

Sermon “The Work of the Church # 4 of 4 – “Working compassionately—Peace and Justice”
Feb. 15, 2009 Rev. Thomas L. Hall, Sr. Pastor, Salem United Church of Christ, Denver, CO
Lectionary Micah 6: 1-8; Mark

We come now to our final theme for ourselves and for the church as we review and consider how we are to maintain a balanced spiritual life, and how the church has addressed the five traditions that will help us. These traditions we’ve considered include the contemplative or prayerful life, the place of scripture or God’s word, the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, and the living of a moral holy, wholesome life.

This morning we consider the fifth tradition of the church—working for compassion and peace and justice. The question that I use in considering the work of the church to help focus on this section is the following: *Is This A Place Where You Can Take A Stand?*

Probably nothing is so divisive as this discipline and practice. Wars have been fought over understandings of what justice and peace is about. The War between the States supposedly was fought over civil rights, and the concept of “freedom” for those who were different from us; divisive between family. Again, the conflict in Iraq is understood by some to be over “freedom” for the Iraqi people. Issues divide us. We use scriptures to substantiate our positions of racism, discrimination, the role of women in the church. We use tradition to keep things the way they are, so that we don’t have to change. We aren’t much different than the Pharisees who did the same.

Even within the United Church of Christ there is not any agreement over the shape and form of what it means to be a Just Peace or Open and Affirming, or Whole Earth church. What does it mean? How does it take shape? What does Jesus mean for us to be a compassionate, just, peace congregation? What is it that we are supposed to do and be in our spiritual lives that balances our involvement in God’s world?

Scriptures don’t always help us. They were and still are used to discriminate against groups of people. A better way to consider the work of compassion and peace, justice, open, affirming, wholeness, is the to look at the life of Jesus and his words.

The “compassionate life” or the Social Justice Tradition is an integral part of the life of God, the life of Christ, the life of the Church and of our lives. God is very much concerned with how we treat one another. We learned that last week. God made that clear in the 10 Commandments, and through the prophets and through Jesus Christ., who said “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul mind and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these. (Mark 12: 29-31. I think today, that we simply don’t love ourselves because if we did we would be doing more for our neighbors. That is an opposite view of what many think: which is that we care too much for ourselves and not enough for our neighbors. Well, if we did care for ourselves we would be doing more for others. We simply don’t expect much of ourselves, from ourselves and from our God. In short, our GOD IS TOO SMALL. WE DON’T EXPECT GREAT THINGS FROM OUR GOD BECAUSE THEN WE DON’T HAVE TO EXPECT GREAT THINGS FROM US.

Most people are familiar with the parable of the Good Samaritan in which Jesus is asked “who is my neighbor?” Jesus answers this by telling a story, a parable about a Samaritan who the Jews thought was unclean. This man stops to help a man who has been beaten and left to die. A priest and a Levite have walked by without bothering to help. Who is the one who was neighbor to the man. Of course, it was the Samaritan, and Jesus tells the listeners and us, “Go and do likewise.” This is a place where Jesus took a stand.

This tradition of expressing peace, justice, compassion, to love our neighbor has been present throughout the history of the church. There have been men and women who have dedicated their lives to the care of the hungry, the poor, the destitute, the sick. They have decided that *“this is a place where I can take a stand.”* St. Francis of Assisi gave up his wealth and worked with the poor and with all of God’s people to bring them hope and relief. The Salvation Army was started to help the poor and is now one of the most prominent organizations. Most of us know of Mother Teresa and the Sisters of Mercy who pick up the sick and dying in the streets of Calcutta and nurse them to health. Habitat for Humanity, World Vision, Heifer Project, , and numerous other groups exist to help people throughout the world.

Our own denomination, The United Church of Christ has taken sometimes controversial positions on issues that its members don’t like. They asked: *Is This A Place Where We Can Take A Stand?* The answer was “YES.” So did Jesus!

The lack of compassion isn’t limited solely to individual practice or cultural practices. It is in our institutions as well. In instances our social structures can actually oppress people in need by denying them access to a better way of life. The UCC is a strong advocate of education and helped establish colleges. Christ calls us to stand against policies that discriminate on the basis of race, creed, sexual orientation, economics, gender, governments that deny basic human rights; countries that oppress their people, and societies that inhibit the betterment of certain classes.

The Social Justice tradition has always worked for justice in all human relations and social structures.

We look to Jesus as our model, example and paradigm. He lived a life of compassion for the very “least.” He cared for the sick, ate with outcasts including prostitutes and tax collectors, forgave the sinful, spent time teaching and conversing with women. Yet never did his compassion undermine his sense of justice. He blended the two together. His love of God led him to grab a whip and drive out merchants in the Temple. He was passionate in his confrontation with injustice!

The basis for his passion was the same Bible we use. In Micah we read: God has show us the way to live, He has told you what is good and what the Lord requires of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6: 8)

But the foundation is even deeper than our scripture basis. It goes all the way back to God. The call to love finds its grounding in God’s love for us. For many people John 3:16 is important, but it also points to the fact that God loves all people and wants us to love one another in the same manner as God first loved us.

What we need to do is to see things from God’s perspective and not ours. While attending the second Academy for Spiritual Formation, I felt that I entered into the ‘heart of God’ particularly through the Psalms. God’s heart, I experienced, was hurting. God was crying. It was a difficult and emotional experience, but one in which I caught only a glimpse of the heart of God. When we look at life and all of it from God’s perspective, things are different. Every one is a child of God. We can’t neglect the outcast, the poor, the needy, the refugee. And neither can we serve everyone. We can’t help everyone. But we can help one or two or three. We can be a light to others, a beacon that says “you are God’s child, and we love you, care for you, and will work with you to nurture, encourage and build you up.

So how do we work: what is it that we can do?

In the coming week write a kind and encouraging letter. Tell someone how appreciative you are of their presence, work.

If you hear someone gossiping, engage in conversation to guard the reputation of others

Contact our Senators and Representatives, and express your concerns about an issue.

Take a stand on an issue, or become better informed.

Recycle your soda cans, newspapers.

Simplify your life!

Pray for discernment on some world issues, like child prostitution, economic inequality, our environment.

There are 5 ways to balance our lives in developing our spiritual life. There are five traditions in the church that help us focus on the balance.

Prayer, scripture, living a holy life, being open to the holy spirit and being compassionate challenge the church and us as individuals to be more Christ like. Whenever one of these traditions becomes overemphasized, there is unbalance. Look at your life, the life of this church and discern what it is that God is calling you to, and is asking: *Is This A Place Where You Can Take A Stand?*