

The Compassionate Life – The Social Justice Tradition

Matthew 25:31-40

This morning we continue looking at our series on the devotional classics with the purpose of seeking to grow in our faith, to commit ourselves to growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. Today we look at the social justice tradition. It is giving attention to that part of our faith that is much more outward focused...different from the contemplative tradition that is much more inward focused. Two weeks ago we looked at the holiness tradition. John Wesley often spoke of living a life of holiness that centered on loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. But a closer look at Wesley's teaching reveals that holiness was not just about one's personal faith but that inward holiness must be complemented by outward holiness. That in order for my faith to be wholistic, I must consider the way I relate to others. Loving my neighbor, you could call it social holiness. Here's how John Wesley put it: "Holy solitaries is a phrase no more consistent with the Gospel than holy adulterers. The Gospel of Christ knows no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness." He said: "Christianity is essentially a social religion, to turn it into a solitary religion is indeed to destroy it."

We were having this discussion at our staff meeting when we looked at the writings in our Devotional Classics on holiness. William Law in his *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* talks about how living a holy life must be seen in the everyday practices of life. So he says: "For if Christianity teaches anything about eating and drinking, spending our time and money, how we are to live in the world, what attitudes we are to have in daily life...how we are to behave toward the sick, the poor...and destitute...we would be foolish to think that these teachings are not to be observed with the same strictness as those teachings that relate to prayer. In other words, one's personal faith should be reflected in how I live. Faith is more than personal prayers and personal devotion. It is to be lived out in my daily life. It is a faith that is not only inward focused but reaches out beyond oneself.

When I think of this outward focus for the disciple of Jesus Christ, I realize that the Christian life needs to incorporate two key dimensions. One is witness, and the other is service. And when I think about witness, the phrase that comes to my mind is "people seeing Jesus in us." That we have a message to share, the good news of the Gospel to

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communicate and that understanding of our faith we will talk about next week in the evangelical tradition. But this morning I want to pay attention to the other dimension: service. If witness is people seeing Jesus in us, then I think of service as seeing Jesus in others. That as I look at humanity, and more specifically individual people, I want to see them as children of God. You remember that was the life focus and mission of Mother Teresa. Mother Teresa would be in ministry in some very difficult and trying places and the people she touched were often in great distress and misery. When she was asked how she could do it, what was it that sustained her in this ministry of service, her reply often would be: This person is a child of God and I see the face of Jesus in him. It's being able to see Jesus in others.

There was a young boy who lived in a European orphanage many years ago. Each evening before supper, the usual prayer was given. "Come, Lord Jesus. Be our guest and bless what thou hast provided." One night one of the orphans said to an old man in the institution, "Every night we pray for Jesus to come, but I never see Him." The old man replied, "Only believe my son and he will not despise our invitation." The little boy thought to himself "I will save Him a seat next to me." Just then a knock came at the door and a poor frozen apprentice entered begging a night's lodging. The shivering man was given a hot meal and warm room. After some thought the little orphan exclaimed to his keeper, "Jesus sent this man in His place. Is that it?" "Yes, dear child, that is just it." If we could receive the insight of this orphan child. The world is crying out for our help. "If you did it unto the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it unto Me."

That kind of perspective really speaks to the simple and faithful living out of the gospel we heard in today's reading: When you feed the hungry, when you give drink to the thirsty, when you welcome the stranger, when you clothe the naked, when you visit those in prison. What did Jesus say? When you did it unto one of these, you did it to me. That's seeing Jesus in others.

Well then, that begs the question. Who are the hungry, the thirsty, the strangers, the lonely. Who are those who we are called to reach with the love of God. Some may be hundreds of miles away, but others may be right in our own backyards, our neighbors, people of our communities, people around us with physical needs, emotional hurts, spiritual hunger. People impacted by our own prejudices or lack of

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understanding. That this would be our challenge as followers of Jesus. Looking for Jesus in others.

I wonder how often has the witness of the church been hindered by our lack of compassion, or our unwillingness to reach out to someone needing God's grace and love. I read a statement that pointedly states that concern. It said: "The acts of your koinonia speak so loudly that we cannot hear the words of your kerygma. The koinonia is the Greek word for fellowship, the kerygma is the message we proclaim. So basically it was saying the actions of our fellowship can adversely affect the message we have to share. We may have the right words, but if people don't see our heart of compassion, our witness goes unheeded.

It brings us right back to our mission statement as a church. *A community of faith committed to sharing the love of Jesus Christ...how? Through our words and actions.* Our message has to be more than words...the call to being a disciple of Jesus compels us to put our beliefs in to visible action. That we might touch lives with God's love and compassion. It is why the book of James says that faith without works is dead. If we really want to demonstrate our faith, people must see it in our actions.

William Temple in our Devotional Classics describes our mission like this: "The Church must announce Christian principles and point out where the existing social order is in conflict with them. Second, it must then pass on to Christian citizens, acting in their civic capacities, the task of reshaping the existing order in closer conformity to the principles."

We live in a world so divided, and a nation divided over issues of race, religion, economics, human sexuality. And that divide only seems to grow deeper with feelings of mistrust, misunderstanding, oppression, and discrimination. Almost every week we hear another story of someone mistreated or bullied, or put down. Yet we are called to see life from a different vantage point. The follower of Jesus sees the world from another point of view. It is seeing Jesus in others, it is reaching out to those who need the compassion of God through us. If you done it unto one of these, you have done it unto me, Jesus says.

Are we looking for that person who is searching for love and understanding...you've done it unto me, Jesus says.

Looking for that person who has felt the hurt of prejudice or discrimination...you've done it unto me.

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Looking for that person who is hungering, physically, or emotionally, or spiritually, You've done it unto me. I'm asking you this morning. Do we see Jesus in others, see people as children of God, then we must go to serve, to give of ourselves with the love of God.

The story is told of an old man in a foreign land who sat down in the shade of an ancient Banyan tree. The roots of the tree stretched far into the swamp. As the man was sitting there he noticed a small commotion where the roots entered the water. Concentrating his attention, he noticed that a scorpion had become helplessly entangled in the roots. The man got up on his feet and made his way carefully along the tops of the roots until he came to the place where the scorpion was trapped. He reached down to help the scorpion, but each time he touched the scorpion, it would lash his hand with its tail, and sting him painfully. Finally, his hand was so swollen and he could no longer close his fingers, so he withdrew to the shade of the tree to wait for the swelling to go down. As he arrived at the trunk of the tree, he saw a young man standing above him on the road who was laughing hysterically at what he had seen. The young man said: "You're a fool wasting your time to help a scorpion that can only do you harm. The old man replied: "Simply because it is in the nature of the scorpion to sting, should I give up my nature which is to save?" That is a description of the very nature of God. A God who loves us with deep compassion. The Scriptures say that Jesus came to seek and to save. He came to serve, not to be served. Followers of Jesus Christ, that is our calling...to be in that place of caring and serving. As we see Jesus in others, we reach out to extend the love of God. That is faith beyond words, that is faith put into action.

I close with two prayers for social justice: Lord God, in Jesus, you came in the body: flesh of our flesh, bone of our bone. We thank you that you did not remain an idea, even a religious idea, but walked, wept, and washed feet among us. By your love, change our ideas, especially our religious ideas, into living signs of your work and will. Through our lives and by our prayers, may your kingdom come.

God of Justice and Peace, Mold our consciences according to justice, And shape our hearts according to peace, That we may recognize the talents that you have given us To secure the rights of the poor, the oppressed, the sick and the marginalized. God, we are Your children.

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Grant us the courage and strength To work for justice,
And in this way, live out our call to be peacemakers. (Jane Deran)