

“Why the Social Gospel Matters Today”

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28; Psalm 105, Romans 10:5-15;
Matthew 14:22-33

**Part III of VI in the Summer Sermon Series,
“The New Social Gospel”**

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August 13, 2023

From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, August 13, 2023, The 11th Sunday after Pentecost, dedicated to Dene Barnard and 50 years among us, to all who have suffered and lost lives and property in Maui, Hawaii, to Bryan Stevenson and his liberating work for incarcerated men and women and all who have gained freedom from the Equal Justice Initiative, and always to the glory of God!

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

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Difficult and dangerous times. Intolerant religious and political leaders who hold disdain for those they call “deviants.” Prophetic voices marginalized and finally silenced as a threat to others. Hungry people holding what little they have – afraid it will be their last meal. This describes the climate of today’s Gospel – and our times.

The disciples know Jesus as the prophet rejected by his own. They also see him lead thousands of hungry people to share a little bread and be satisfied. All of this happens just after John the Baptist, the preacher closest to Jesus has been senselessly beheaded and martyred by a deranged ruler.

This is a lot to handle.

Following the miracle of feeding the 5000+ - Jesus slips away to pray by himself (Matthew 13:54-14:33). The disciples leave the land and go out alone on the water. This is the first time the 12 are alone together. Remember, not all of them are fishermen. A couple of them have no idea what they are doing. They are land creatures on the sea.

In this climate and context, the story begins. Is it any wonder the disciples are fearful? They are all about to die on turbulent waters! Matthew, Mark and John each narrate a version of the storm and Jesus calming the disciples and the sea – but Matthew is the only one to tell on Peter.

What's the deal with Peter? Well, he is a big deal in Matthew's Gospel where is named 24 times. He is among the first disciples called (Matthew 4:18). Jesus visits his home and heals his mother-in-law (8:14). Peter assumes the role of speaker for the group (17:24).

Beyond that, Peter stars in three stories that have the same plot – today's stormy sea account, his proclamation of faith in Jesus (16:13-28) and his denial of Jesus during the passion and crucifixion of our Lord (26:31-75). By the same plot, Peter, the rock of faith becomes a pebble of faith. He rises and falls on the sea, on the land, and in the moment, Jesus needs him most.

The scene of today's incident has the disciples boarding their boat just after Jesus had preached all day to a multitude. In that scene, when the disciples suggest that Jesus send people home to eat, he tells them to offer their own meager provisions to feed the five thousand. Even more preposterous than that proposal is the crowd's sharing of bread and fish until they are satisfied. That's what the disciples have experienced before heading out on the lake. They are still prayerfully processing the feeding miracle of the day as they seek the catch of the night. Last week, Rev. Samuelson suggested the women led the charge on this. Good chance. But, let's give full credit to Jesus for setting it all in motion.

Once on the water, they get caught in a storm. While the waves have their way with the boat and the disciples are fighting for their lives, Jesus walks toward them on the water. Because his appearance was the last thing they expected, they figured they were seeing a ghost – a sure sign that they were about to die! Then, as all God’s messengers do, Jesus says, “Do not be afraid.”

Peter, a sterling example of the dictum that anything worth doing is worth overdoing, decided to test the waters: “If it’s really you, call me to join you out there!” Jesus replied, “Come.”

Peter loves Jesus with a wild heart, mind and soul – add to that a drenched body. What a test! “If it is you, let me walk on water!” Does Peter even consider what will happen if it is not Jesus out there? Peter jumps overboard (in every sense) and starts to do what Jesus did. For a quick minute it works. Peter is walking on water! Then Peter looks down and gets overwhelmed. Being overwhelmed is what sinks him. If not for Jesus, Peter would have sunk like a rock.

As Jesus pulls Peter’s head above the water, he says, “O you of little faith!” And we all wonder – How is that fair? Peter has risked his life to take a chance on Jesus! Wouldn’t it have been nicer to say something like “Great try!”? He could have asked Peter what happened. But no, Jesus just says, “O you of little faith.”

There’s a subtle and costly dynamic in all of this. On the hillside near the lake, Jesus had told his disciples to give everything for others. It worked and everyone ate. Then, when they are in mortal danger, only Peter takes a crazy risk. Although he sinks into doubt, it is his daring and somewhat delirious faith that brings him into a new relationship with Jesus. Jesus has now truly saved him. At least this once, Peter has risked it all. He bets his life on Jesus – and in the midst of not getting it right, Jesus does more for him than anyone ever had before.

Matthew leads us to ask who understands Jesus better – the ones who did solemn homage (like the Magi who returned home) or the wild wet one Jesus rescued when his behavior looked like pure folly. Isn't Peter's risky expression of faith much greater than that of the boat-bound spectators who simply worshiped?

Risk, failure and redemption are Peter's pattern. He repeats it when he proclaims Jesus as Messiah and then tells him how to do it. He does it again when, after swearing he will die for Jesus, he denies him and goes off weeping.

Peter offers us a saintly example of extravagance. Fear of failure doesn't stop him. He keeps growing closer to Jesus who appreciates his passion rather than worrying about his weaknesses. Jesus doesn't criticize the group who stayed in the boat. They gave him proper homage as they hung on for dear life. But Peter loves Jesus with a wild heart, mind and soul, plus a drenched body. Peter's very doubts allow him to go deeper. Maybe we should hear "you of little faith" as an invitation. Peter shows us how to risk the depths. His example dares us, too, to do what Jesus did. Today's word of God is "**Come.**" It's the only remedy for our little faith. It is also a perfect guide into the social gospel. That's right. (Drawn and quoted from Sr. Mary McGlone, reflections on the text in *The National Catholic Reporter*, "Dare to Do What Jesus Did," August 6-13, 2023).

I love this Gospel Story. It has all the ingredients for us as we seek to live the Social Gospel for today. We have The Context (or Climate), the Text, and finally The Relationships needed to point us toward a more just society. On the surface, you may be scratching your heads. But let's look at what the social gospel calls us to do in the name of Jesus.

First, **the CONTEXT or the Climate** – is everything in the Social Gospel. Remember – it is the **GOSPEL** – placed in a social context. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is our heartbeat and our guide. Nothing we do is far apart from this pulse of life and faith.

In my book, *The Genius of Justice*, one of the geniuses is Rev. Dr. Ron Luckey. Ron is a retired Lutheran Pastor in Lexington, Kentucky. In our conversation, as one of 53 geniuses of justice, “Luckey” as he refers to himself said, “Justice is a climate that exists when all people are treated with dignity. Treat people with dignity and always keep the pressure on and always keep pushing forward. That is the key to social change. Justice is a marathon. It is not a sprint.” He continues, “Hope always shows up when our sleeves are rolled up. We can never sit back, and “hope” change comes. We have to get out there and get busy and remember that the work we do is not ‘our work’ but God’s work. We are just part of ‘God’s make-up.’” (Ahrens, *The Genius of Justice*, Cascade Books, Eugene, Oregon, 2022, p. 146).

In the climate of the Gospels, we find our call to action. Context is everything. Again, from Robert MacAfee Brown, we learn three important lessons about proximity and context. Dr. Brown taught me years ago three important lessons, which I share with you:

- 1. Where you stand will determine what you see.***
- 2. Whom you stand with will determine what you hear.***
- 3. And what you see and what you hear will determine what you say and what you do.***

Beyond context or climate, we have the Text of scripture to guide us on the pathway of justice today. Dr. Walter Brueggemann is the foremost biblical scholar of our times. Now 90+, Walter is not writing anymore. But the vitality of his Words based on his intense and intentional study of God’s Word is alive and well. When together in the summer of 2021, Walter sees Justice in every text of Holy Scripture – not just a few quotable and memorable ones. From Genesis 1:1 through Revelation 22:21, Walter sees God’s justice initiative in each breath, each word, each verse, each chapter, each book. We are all called into prophetic imagination – which is the capacity to entertain a world other than the one that what is in front of us.”

He continues, “it seems to me, that is exactly what the Bible wants us to do. It invites us to host a world other than the one we see” (Ibid, 20).

Justice is the task of apportioning the abundant common good so that every member of can live a life in dignity and security. It is distributive justice. We see this in the Exodus when Manna from heaven feeds the people in the desert. We experience it in the Eucharist, in Holy Communion, when all are fed, and all have drink. We are schooled in a scarcity system – but the prophets and Jesus call us to live into abundance of life and living – to share what we have so no one is without food, work, housing, education and more. The Text of Scripture calls us to this task over and over and over again.

Walter has the best definition of justice. It is this: **“We have to figure out what belongs to whom and return it to those from whom it has been taken.”** God is calling us to no less than this work.

Beyond Context and Text, the Social Gospel today must ground itself in Relationships – or in the words of Gladden – “Friendship.” My favorite Gladden quote delivered in his autobiography *Recollections*, can be found in the last chapter of the book, at the age of 76 (he died at 82), he writes:

I am fain to believe that the time is drawing near when the Christian Church will be able to discern and declare the simple truth that religion is nothing but Friendship, friendship with God and with all people. I have been thinking about it in these last days, and I cannot make anything else, so far as I can see it, this is all there is to it. Religion is Friendship - friendship first with the Great Companion, of whom Jesus told us, is always nearer to us than we are to ourselves, and whose inspiration and help is the greatest fact of human experience. To be in harmony with God's purposes, to be open to his suggestions, to be in conscious fellowship with Him - this is religion on its Godward side.

Then, turning (human)ward, friendship sums it all up. To be friends with everybody, to fill every human relation with the spirit of friendship, is there anything more than this, that the wisest and best of Men (and women) can hope to do?

The Social Gospel one hundred years ago, as well as today, is all about relationships. It is about struggling through Friendship. It is that simple and that hard. In Jacob Dorn's classic on Gladden, *Washington Gladden: Prophet of the Social Gospel*, Dorn tells of Gladden's struggle with two members of the First Church trustees. Each was invested in the coal mines and ownership of those mines in southeast Ohio. There was a coal miners' strike and Gladden told them (and Joseph Jeffery, too) that he would be preaching against their treatment of the miners. Apparently, it caused quite a rift between them. However, none of them left the church. They figured out how to stay together and be together – not simply go somewhere else – where quite frankly they would inevitably encounter problems with a new pastor. It is – after all – human nature to disagree. In relationship with one another, you figure out how to work through the pain and challenge of it all.

As Martin Marty once said thirty years ago, “in the old days, it took three bad pastors in a row for a person to leave the church. Nowadays it takes a parishioner having three bad feelings (or less) to leave a church.” I would say it takes one or at the most two bad feelings today.

Gladden worked at the relationships and friendships with people in all spheres of church and the world. Perhaps this was his greatest gift of all. We can all learn well from him on this.

Let me put it another way – this pulpit, this church, the Senior Minister of our Social Gospel Church worked to bring people together – not divide them further. Their model for that was Jesus. They owned that – so should we.

The Social Gospel matters today in so many ways. For those who are left behind, forgotten, forsaken and unforgiven, the social gospel offers a hand up – a way to connect and help. For those who have enough and may not feel the need to face their siblings who are poor and struggling, it offers no less than redemption and true salvation. We can only truly be saved together – when all of us have dignity and respect; when all of us have equal pay for the

work we do; when all of us have a table on which to place and bless our daily bread – and then – to break it and share it with one another.

Or in the words of Washington Gladden:

To be friends with everybody, to fill every human relation with the spirit of friendship, is there anything more than this, that the wisest and best of Men (and women) can hope to do?

Amen.

