***GREAT ENDS: PROMOTE SOCIAL RIGHTEOUSNESS!***

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Texts: Amos 5:18-24 and Matthew 5:1-6

Earlier this year in several addresses in the course of his global travels Pope Francis raised concerns with regard to a variety of economic and environmental issues. In Paraguay he told an audience:

*As Christians we have an additional reason to love and serve the poor; for in them we see the face and the flesh of Christ, who made himself poor so as to enrich us with his poverty.*

His comments were welcomed by many, especially in poverty-stricken nations, but they were not well-received by others; several American politicians not only took issue with the substance of his statements, but also suggested that the pope should stick to religion and leave the state of the world to others – no doubt, meaning themselves. In the words of the ever-combative Patrick Buchanan:

*Pope Francis is the infallible custodian of the truths Christ taught. Is that not sufficient, Your Holiness?[[1]](#endnote-1)*

Now whether you agree or disagree with Francis’ comments, do you believe that the issues he addressed are appropriate concerns for disciples of Jesus? Is the state of the world a vital concern for people of faith or is it only the state of our souls that is of Christian concern? Is our Christian faith a purely private matter or is there a public dimension as well?

Over a hundred years ago our Presbyterian ancestors identified one of the Great Ends of the Church as “the promotion of social righteousness.” In that call echo the words of Jesus that we read this morning: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.” Echoing too are the older words of Amos about justice rolling down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Is the righteousness of which Amos and Jesus spoke just about our personal relationship with God, or does it include the social righteousness which our Presbyterian ancestors identified as a vital role of the Church?

The prophet Amos was a self-described herdsman and dresser of sycamore trees, a shepherd watching over his flocks near Jerusalem 750 years before Jesus’ birth. King Uzziah reigned in Judah and King Jeroboam sat on the throne in Israel and Amos tended his flocks, but Amos also issued prophetic indictments:

an indictment of the nations for violence done to neighboring states;

and an indictment of Judah for rejecting the law of the Lord.

But the brunt of the prophet’s words is directed at the people of Israel for self-righteously trampling the poor, enslaving the righteous, pushing aside the outcasts, taking advantage of the weak, and using religion for their own purposes. It was very much about private ***and public*** practices.

By all appearances the people were very religious; they gathered for worship, celebrated the festivals of their faith, offered sacrifices and offerings to the Lord, and sang songs of praise and thanksgiving. But the Lord turned a deaf ear and blind eye to those religious rites, for what the Lord wants more than our worship and praise is faithful obedience along these lines: *Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream!* Offerings to God are worthless if the hands with which they are offered are not working for justice and righteousness. Our songs are empty words if we are not speaking out on behalf of the poor and oppressed. Our worship is a sham if we take advantage of others or remain stoically silent in the face of injustice the rest of the week. As Paul tells the Corinthians,

*If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels but have not love, I am a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal.*

Love for Paul, for Amos, and for Jesus is active; it infuses all of life. Faith is not private; it is personal, but it is also public. How we live and live together cannot be disconnected from the faith we express in the God of Abraham, Amos, and Jesus. Justice and righteousness are the marks of the community of God, and they are the responsibility of all those in it, including us!

Throughout Scripture, justice and righteousness are entwined, at times virtually synonymous. Righteousness – right relationship with God – demands justice in relationship with others. It is the practical application of the Great Commandment to love God and neighbor. If we are to love God we must love our neighbors; in loving our neighbors we express love for God. As Jesus says in that familiar passage we read from Matthew’s Gospel a few weeks back: “as you do it to the least of these, you do it to me; as you fail to do it for the least of these, you fail to do it for me.” There is a public, relational aspect to our personal faith as we proclaim what we really believe, not just by what we say, but by how we live and treat others!

Amos’ indictment of the people of Israel was that their professed faith in the Lord was belied by their failure to care for the poor and outcast, and he warned them not to self-righteously long for the day of the Lord to come quickly, for it would be a dire day for them if they did not change their ways. As Jesus tells the Pharisees:

*Woe to you, for you tithe and neglect justice and love!*

Woe to us too if we neglect the demands of justice and love in practice. Woe to us if we neglect the poor and fail to speak out on their behalf. *God helps those who help themselves* is nowhere to be found in the Bible. *Woe to you who are rich* and *blessed are you who are poor* are there in the red-letter words of Jesus. Woe to us if we dare to come to worship on Sunday and ignore the needs of the poor the rest of the week. Woe to us if we support government policies that hurt the poor or benefit the rich at their expense. Woe to us if we think it is someone else’s responsibility to speak for the poor and help the immigrants and minister to the outcast.

*Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream, says the Lord.* It is not enough for justice and righteousness to drip or trickle down; justice and righteousness must roll down! In his *I Have a Dream* speech Martin Luther King, Jr. said:

*There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights, “When will you be satisfied?” …We are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.*[[2]](#endnote-2)

That day had not yet arrived and it is still not here, so God’s call to the Church continues to be a call to work for social righteousness, for the betterment of society, for the common good for all people. In Scripture the repeated call is to help the poor (including the orphan and widow who had no means of support), the outcast (the lepers of Jesus’ day), and the strangers or aliens in the land who are the immigrants both legal and illegal in our land today. Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream for them, says Amos!

Today justice is just trickling and righteousness is far short of a mighty stream for many in our nation and world. Those holy waters are not flowing for many African-Americans as the rash of police shootings of young black men in cities across our nation reminds us almost weekly; just Friday a Department of Justice report criticized the St. Louis County Family Court for treating black youths more harshly than whites. Justice and righteousness are not flowing for the poor in our nation as the rich get richer and the poor try to hold on; in the 25 years between 1979 and 2005 average after-tax income (adjusted for inflation) grew

by $900 a year for the bottom 20% of American households,

by $8,700 a year for the middle 20% (that’s 9 ½ times as much), and by $745,000 a year for the top one percent of households (that’s 827 times as much)!

From 2009 to 2012, the real incomes of the top one percent of American families rose 31 percent, while the real incomes of the rest of us (the other 99 percent) rose less than a half percentage point.[[3]](#endnote-3) As Robert Putnam notes in his recently released book *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*, “No serious observer doubts that the past 40 years have witnessed an almost unprecedented growth in inequality in America.”[[4]](#endnote-4) The waters of justice and righteousness are not flowing like a mighty stream!

They are not flowing for children orphaned by AIDS in Africa nor for the millions of refugees chased from their homes by war in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. They are not flowing for poor children in our nation where, by a host of measures, kids from poor families are being left behind – that is what Robert Putnam’s book is all about. They are not flowing for those who cannot afford health insurance here, nor for the desperately poor who have no access to health care in the Third World. They are not flowing for immigrants in our nation who, instead of being welcomed as Scripture demands (for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt, the Lord reminds them), are called criminals and rapists and are treated as outcasts or being victimized in human trafficking. And they are not flowing in our community when a self-appointed vigilante sits along Richmond Road with a semi-automatic rifle, ostensibly to protect an Armed Forces Career Center that has not asked for his protection, but in reality to draw attention to himself and deter the “Middle Eastern men or young men driving late model vehicles” who he is profiling as potential terrorists. As Shelby Owen accurately noted this week, “I guess he would be looking for Jesus himself because Jesus is a Middle Eastern man.”

If we are to be the people God calls us to be, then we must live as God calls us to live, and we cannot turn a blind eye to injustice and unrighteousness in our midst. We can and should pray for those who are suffering in our world, but if we are to be disciples of Jesus, then we also must work for a better world where justice flows like mighty waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. As the great theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote almost 90 years ago:

*If the church can do nothing else, it can bear witness to the truth until such a day as bitter experience will force a recalcitrant civilization to a humility which it does not now possess*.[[5]](#endnote-5)

That kind of public witness is not an alternative to our personal faith; it is the faithful expression of it. If we say we want justice and righteousness and do nothing, then woe to us. But if we hunger and thirst for those holy waters, if we work together for justice and promote social righteousness, then as Jesus says, one day we will be satisfied – and blessed, many times blessed. Amen

1. Leonard Pitts, “Pope Should Stick to Religion?”, *The News Leader*, July 16, 2015, Page 7, Section A [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr*., James M. Washington, ed., HarperSanFrancisco, 1986, pp.218-219 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Robert D. Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*, Simon & Schuster: New York, 2015, p.35 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Id. at 36 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Reinhold Niebuhr, Leaves from the notebook of a Tamed Cynic, Westminster/John Knox Press: Louisville, 1929 renewed 1957 and 1980, p.152 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)