

Justice Ministries
Mission Sunday Message
April 30, 2018

Last Mission Sunday we left off with a quote from Martin Luther King “we are called to be the good Samaritan but after you lift so many people out of the ditch you start to think maybe the whole road to Jericho needs to be repaved”

So today let’s think about “repaving”. It means looking at the ‘big picture’. Is there something bigger that needs fixing? Social justice is the work that results in long term societal change.

Justice is defined as the principle or ideal of right action. The concordance of my Bible has almost two full columns referring to justice. Micah 6:8 says: He has shown you O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

In the book Barefoot Church Brandon Hatmaker says – “We need both...we need mercy which means offering immediate compassion and temporary relief for an immediate need – ‘becoming the good news’ to someone – and it goes hand in hand with justice which is an awareness and effort to do something about a more global

need such as human trafficking or HIV Aids or the need for clean water on First Nations reserves and more...

Mercy offers immediate help: justice is the principle or ideal behind a right action.

So how does one move from deed to justice? First we have to make the effort to understand the issue. For example Emily gave me a book for Christmas by Laura Willis entitled Finding God in a Bag of Groceries. In it Willis says poverty is complicated. “Until a person experiences the reality of poverty and understands the difficulty in accomplishing even simple things, it is hard to truly empathize with the poor”.

The man who is the President and CEO of World Vision, Dave Toyce, puts it this way – “To use a travel metaphor, the poor are walking on foot while the affluent are flying in an airplane in pursuit of the same destination. At this rate the poor will never arrive unless we do something”.

In Canada we hear that many families are just one paycheck away from being unable to meet their expenses. We describe poverty as ‘grinding’ and it’s a really good word for it – you can never let down your guard, you can never meet all your needs, you can never splurge – even on a small thing. And...you have to ‘ask’ – ask for Ontario works, ask for housing, ask for an extension on a payment, ask if you can pay a reduced rate for the school outing, ask at the food bank. So our goal at Outreach is to offer before someone has to ask. We welcome folks and

thank them for coming. We provide choices – “is there anything you would like today? Please help yourself to some of the fruits and vegetables”. We try to be respectful and help where we can. And people want to give back so there are opportunities to help – setting up all the tables and chairs, bringing in extra plastic bags, etc.

If we are serious about being merciful and just, we need to really love our neighbour – even when that’s hard. Justice is not judgement. Richard Stearns wrote an irreverent version of Matthew 25:

“For I was hungry, while you had all you needed. I was thirsty but you drank bottled water. I was a stranger and you wanted me deported. I needed clothes, but you needed more clothes. I was sick, and you pointed out the behaviours that led to my sickness. I was in prison and you said I was getting what I deserved.”

Clearly this is not what Jesus said or did. We are called to love those who are different or in trouble, just as Jesus did. Sometimes that’s hard but as Hatmaker says, “Something happens when you serve. Something changes and you stop seeing people and start seeing a person.” You may learn that person’s back story, interests, hopes, challenges. Communities aren’t us and them – they’re everyone.

So poverty and the reasons for it are complicated. So are a lot of the other challenges in our world. If you go onto the Presbyterian Church in Canada’s website, there is a

section about Justice Ministries. There is information about the LGBTQ community, information about overseas missions and ways to respond to the refugee crisis. There is also the Presbyterian Church in Canada's response to the Truth and Reconciliation with Canada's First Nations. I remember thinking that my paths don't tend to meet those of First Nations folks. But that's just an excuse. There are things we need to do. Step #1: we need to educate ourselves – know and teach that the Presbyterian Church ran many of the residential schools that caused so much hurt. Some of you will have seen or heard the story of Chanie Wenjack – the 12 year old boy who died running away from a residential school trying to get back to his father. This past summer Gord Downy of Tragically Hip and Jeff Lemire made the documentary 'The Secret Path' that told this story and they met with Chanie's family. The Presbyterian Church ran that school – The Celia Jeffrey School – from which Chanie Wenjack ran away. That school wasn't closed until 1976. To me that seems pretty recent history! In 1994 the Presbyterian Church adopted a confession document that acknowledged our complicity in the residential school system and expressed deep regret – that was step # 2. Step #3 was to ask forgiveness and Step #4 is to join with our First Nations brothers and sisters to address a myriad of real concerns - clean water, equal education funding, decent housing, healing and mental health. That's justice.

Sympathy is not justice. It is an important first step but it remains sympathy until we do something about it.

Hatmaker puts it this way... "Sometimes I would like to ask God why He allows poverty, suffering, and injustice when He could do something about it. But I am afraid He would ask me the same question!"

If we read a little further in James chapter 2: 14-17 it says this..."What good is it my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?

Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him: Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed", but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. ...verse 24: you see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone." By God's grace we are saved but by understanding what God asks of his people we are just.

David Putnam in Breaking the Discipleship Code outlines ways to address big picture issues. He says we can:

- Be informed
- Work with partners (non-governmental organizations with similar goals) and find common ground like Habitat for Humanity or a burn clinic in Peru
- Pray that leaders and governments will understand and address global issues
- Challenge and inform political parties

- Venture outside our insulated experience – mission means going outside our churches (hence “outreach”)
- Lend your voice to a cause – march, write letters, raise awareness – even a bumper sticker can make a statement.
- And value, even enjoy, ‘difference’.... You know I still dream sometimes about Baycrest – the Jewish Home for the Aged where I worked for over 30 years – and I was thinking the other day how enriched my life was by what I learned there about ‘difference’ – Hebrew music and dance, what genocide looks like when you know the person not just the people, Yiddish expressions like schlep and chachka that still linger in my speech, long philosophical talks with our Rabbi, what prejudice and tolerance mean to everyday life. Christians don’t have a corner on love and justice, but as Christians we have a teacher and a book that tells how to make them real.

I loved that fact that at Christmas we were known as the church with JOY. Or on the street we may be known as the church with the food bank. But maybe our collective voice can make an even bigger impact than one letter or one bumper sticker. Let’s be known as the church that “steps up”. The church that will stand around the mosque that has been damaged. The church that speaks for justice, raises money for refugee families, invites a First Nations speaker to help us understand rather than judge from a distance. Let us be the church that helps a woman

leaving an abusive situation set up an apartment for her children, facilitates a support group for caregivers or reaches out to families with special needs children and finds ways to include them in our Sunday School. There are so many things we can go if we do them together. We have such talent and strength as a faith community. As the song says...they will know we are Christians by the way we put love into action and demand that our politicians and leaders work hard for a just society.

Imagine the impact on the world if we all took God's word seriously. If we made that verse in Micah our own – 'To act justly and to have mercy and to walk humbly with our God'

There will always be potholes here and there but each and everyone of us can be part of the work crew repairing that road to Jericho.