



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

2 Poland Manor
Poland, Ohio 44514
330-757-1547

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A Sermon by Brent J. Eelman

Social Righteousness

Matthew 25:31-45

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" ⁴⁰And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." ⁴¹Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴²for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." ⁴⁴Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" ⁴⁵Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me."

An elder in my church in Texas, named Tom, was musing about the piety that was often displayed at Texas High School football games. In particular, he was referring to all the signs that people held up which read: John 3: 16. (For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life). He had no objection to this particular display of piety, but felt that someone should also hold up a sign that read: Micah 6:8, (What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.) His point was simple and straightforward. We should also emphasize justice, kindness and humility in the presence of God.

I am not sure if Tom was ever familiar with the *Great Ends of the Church*, but he sure understood the importance of one of them. The fifth Great end of the church is "to promote social righteousness." It means the church is called to address the issues of justice and human need in the larger world.

I

This is the prophetic message of the church: When we read the prophets of the Old Testament, we are confronted with a powerful message of social justice. Amos, writing in the 9th century before Christ, railed against the abuses of the ruling class in light of the extreme poverty in Israel. Jeremiah continually reminded the people that justice was measured by how they treated the widows, orphans, and the foreigners in their land. Isaiah spoke about a messiah who would come and judge for the poor and oppressed. And of course Micah exhorted the people to "do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God."

The great end of the church, *the promotion of social righteousness*, is at the core of the prophetic message. Amos even took on the religious festivals, the special offerings, and the religious services to God. Speaking for God he declared in the fifth chapter of Amos:

"I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. I will not accept your offerings; I will not look upon them. Take away from me the noise of your hymns and I will not listen to the melody of your instruments." What does God want: "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

Jesus reminded his disciples that they were to serve "the least of these", and in doing so they were serving Christ. The letter of James continued this prophetic emphasis on social righteousness in the New Testament declaring: "Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves." It is not enough to hear and understand God's promise. It is not enough to hear the words of Jesus. It is not enough to say you believe them. Christian faith requires action. Christian faith believes that God wants something better for God's creation. Christian faith believes that faith in Christ is manifest in the way we live, not merely as individuals but as communities.

The great end of the church for today, the promotion of social righteousness, is often the most controversial. Preachers who declare it are often silenced. Prophets who demand it are soon alienated and marginalized. Jesus was scorned for associating with the social outcasts, for healing on the Sabbath. Social righteousness.... the church is called to make the world better. As Presbyterians, this is part of our constitution. I have shared the biblical foundation of this end, but would like to look at how this has manifest itself historically and how it challenges us today.

II

You know my love of the hymns. If I ever have the time to organize my material, I would love to teach a course in church history that uses the Hymnal as its text. Next to the Bible, the hymnal is the most important book in our common life. It is the book that tells the story of church. It is our link with previous generations, going back to the founding of the church. The hymns of the church tell the story of the church's commitment to social righteousness. Let's look at three American hymns, one of which we will sing today. The first is by John Greenleaf Whittier:

*O brother man, fold to thy heart thy brother;
Where pity dwells, the peace of God is there;
To worship rightly is to love each other,
Each smile a hymn, each kindly deed a prayer.
Then shall all shackles fall.....*

Worship rightly... is how we treat each other... with love??? The shackles that will fall, are none other than the shackles of slavery... Whittier, a Quaker, was an abolitionist, and believed that discipleship should lead the church to denounce and condemn slavery and fight for its extinction.

He paid a price for that view. In Boston, he was pelted by eggs walked down the street. In Philadelphia, a mob burned his offices of the Anti-Slavery Center.

Consider the hymn by James Russell Lowell "Once to Every Man and Nation"

*Once to every man and nation, comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of truth with falsehood, for the good or evil side;*

This hymn was part of a much larger protest poem written when Texas was annexed and entered the Union as a slave state. In Lowell's eyes this was evil and a falsehood and God called the nation and individuals to decide either for it or against it.

Consider the hymn, "God of Grace and God of Glory" (our closing hymn today) and once again set it within its context... Fosdick, the great Baptist preacher of the 20th century, wrote this hymn when the Presbyterians were trying to silence him because of his social views and his willingness to accept the new Biblical scholarship.

*God of grace and God of glory,
On Thy people pour Thy power.
Crown Thine ancient church's story,
Bring her bud to glorious flower.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
....For the facing of this hour.*

Church history is the story of the church of Jesus Christ that did not shrink from the social evils of its day. It is the story of people, following Christ in their time... People who found wisdom and courage to pursue social righteousness.

- It is the story of the underground church in Germany that bravely stood up to Nazism in the 30's and paid as martyrs.
- It is the story of the thousands of Christians who said that racial discrimination in this country was evil and God says "no" to oppression.
- It is also a quiet story... the story of Clarence Jordan, who in 1942 founded Koinonia farm... retranslated the gospels into the "Cottenpatch Gospel" and through his efforts to enable people to escape poverty, and birthed Habitat for Humanity.
- It is the story of Donaldina Cameron who bravely stood up to the exploitation and sexual enslavement of young Chinese women in San Francisco, starting a shelter in 1874 that is still at work today.. Cameron House.
- It is the quiet story of women and men through the ages who have sacrificed in the name of Christ for others, to ease their lives, to make the world a better place... to promote social righteousness.

III

And then there is our story. Our challenge is to be the church today. How far do we have to look, to go to see the need for the promotion of social righteousness? Not too far. The homeless are not far away... the hungry are at our doorstep... Social evil is prevalent throughout the world. In Africa and Eastern Europe and part of Asia, slavery is once again rearing its evil head. In the last 4 months, Europe has seen families seeking better life, literally walking and swimming miles upon miles, defying death and public scorn, hoping for a better life for their children. In some cases, just hoping for life for the children, (an escape from systematic rape and execution). Sadly, these have all become ideological issues, with people arguing about the causes and the possible solutions. But few are saying that we are our brother's keeper, and we share responsibility for the welfare of others. This requires moral courage.

The fifth Great End of the church is "the promotion of Social Righteousness." What I have said is not easy to hear. Amos, Jesus and the prophets were not easy to hear, and they are not easy to study. Poland Presbyterian Church is called (you are called) as a community of faith to promote social righteousness in this community and in the world. We are called, not only to hear the word... but to do it. We are called to say "no" to the evils of the world. We are called to "yes" with our Christ, to the least of these... the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the sick, the and poorly clothed." When we say "yes" to these people, who are our brothers and sisters, we say "yes" to Christ. This is the Good News. Amen.

8:30 Jesus felt tender compassion for the suffering people he met. He realized that many workers would be needed for a great harvest of mercy and love. This day you and I are called to this work for the reign of God. This very day you and I are called to a sweet labor of generosity, healing, and peace. Let us bring our gifts, then, so that the ministry of this church will be a growing, vibrant witness to God's love. Let us gather our gifts together and offer them to God in gratitude and praise.

10:30 I spoke of our closing hymn in the sermon... The words of this hymn are a prayer.. a prayer for moral courage... grant us wisdom, Grant us courage... save us from weak resignation. ... The tune is a sturdy vehicle for these words... inspiring the singer, indeed the church, to serve the one whom we adore.