Working for Justice

Matthew 25:31-40 Kimby Young

Amos 5:24; Micah 6:8 August 4, 2024

Almost all Christians and many other faith traditions agree that God calls us to work for justice, to do what is right and to make things right. We do not all agree what that justice looks like in practical ways. We have a wide variety of solutions, some of which even seem to be in opposition to each other. Just what is the right thing to do? How can we truly help others?

The Presbyterian Church is known for tackling poverty and hunger. We have current programs that were started over a hundred years ago. The Presbyterian Church historically is known, not just for giving a few handouts to help the poor, but for taking on poverty and hunger as the enemy, working on many fronts to destroy poverty and hunger. In early years in America and throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, often these programs were linked with education. We started schools and fed children at school – the Sunday School movement started as a literacy program for poor children and child factory workers on their only day off - Sunday. We believe education is the best way to help the poor, to give people a way to lift themselves out of poverty and other difficult situations. Worldwide Presbyterians have started schools. We support education for girls and ethnic schools. We give scholarships. Presbyterians really love education and promote education as a way to work for justice – to fight poverty. Several other denominations do as well.

In our war against poverty, the fight looks different in different churches. Some churches, like our church here in Gardner, seem to start at ground level – person to person feeding and caring. You have a long history of that care – culminating in the last 10 years with the Joy Closet. It is such a practical purposeful way of meeting need. In the last few years the Joy Closet has become so successful that we are able to expand the reach beyond clothing to help in so many ways. You connect people to resources. You connect volunteers to real ways of making a difference. You are truly helping in mighty ways – combatting poverty and hunger.

Some Presbyterian churches start at the other end of the problem. Whereas you are very hands on person to person, there are some churches that work on the other end – trying to tackle the source of the problem. There are people and churches who see some of our systems in society as adding to the cycle of poverty. They try to fix those systems to bring more justice. If we can keep people from falling into poverty that is better than trying to help pull them out of poverty. Some churches work on legislation and advocacy – trying to help farmers or low income urban dwellers; trying to provide health care, mental health care or changes to housing. There are hundreds of tactics to take to work for the good of others – to fight poverty and hunger. The problem with this approach is we don’t all agree with the proposed solutions. We don’t agree on tactics and methods. Especially in politics and advocacy, in areas of social justice, sometimes people start fighting each other, rather than working together to fight the actual problems we are trying to solve.

For example – and I am not advocating one side or the other right now, I’m just using an example. The “Black Lives Matter” movement means different things to different people. To some it means we need to protect vulnerable people and populations. We need to change systems that don’t work. To other people it feels like an assault on law enforcement and is highly insulting. The problem is if we could get beyond the rhetoric both sides are correct. We need to honor and protect law enforcement. We need to respect and protect vulnerable minorities. Everyone needs to do the right thing and take care of each other. When we start using loaded language or making blanket statements about others, we get into trouble. We forget that we should be attacking the problem not the people. We fight amongst ourselves, rather than working together to stop poverty, hunger, racism, prejudice, injustice and the other true evils of the world. Honestly, sometimes we don’t even agree on what those true evils are.

The Biblical witness is clear. We are called to stand on the side of the weak and vulnerable. God calls us to lift up the lowly. God stands with the lowly. The problem is sometimes we all feel weak and vulnerable. Any time we start arguing and fighting, the vulnerability rises.

We must be careful that when we try to defend someone who is vulnerable, we aren’t attacking someone else. Sometimes in defending or lifting up one group, another group feels threatened. I hope that is not the intent. We can all rise together. One group or one person does not have to suppress another in order to thrive. We can work together to lift each other up, to help each other. I don’t believe God wants all this anger and fear. There’s a line from the Hunger Games trilogy – “remember who the true enemy is.” Fight problems not people. Fight poverty, homelessness, hunger, racism, prejudice and injustice. Don’t fight the people who have a different approach. Talk to the people who have a different approach. Maybe a better solution can be found that lifts up everyone. Fight the problem not the people. And do not be afraid. For God is with you. God has answers if we will listen.

We need to focus on God. Listen to God. Listen to other people. Then - do what we think is best. It’s a challenge. It is very easy these days to jump on a band wagon or a bumper sticker, or a political agenda from whichever side you lean – and not to see the other side’s perspective. Sometimes it is impossible to see the other person’s perspective. If you are talking white supremacy, I will never understand that perspective. But for many other topics, there is a whole lot of common ground we should be exploring. Most of the time God is not on one side or the other. God is on the side of love, care, concern, protection, provision, sympathy, generosity.

The scripture for today can and should guide our decision making. Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God. What does it mean to walk with God? To do the loving thing? To take the kind action? Think of others. Love one another. If we take a step back and look in the face of need, we see the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Look for the face of God in those who are in need. As Matthew says, when did I see you hungry? When did I see you afraid? God is in and with the person who needs justice. We must look for God in every one we meet, even in the person who is very different, even in the person with whom we disagree. We are not enemies. We are all children of God.

What that means in every situation I can not tell you. But the Holy Spirit can tell you. The Holy Spirit is with you to guide you each and every day in each and every situation. Listen for God’s guidance. Pray for God’s wisdom. Pray for God’s mercy. Pray for the people you encounter. Pray for those in need. Pray. Then move forward in faith. Move forward into whatever you believe is right. Move forward by God’s grace. Walk humbly with your God.

Amos 5:24;

But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.

Micah 6:8

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Matthew 5:43-48

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Matthew 25:31-40

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.

All the nations will be gathered before him,

and he will separate people one from another

as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats,

and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

Then 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;

for 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, I was naked and you gave me clothing,

I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

Then 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?

And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you,

or naked and gave you clothing?

And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?”

And 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.”

The Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God.