

February 6, 2011

The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

Isaiah 58:1-9; Matthew 5:13-20

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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Doing Justice

Doing justice is not that easy. Every one of us wants justice. No one really approves of the oppression of one person or group of people by another. What I might see as a matter of justice, you might see as something else. If we start an emergency overflow shelter for those with nowhere else to lay their heads at the building on the corner of Peachtree and Pine, is it justice when that shelter turns out to be something other than planned and becomes a more or less permanent residence for a largely treatment-resistant population? The shelter is operated by something called the Task Force for the Homeless. They haven't paid their bills recently. Conditions inside by all accounts are quite squalid. The building's new owners want to evict—not the four or five hundred homeless people who stay there—but the management. They want to put in a group who will help the residents move off the streets and into safe and secure and more stable homes. The issues are tied up in court as our justice system tries to sort out competing claims, desires, interests and accusations of bad faith. There also appears to me to be some sense in which opinion as to what should happen is dividing along racial lines. The influential Concerned Black Clergy support the Task Force, believing that they are a place of last resort for the treatment-resistant and that somewhere for those people is better than no where. Holding those men accountable for their choices and behavior will lead them, it is believed, back onto the streets with an increase of crime and all the problems that come when there is large group of men with no resources and no where to go. Others, especially many in those churches of the Peachtree Corridor of which we are a part, say that is all very well, but the bills aren't getting paid and the men are living without electricity or even water unless our utility providers show some compassion. By all accounts, conditions inside the shelter are unhealthy and dangerous. And why should we not hold people accountable for their behavior, even recognizing how the capacities of some to make good choices are severely compromised by their history of poverty? What is unjust about supporting the carefully worked out plan to address homelessness in our city that was worked out in the tenure of Mayor Franklin? Doing justice is complicated.

A longing for justice is universal human hope. That longing is much of the content of the wonderful music we are enjoying to day. Shout praises to God for one of these days no one will go hungry. We are forgiven sinners on the journey home, becoming the love we seek. As we take communion our choirs will be singing about how “we sing today and shape tomorrow: Justice gives us all a chance.”

The prophets remind us that this is a reasonable and holy hope *if and as and when* we act in ways that are pleasing to God. So complicated though doing justice can be, we simply must figure it out what part we are going to play and get on with doing the work we have been given to do. That was certainly the message of the prophet to a people who had returned from exile and started rebuilding their Temple in Jerusalem and observing the fasts and joining in worship. ‘You might call this acceptable to the Lord’, is the message, but the fast the Lord desires is “to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke.” Is not the fast I desire, saith the Lord “to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house... (ow) ...Then...Then.. your light shall break forth like the dawn and the Lord will answer your cry for help.”

The challenge of doing justice by, for example, the idea of bringing the poor into our homes, is that very often the poor cannot regulate their own behavior and so can easily become people who drain all our energy, resources, time and money. That cannot be what God has in mind, can it? At the same time the prophets sing the song of caring for the weakest among us, being in relation with those who are damaged and oppressed, staying connected with the wayfarer and stranger, the widowed and the orphaned and not living as though they do not exist. And there is the clue: justice begins with relationship.

Our staff has done some work over the years on attending to differences among us and how and where we get caught in the realities that flow from real differences in power and background that we know. In one relationship we might be in the majority and in another we might represent a minority.¹ In one way we might be like the teacher who hears the call of Jesus and pours all kinds of effort into that child she knows to be from a broken home and gives a better grade than is earned in the hopes of providing some encouragement. When we do that, or when we give someone a dollar because it is easier than saying no to a persistent panhandler or when we allow the takeover of a shelter by those who will not regulate their behavior, then we are engaging in something called ‘dysfunctional helping.’ We think we are doing a good thing, when in fact we are teaching something profoundly counter-productive. That liberal guilt or what ever it is, gets internalized by those who do not have the power as an attitude that says “I can beat the system,” “I don’t really have to work for my grades,” “I can make more money panhandling than by dealing with my issues.” “We just have to complain that the system is oppressive and we can do what we want in that shelter,” and any hope of justice in the form of real relationship goes out the window and all our interactions get distorted. Doing justice is complicated.

So, hearing the call of the prophets and seeing the example of Jesus, we try and converse about the challenges we have in relating (black and white, rich and poor,

¹ The concepts in this section can be found in expanded form in a paper by Valerie Batts, *Is Reconciliation Possible?* Available at <http://www.visions-inc.org/Is%20Reconciliation%20Possible.pdf>

old and young, man and woman, black professional and a Philippine maid— wherever there is a difference in power) we try and talk and have to learn to talk at the same level as each other rather than talking past each other because one of us is talking about our personal experience and the other is talking about institutional or cultural realities. If I grew up white in the South (which I clearly did not, but I've heard a lot of your stories over the years) I might talk very personally about how much I loved the woman who partially raised me and looked after my family almost as a member of the household, and then be hurt when someone responds to me about the cultural reality of racism and how I am participating in it by that very relationship I value so much. We have to get the conversation on the same level as each other, without denigrating the importance of the other conversations we are yet to have, if we are to make progress. Doing justice is complicated and it is hard spiritual work. But do it we must if we are to bridge the chasms that separate us from one another.

The longing for all to be well with the world and all to be well in our lives is a holy gift and our song is pleasing to God when it is more than a vague aspiration and it becomes an incentive to action. We might disagree about the best future for the shelter at Peachtree and Pine and for the men (and some women apparently) who live there, just as we might disagree about the best policy on immigration or how to fix our untenable and broken system of healthcare. But we cannot sing our hymns and offer our praise expecting that they are pleasing to God if we do not agree that finding good ways to ensure justice for those at the bottom of the heap so that they can live and flourish is of paramount importance. Finding ways to seek right relationship without all the distortions that come with power and with our particular histories is hard spiritual work, part and parcel of what it means for us to ensure that our salt has not lost its flavor, and that the light of the gospel can shine in and through us for a broken and hurting world.

I invite you to think about someone that you find difficult—whatever the reason—and ask in prayer that God help you find a way through the distortions of power and history in that relationship to a place of real appreciation. In so doing your righteousness will exceed that of the Pharisees and you will not be far from the Kingdom of Heaven. In silence and in response to the gospel, let us pray...