and I might add continued to be there for a long time thereafter. Dad had been the minister at the Goodale Chapel Methodist Church some time before and liked to return to the neighborhood on occasion. We went in, sat down at the counter and ordered our lunch. As we waited, we chatted about our morning's activities and where we were going to go after lunch.

An elderly black man entered the restaurant and sat down next to my father. The fellow who ran the place came over to him and said, "You'll have to go around back." The man stood up and said, "Yes sir," and left. I don't know if he went round back or not but I do know that my father stood up and asked the fellow, "How much do we owe for our lunch?" He replied, "You ain't had your lunches yet." Dad handed him a couple of dollars and said, "No, and we won't be eating where any of God's children are not welcome." We left.

For a 7-year-old, such an experience can be somewhat mystifying. What I knew for sure was that we went home and had peanut butter sandwiches rather than hamburgers, fries and Cokes at a restaurant. However as I grew both in appreciation for the events of my life and in an understanding of what caused some of them, I came to see that Dad's statement was one that I needed to learn to make myself. It was a statement that no matter my discomfort I must do what is just and I must object to what is unjust. As a 7-year-old, I was

confused by that; as a 70-year-old I can tell you that I reflect on it whenever I see someone treated unfairly: “They will know us by our love.”

Another example relates to my mother. In 1946, Mom’s picture appeared on the front page of the *Columbus Dispatch* alongside an article explaining that she was the new vice president for legislative initiatives for the League of Women Voters. The article discussed some of the issues that the League was bringing to the legislature. They would ask the legislators to enact laws to remedy some of the problems in our society. As I recall from reading the article they began by asking the legislature to “fully fund primary and secondary education in Ohio.” Go figure!

Many years later, mom told me that she received quite a few nasty telephone calls as a result of that article. People called to say that women should keep their noses in the kitchen, that they shouldn’t be dabbling in “men’s work” and that, if they knew what was good for them, they would just stay home and take care of their babies.

I asked her if she was intimidated by such talk, and she said, “Heavens no!” She said she took it as something of a complement that so many people were paying attention to the article in the newspaper and she thought that if those vocal few noticed, then certainly an awful lot of people who agreed with her noticed as well. She said that it was her Christian duty to seek out injustice in our society and to do what she could to fix it. I think of that incident every time I’m at a BREAD organization meeting.

Emily:

So, following your point, I would say that there must be many ways that members of this church, or for that matter, members of society in general, can work to do justice in their communities. First Congregational Church participates with about 50 other congregations in the BREAD organization as an important way for people to participate in doing justice. The many issues that BREAD has addressed over the years have

made significant improvements in the conditions that many people face on a daily basis in our community.

First Church also participates in We Believe Ohio, which is an organization seeking to establish civility in our electoral process and asking those seeking elective office to address issues critical to the disadvantaged in our community. There also are a number of members of First Church who tutor on a regular basis in elementary schools in the Columbus City Schools. The Sacred Earth Committee seeks to get people to express their concern for the conditions of our world in terms of ecology, sharing resources, establishing sustainability, fair trade and like issues. All of these initiatives are important and all of them help to fulfill the mission to seek justice in the world.

In addition to these justice initiatives, it is important to keep in mind Micah's mandate to love kindness. There are so many efforts in which First Church is involved that are important mercy initiatives, such as Bethlehem on Broad Street, the Good Samaritan Fund, UCC Disaster Relief, Neighbors in Need, Crop Walk, youth mission trips, etc. etc. We could go on a long time just naming them all.

It is safe to say this is an involved church, but let it be known that many more people in the church need to be involved in our efforts for justice. The power to advance the cause of justice is the power of people assembling to demand justice. Welcome aboard!

Tom:

“They will know us by our love.” Amen.

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