

Becoming a Good Samaritan
“Seeking Justice and Reconciliation”
Isaiah 1:16-17, Luke 4:14-21

Back in the 1980's the TV show "Cheers," had a theme song called, "Where everybody knows your name." It celebrated the joy of being able to go someplace where everyone knows you, everyone cares, and everyone is glad to see you. There are places like that. I hope and believe this church is, more and more, becoming that kind of place. (By the way, remember to wear your name tags - that will help). But there are times when it isn't necessarily a plus for everyone to know you - particularly when they only think they know you.

This is the problem Jesus encounters in today's Gospel reading. He returns to his hometown of Nazareth, the place in which he grew up. Everybody there knew his name. It wasn't a big town. They also knew his mother Mary, his brothers and sisters, and Joseph, his earthly father. They had seen Jesus grow up. Although the Scriptures affirm that Jesus was without sin, they also affirm his humanity, and so he certainly went through the same ordinary, awkward stages of growing up that we all do. And the people of Nazareth had seen that. So, on one hand, their familiarity with Jesus had a positive side: people were glad to see him, and eager to hear what he had to say. On the other hand, it made it nearly impossible for them to receive him for who he truly was. To them, he was still the kid they'd watched grow up. And so, as the Gospels of Mark and Matthew indicate, the people had trouble placing their faith in Jesus. But Luke gives us an even greater understanding of what happened. He tells us that not only did they have trouble believing Jesus, but that they were enraged to the point that they wanted to throw him off of a nearby cliff. What could inspire this kind of rage?

Luke tells us that Jesus entered the synagogue in Nazareth and took a turn reading the scriptures. Rather than choosing a passage from the Torah - the Old Testament law - he chose a passage from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He read, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." This sounds pretty good, doesn't it? People would have liked the reading. Jesus is describing a time in which no one is trapped by poverty; in which no one has to languish in jail; in which no one is blinded by ignorance or physical illness; and in which no one is oppressed by another group or nation. He's describing a new world in which our suffering is alleviated and the human community is restored. He is describing a world in which God's justice is fulfilled and people are reconciled to one another - a world in which God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. But then Jesus went on to say something that really upset people: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Why should this be a problem? It's a problem for a couple reasons. First of all, it places the fulfillment of God's justice in the immediate present instead of some theoretical time in the future. If the scripture is fulfilled now instead of later, then it really upsets the status quo. How could it possibly be fulfilled when we see all the injustice and oppression and suffering around us? They'd wonder, "If the scripture is fulfilled in our hearing, then does that mean we have a responsibility to change?" The answer is yes. Secondly, Jesus evoked a

negative response because he directly tied the fulfillment of God's promises to himself and his ministry. To the people of Nazareth, this was just an outrageous claim. They knew Jesus. They KNEW him. Surely, he couldn't be God's messiah. And if he wasn't the messiah but was claiming to be, he was a false messiah and guilty of blasphemy. Consequently, they wanted to throw him off a cliff. But Jesus escaped their wrath and went on to continue his ministry elsewhere.

We are in the midst of a six-week series on "Becoming a Good Samaritan" in which we are exploring various ways we can fulfill God's commandment to "Love your neighbor as yourself." Today's readings point us to the fact that that justice and reconciliation are inseparable from love of neighbor and love of God; they are an essential part of the Kingdom of God, and the mission to which Jesus calls us.

As we reflect on justice and reconciliation, I'd like make an important distinction between two aspects of justice: The justice of retribution and the justice of distribution. Although there are political and economic ways of describing these ideas, I'm going to stick to the Biblical and theological dimensions of the issue.

Most people yearn for the justice of retribution. It is the kind of justice in which the evildoers are punished and made to suffer. Of course, those who advocate this type of justice are often quick to overlook their own sins, and focus on the punishment of people other than themselves. Very few people who see themselves as guilty hunger for justice to be done. Biblically speaking, we see numerous occasions in which people suffer terrible consequences for their sins. But we also find Jesus cautioning us about this kind of justice. He tells us that the old "an eye for an eye" approach is to be superseded by love for our enemies and a non-retaliatory approach. He tells us not to judge other people because, more often than not, we have plenty of our own guilt already. "Take the log out of your own eye instead of complaining about the speck in someone else's," he says. This doesn't mean criminals shouldn't be imprisoned or society protected, but Jesus is pointing to a form of justice that involves more than the punishment of sinners. Perhaps you remember the story of the woman caught in adultery, in which Jesus dissuades a crowd from stoning her by reminding them of their own guilt. They were seeking justice through retribution, and he talked them out of it. In part, I think he does this because **the justice of retribution does not lead to reconciliation.** The justice of retribution creates further bitterness and grudge holding and ultimately leads to further retribution and violence. This was as much the case in Jesus' day as it is in our own. Consider the way the Israelis and Palestinians seem locked in an embrace of death, in which each side is continually retaliating against the other for previous actions. They don't agree about who started it, and it no longer matters. They are stuck in a cycle of retribution and violence that is not going to lead to true justice or reconciliation for anyone.

The alternative to this is what we might call **the justice of distribution.** Both Jesus and the Old Testament authors saw God as being very concerned with this kind of Justice. When the Israelites entered the Promised land, God divided the land fairly among the twelve tribes of Israel. God allocated land by tribe and by clan with the provision that no one should ever permanently lose their land or family farm. Even if someone got in debt and had to sell their land, God made provision for a periodic year of Jubilee in which all land and property reverted to its original owners. When Jesus talks about the year of God's favor, it is this year

of Jubilee to which he is referring: the time when all debts are cancelled and everyone gets a fresh start. To be honest, it's doubtful that the Israelites ever obeyed this law. But in God's eyes, justice required a fair and even distribution of land so that all would have what they needed to live. Even though, in the course of regular business, people would at times gain and lose property, it should never get out of hand so that anyone became permanently impoverished. Throughout the Old Testament, the prophets regularly protest the Israelites lack of obedience to God and to this God-ordained just distribution of the land. In fact, the justice of retribution only kicks in as a consequence of their ignoring this first type of justice. Foreign empires conquered the Israelites and sent them into exile when they ignored God's distributive justice.

If you think about it practically, it is only the justice of distribution that makes reconciliation possible. If everyone has fair access to the things they need to live; if people aren't oppressed and victimized and discriminated against, they aren't going to be filled with bitterness and rage against others. And without the bitterness, anger and distrust to hold them back, they will be free to learn, to grow and to prosper. The human community itself will benefit as the divisions that separate us are minimized and our ability to cooperate increases. But as long as people feel victimized and mistreated; as long as people fear that others are going to abuse and oppress them; as long as people have no hope of a better life - reconciliation is not going to be possible.

Today. Jesus says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." The challenge that so enraged the people of Nazareth, and which may well enrage us, is that we, having heard the scripture, are invited to be Jesus' partners in making it come true. It's a perversion of Jesus' teachings to say, "There is nothing we can do except pray and wait for the second coming." Jesus said, "Today." And he charged all who followed him to live new lives of sharing, mercy and forgiveness, by which the Kingdom of God is made known in our midst. Our personal salvation is never separate from our responsibility to care for one another in community. Of course, the difficult thing about the justice of God's kingdom is that it can't be achieved through violence or compulsion. It isn't a government program. It is the turning of our hearts to one another in love and compassion because we have been transformed by God. Will we ever completely transform the world? Probably not. But we are called to be a sign of God's kingdom and to do what we can.

Every month I go to one of our churches on the West side of Dayton for a committee meeting. I travel from the beautiful suburban environment of Centerville to an area filled with abandoned homes and dilapidated buildings, in which the only businesses are run-down convenience stores and bars. There may be a few check cashing places as well. People flock to the church where my meeting takes place because they offer a free breakfast every Saturday for people in need. I come back here and think, "How lucky I am to live where I do and to have what I have." Sure, I stress about paying medical bills and my taxes and things like that. But I'm so glad to be here. Neither you nor I created the problem of intractable poverty that afflicts so many - whether right here in Dayton, or across the world. Then again, we didn't create the relative prosperity of Centerville either. These are movements that were put in place years before many of us were even born. But, that said, as followers of Jesus who seek the Kingdom of God, and are called to love our neighbors, we can't be satisfied with the current state of affairs. Our concern must be with justice for all people, and the reconciliation of all humanity. Poverty, ignorance, and oppression do terrible things to

people. Where the kingdom of God is present, that begins to change. Today the scripture is being fulfilled, because you have heard it, and because Jesus is at work in our lives. I invite you to consider this question, "What can you and I do to be a true sign of God's justice and reconciliation in this world?"

Today's New Testament lesson comes from the Gospel of Luke, which was written by an anonymous (probably gentile) author between 80 and 100 B.C. It tells the story of Jesus' life and ministry from approximately 4 B.C. to 30 A.D. To learn more about today's preaching text, check out the commentary on Luke in **The New Interpreter's Bible: Volume IX**. You might also look up Isaiah 61:1-4 so that you can read the passage Jesus is quoting. Also consider looking up "Nazareth" and "Jubilee, Year of" in the **Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible**. Both books are available in our Learning Resource Center.

For online study, you visit these websites:

www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/
www.followtherabbi.com

For more on justice and reconciliation you can visit these websites:

www.juststart.org
www.pcusa.org/peacemaking