

CHARITY OR JUSTICE?

In this morning's sermon, I want to challenge us to consider the difference between charity and justice. What is charity? It is something that grows out of a compassionate heart. We see a need and we address that need. People are hungry and we feed them. They are lonely and we visit them. They are hurting and we try to bring them comfort.

Churches are especially good at charity. They fed the homeless, tutor children, build houses for low income families, take up special offerings for Haiti, and include people from all walks of life in their fellowship. These are no small accomplishments. The world is a better place because of these efforts. But they are works of charity, not justice.

What is the difference? Perhaps the "Parable of Good Works" will help to make that clear. There was this peaceful little village next to a river. One day as two men were walking along the bank they saw a baby floating down the river. They rescued it. The next day two babies were floating on the river and a number of people got concerned. They organized the town to meet the crisis. The young men and women who were good swimmers took turns watching to see when there were babies to be rescued. Some of the folks took courses in artificial respiration in order to save as many as possible. There were even a number of good families who were willing to adopt these babies and make them their own. Each day the babies came. They saved as many as they could. One day, at a town meeting a young person spoke up. "Why don't we go up the river and see what is causing this?" "NO", shouted an elder, "We can't do that. Everyone is needed here to continue this work of mercy. Besides, if we went up there, there might be trouble!"

Archbishop Romero, advocate for the poor in Latin America who died a martyr's death, understood the difference between charity and justice when he said, "When I fed the hungry, they called me a saint. When I asked, why is there hunger, they called me a communist."

Charity is relatively easy. It even brings rewards. And not just churches do it. Service clubs, community organizations, schools, and scout troops also do this work. I was invited to attend a breakfast with the Civitan Club and was surprised to learn that they were currently involved in three projects to help others including building a ramp for a wheelchair person. Many do deeds of charity but few work for justice.

Justice involves taking a stand, being willing to be counted, challenging the "powers that be". It is never popular. Often it is divisive. So, why get involved? Wouldn't it be better to just be neutral?

Paulo Freire, Latin American educator, answers that question when he says, "Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral." Our challenge usually is to either get involved or by lack of involvement cast a vote for the status quo.

Let us consider three justice workers who were different in many ways. One was a Jew in Galilee named Jesus, another was a Hindu in India named Gandhi, and the third was a Baptist in the USA named Martin Luther King. Though they came from different parts of the world and had different religions, they had a lot in common. They all were very courageous and died martyrs' deaths. They all had a vision or a dream about how ours could be a better world.

Jesus' vision was of something called the Kingdom of God. He asked the question - "What would the world be like if not Caesar or Herod or Pilate ruled the world, but God was king? Then the human barriers that separate people from each other would come tumbling down. Each person would be affirmed as a child of God and therefore, a brother or sister to each other. When Jesus preached in his hometown, they were favorably impressed until he used a widow in Sidon and a leper in Syria to illustrate God's love for the outsiders. Then they were angry enough to try to kill him! His idea of a Kingdom without boundaries was dangerous. He not only taught it but lived it. His friends included lepers, tax collectors, women, children, Samaritans, and other who were marginalized in his society. They were all God's children.

Gandhi lived in a world that was permeated with violence. He taught non-violence, not just with words, but also with his life. He had the idea that if people practiced non-violent resistance against evil oppression and the "powers that be", they could overcome injustice. He reasoned that to use violence against violence would only replace one injustice with another. The world thought that he was weird. Nevertheless, by the use of this method, he was able to gain independence for India from one of the world's greatest empires without firing a single shot.

Dr. Martin Luther King had a dream that is familiar to us now. He envisioned a country where race, nationality, gender, and religion would not be used to determine who was accepted and who rejected but each person would be judged on the basis of his or her own character. Dr. King took Jesus' vision and Gandhi's method to try to bring this about.

They all three died without seeing the fulfillment of their dream / vision. But each one helped to launch a new day for humanity and others have since picked up their causes. If we would work for justice, we can learn from them. It is not enough to be against something; we must also be for something.

Where can we begin? Almost anywhere. We can begin with racial, political, economic, or environmental justice issues and if we go deeply enough into them we will see that they are all connected. It's like an octopus with many tentacles. You can begin at one

end but if you work your way more deeply you will meet others coming to the center from other issues.

Let me take an example to illustrate how this works. You could do this with other examples. One of the really great problems in the world today is that there is a growing gap between the rich and the poor. One can see this in Jimmy Carter's book, "Changing Values". He tells how at the beginning of the 20th century the 10 richest nations were 9 times richer than the 10 poorest nations. By the 1960's, they were 31 times richer. At the beginning of the 21st century, the 20 richest countries were 131 times as rich as the 20 poorest. And the gap continues to widen.

At the Peace Center this past week, we saw a movie about mining in Guatemala where 99 % of the profit is taken out of the country by large corporate mining companies. The government gets 1 % and the indigenous people get polluted water, poor health, and destroyed land! Can you see how injustice works. And then there is Haiti. We learned on the "Now" program on PBS that about half of the women who have babies die in childbirth. Now, Haiti is in the news but when the scenes of the broken land fade, they will soon be forgotten. Nevertheless, they will still be in poverty. The world is filled with hungry people, with refugees and homeless people, with people living on the edge of existence. There is so much human suffering.

What is true on the world's scene is also true in the USA, one of the richest countries in all of human history. "Business Week" tells us that in 1980 the average CEO made 42 times as much salary as the typical factory worker. Ten years later, in 1990, it had grown to 85 times. Then in the year 2000 it was 531 times. Can anyone make a case that one person (a CEO) is as valuable as 531 workers! And then when a CEO brings down a company, the workers lose their retirement while the CEO has a golden parachute. And what has happened since 2000? Our economy has tanked. The banks got a bailout with the peoples' money. The workers got unemployment. No wonder the gap is growing between the rich and the poor.

Since 1996 the minimum wage was \$5.15 an hour. Each year the cost of living went up. However, Congress refused to raise the minimum wage even though they gave themselves a raise every year. Finally, it was raised by a little. But jobs pay so little that many have had to have two of them to try to escape the poverty level. And the gap grows.

This is not good! The poor are suffering with a life hardship. The rich are becoming callous, greedy, and sick with power. It is possible to be rich in things and lose one's meaning in life. Perhaps that is why divorce, suicide, and alcoholism are on the rise among the rich.

What can be done to address this growing gap? I will make one suggestion. You can certainly add many other ideas. The important thing is that we need to do something and not just look the other way.

My idea is to bring the troops home from Iraq and Afghanistan. Why do I say this? First of all, because these wars are getting us hopelessly in debt and causing the gap to grow between the rich and the poor. Consider this fact - the poor are paying the price for these wars. It is their sons and daughters who are being killed or coming home maimed and with post dramatic stress syndrome. The rich got a tax cut. And because of that cut and the cost of the wars there is no longer money in the congressional budget for education, health care, and other social and humanitarian needs. Add to all of this, the fact that certain corporations are getting fat. They have an inside track. They, in many cases, have gotten no bid contracts in spite of the fact that they have not been responsible in their work. I have this feeling that if the profits were taken out of the wars the rich would be opposed to them. If the sons and daughters of Congress had to serve in combat, Congress would find a speedy end to the wars.

What are the wars really accomplishing? Are they making us safe from terrorists or are they producing more terrorists? Every time we bomb an innocent village or kill civilians in an effort to hit a target we produce new terrorists. Perhaps working to eliminate poverty in the world would be a better way to eliminate terrorists. But can we now after all these years be honest. We went into the Middle East because of our dependence on oil, did we not? Isn't that why our bases are located all along the pipelines? If that is true, couldn't we take half of the money we are now spending to kill and destroy and use it to develop alternative sources of energy. This could put a number of people back to work. And couldn't we produce cars that got better gas mileage. I heard on the radio a while ago that Ford has produced a car that gets 67 miles per gallon and is selling it in Europe. If that is true, then why not in the USA? Someone said to me that they can make more money here with the bigger cars that use more gas. It's like if you live in Canada you can get American drugs more cheaply than if you live in the USA. And, of course, the biggest thing we could do to lower our nation's dependence on foreign oil is conservation - sharing rides, walking, using the bike.

Well, I know. I have stopped preaching and started to meddle. Let me then take a few moments to say what vision / dream lies behind my concern. This is a vision of my country for which I would be willing to live and work for. 1. A country where diversity is affirmed and community is built among people who are different. 2. A country where peace and non-violence will one day be the rule and not the exception. (3) A land where children don't sleep in the streets or go to be hungry at night. (4) A place where the person who works hard will receive a living wage. (5) A society where the power of love will overcome the love of power and where peace will be more than just a word.

I am a realist. I know that this cannot happen overnight. However, I love the quote from Ashley Montague who said, "At last, we have discovered the missing link between our anthropoid ancestors and truly civilized beings - US!"

Through the ages humans have asked the question - "What is the good?" Many have attempted to answer that question but none so well as an ancient prophet Micah who said, "He has showed you, O man, what is good and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." I want to make

two observations: (1) Justice is listed first. Kindness (charity) is second. But notice they are both important. It is not a matter of one or the other but of both/and. (2) To walk humbly with your God (However, you conceive of God). What this is saying is - Don't take yourself too seriously. If you do, you will become a fundamentalist and will be part of the problem. We need a sense of humor in this world. We need to keep things in perspective. We need to develop the art of hanging in there when the future is in doubt.

I want to close with some words from the Talmud: "Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justice, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the task, but neither are you free to abandon it."

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