

Loving Creator – We gather here today as your children. We call you by different names, we understand you in different ways but despite our differences we all long to serve you, to honor you and to help all men and women to experience the reality of your great love for all humankind. Help us to be aware of your presence among us, help us to be sensitive to the leadings of your spirit. Bind us together, we pray, O God, so that we might stand together to bring your love and justice to this community. Empower us that we might be beacons to the whole world that there is good news for the poor and sight for the blind and freedom for the oppressed. We ask this in your Holy Name, Amen.

I've been asked this afternoon to share with you what Christianity teaches and requires of its believers in regards to justice. I should say from the outset that I regard this task on some level as impossible due to the sheer number of varying understandings of the Christian experience. Believers in Christ Jesus have subdivided themselves in many ways over two millennia – beginning as early as the year 451 of the Common Era, and more famously in 1054 with the split between Rome and Byzantium, and finally between Catholics and Protestants in 1517, with all of the following splinters of the Reformation. And as a representative of one of the movements of the radical wing of the Reformation, the Baptists, I stand, in some ways, at the extreme end of the spectrum of Christianity and so I must ask, in all honesty, if I am really an appropriate spokesman for the bulk of my fellow believers. My situation is made even more complicated by my adherence to the key Baptist tenet of Soul Competency; that is, that each person is competent under God and with the guidance of the Scriptures interpreted within the community of faith to determine their own relationship with the Almighty. The result of that approach is that no two Baptists believe in exactly the same way. I think Baptists may have subdivided themselves more than the rest of Christendom combined. We are an independent-minded group of a fractious communion. There are, however, a few things that I think I can safely say are or should be true for all Christians when it comes to the subject of justice.

First, I believe any Christian who is truly interested in justice will recognize the debt we owe in our understanding of justice to our older brothers and sisters under God, the Jews. It is from Torah that we learn the basics of what it is to be just and to pursue justice. It is from the ancient faith of the Hebrews that we learn that the One True God is one with justice. In the book of Deuteronomy, we read that all God's ways are just. From this, it follows that humankind is called to imitate God in justice in all of our doings. The book of Leviticus, for example, reminds us to be just in our business dealings: "You shall not cheat in measuring length, weight, or quantity. You shall have honest balances and honest weights..." Humankind is called to be just and fair in the application of the rule of law. Again, from the book of Deuteronomy: "You shall appoint judges and officials throughout your tribes... and they shall render just decisions for the people. You must not distort justice; you must not show partiality; and you must not accept bribes, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of those who are in the right. Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue." It is also in Deuteronomy that we find God's command that justice includes a periodic restoration of land to the impoverished and the forgiveness of indebtedness, the concept of the Year of Jubilee, or the acceptable year of the Lord, which is now beginning to find new acceptance among those concerned with economic justice.

In the books of the Writings and the Prophets that are sacred to all the People of the Book, we find a further explanation of what justice means in the context of those who worship the Lord. It is most important to safeguard the rights of those weaker than ourselves. In the Psalms, we read, “Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.” The prophet Jeremiah issued a call from the Lord: “Thus says the LORD: Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place.” Following the Exile to Babylon, Ezekiel kept this vision of God’s justice before all his displaced countrymen: “If a man is righteous and does what is lawful and right— if he does not...oppress anyone, but restores to the debtor his pledge, commits no robbery, gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, does not take advance or accrued interest, withholds his hand from iniquity, executes true justice between contending parties, follows my statutes, and is careful to observe my ordinances, acting faithfully—such a one is righteous; he shall surely live, says the Lord GOD.” Ezekiel’s vision of justice is proactive, with the call for feeding the hungry and clothing the naked, and not simply a matter of keeping within fair play in business and good relationships with humans and God. It is this same sense of proactive justice, I think, that lies behind two of the most inspirational and beloved verses from the prophets, one from Micah and one from Amos. From Micah: “what does the LORD require of you, O mortal, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” I shall return to that verse later. And from Amos, a verse often quoted by the great Baptist preacher, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.” I think it is impossible to grapple with the concept of justice from a Christian point of view without reference to what God revealed to the Chosen People.

Of course, for the Christian, the Law and the Prophets find their fulfillment in the person, work and teaching of Christ Jesus. Jesus, like the prophets before him, had a great deal to say about justice. In the Gospel according to Luke, we read that Jesus announced the beginning of his ministry to a synagogue gathering in his hometown of Nazareth by quoting from Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Or, in other words, the Year of Jubilee, the year in which slaves were to be set free and land returned to those who had sold it to pay debts. When quizzed about what was the most important commandment in all of the Torah, Jesus actually gave two answers, the second of which informs the question of justice. “One of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “‘you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”” For Jesus, relationship with one’s fellow humans is as important as one’s relationship to God. Can there be a better definition of justice than loving your neighbor as you do yourself, putting your neighbor’s needs equal to your own?

But Jesus departs from Torah and goes beyond the call of the earlier prophets with his call to God’s people for a new and radical type of justice. In the gospels of Matthew and Luke, we find Jesus’ new vision of justice. “But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” Jesus has extended the

Torah concept of the love of neighbor to include not just those who look and believe like his followers, but even their most ancient enemies. After Jesus responded to the lawyer whom I mentioned earlier that love of God and love of neighbor were the chief commandments, the lawyer asked, “who is my neighbor?” In response, Jesus told him the famous parable of the Good Samaritan. Had this exchange taken place today, Jesus would have told his Israeli brother a story about a Palestinian who saved the life of a Jew. Jesus called his followers to consider their words, thoughts and attitudes as carefully as their actions: “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.” “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” For Jesus, this new ethic of peace and justice has its roots in the very nature of God. “Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

Jesus’ followers continued his call for God’s people to extend justice to all men and women and gave new examples as they reached different audiences from the rural poor to whom most of Jesus’ message was addressed. God revealed to the Apostle Peter that even the Gentiles, the non-Jews who had previously been considered spiritually unclean, were to be granted full status as God’s children. The early Church embraced this concept and Paul became the apostle to the Gentiles. As he preached to an urban audience which included more of the upper class, Paul applied the concept of justice to the workplace: “Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, for you know that you also have a Master in heaven.”

There are many, many other scriptural examples I could cite but I also want to mention some more contemporary writings, specifically from my Baptist heritage. “The Baptist Faith and Message,” a document that seeks to express the general consensus of Baptists beliefs, has this to say on the subject of justice: “The Christian should oppose, in the spirit of Christ, every form of greed, selfishness and vice. Christians should work to provide for the orphaned, the needy, the aged, the helpless, and the sick. Every Christian should seek to bring industry, government, and society as a whole under the sway of the principles of righteousness, truth, and brotherly love. In order to promote these ends, Christians should be ready to work with all people of good will in any good cause.” Another publication, “We are American Baptists,” affirms “that God through Jesus Christ calls (Christians) to be...” a people “who seek justice for all persons... (and) who care for the earth and all its creatures...” Baptists have had and continue to have an impact on justice issues in America and on the world stage. I’ve already mentioned Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., famous for his work for civil rights and for peace. Baptist theologian Walter Rauschenbusch is credited with popularizing the concept of the “Social Gospel” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the concept that Christian principles, such as those I have mentioned today, must be applied to current social issues such as poverty, inequality, war and so on. And it was Baptists in the earliest days of the United States who led the charge for religious liberty and succeeded in having that principle written into the Bill of Rights. Without their work, many of us here today might not be able to worship as we choose publicly.

But for all the positive contributions towards justice which I might claim for Baptists in particular and Christians in general, there are many failures of justice perpetrated by Christians of all denominations. As G.K. Chesterton wrote, “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried.” Why is this so? After all, as I mentioned earlier, the prophet Micah was quite clear in his call for justice. “What does the LORD require of you, O mortal, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” Because Jesus and his followers preached a message of God’s love and forgiveness, Christians have too often used God’s mercy as an excuse to ignore God’s righteousness. Like all good Protestants before me, I too would say that humans cannot and do not earn God’s saving grace. The apostle Paul wrote, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast.” It was this verse above all others that led to Luther’s reformation cry in 1517, “sola gratia – grace alone!” But it would be a dark and wretched heart indeed that did not respond in loving gratitude to God’s loving grace. That response naturally leads to deeds, to works. The apostle James, the brother of Jesus, wrote, “For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.” These two verses, often held in juxtaposition, have troubled Christians trying to find the right balance between faith and works for two millennia. But surely, our response to the Creator’s love for us will always rightly include responding in like love to our neighbor. That is to me the core of the Christian concept of justice.