

Sermon July 9, 2006
Rev. Missy Shiverick preaching
You Asked For It – Charity and/or Justice
Isaiah 42: 1-9
Matthew 25: 31-40

I do not know if you wonder how we decide which minister gets, or in some cases has to preach on a particular “You Asked For It” sermon topic instead of other ones, and the answer is that we kind of negotiate it in staff meetings based on what interests us or seems to be a challenge we would like to take on this summer. This year the topics were all challenging and I thought some of them were way too intellectual for me to tackle. So I chose one that is a struggle within the church and my ministry and personal theology. That is whether God calls us to do charity or promote justice in God’s name. The individual requesting the sermon asked, “why are so many people interested in charity – providing for immediate needs – and so few interested in justice – clearing up the causes of these needs?.” This is a good topic, one that has many Biblical references for a sermon, and clearly a topic for the minister on staff that also has a social work degree.

Listen to the prophet Isaiah, chapter 42: verses 1-9 as he clearly states the importance of bringing about justice in following God’s commandments.

And now listen to Jesus as he is equally clear on the importance of charity to those who are in need or have less than we do. Listen for God’s word in Matthew 25:31-40.

Charity and bringing about justice are the work of the faithful Christian. Look at Jesus’ ministry of care and concern for others. His was a hands-on ministry. Jesus healed the sick, fed the hungry, and spoke for the powerless. He preached clearly that we should not turn from the sick, but to minister to them. In the Sermon on the Mount he clearly used the beatitudes to show how those who do for others will be smiled upon by God. His parable of the Good Samaritan taught us that we are to extend care and hospitality even to the individuals society has forgotten. As his disciples, we are his hands and heart in the world caring for all of God’s children. I remember the song that I sang in high school and college at Youth Groups: “They will know we are Christians by our love.” Charity IS a part of Christianity.

But The Word of God in the Bible does not stop there. We are not just called to help others but to empower them as well. The Bible is full of stories of people not just helping individuals in social crisis, helping people in pain and need and offering food, shelter, and clothing, but changing the basic causes of injustice, working at the roots of injustice, socio economic and political sources of suffering and group oppression. Think of how Boaz helped Ruth in the Hebrew Scriptures. He did not feed her but empowered her as a woman to care for herself. He helped her to glean in the fields free from the anxiety and fear of being accosted by one of his employees. He provided a safe and fair place for her to work. An even more powerful story of justice in the Bible is the Exodus, where Moses led the entire Hebrew nation out of slavery and then appoints leaders to organize self government under the Law.

Pastor Louise gave me a chart which showed the continuum of acts of charity to service to justice. It lists the strengths and limits of the different forms of mission work. The strength of doing charity is that it is personal, simple, quick and deals with immediate needs. Charity also uses volunteers and promotes giving and provides for tax deductions. The limits to doing charity work are that it does not deal with the basic causes of the problems and is reactive and promotes one way giving. The recipients of charity might not become responsible for their situation but be dependant on the giver. Justice on the other hand engages people in self development and empowers people to meet their own needs. Working for justice forms partnerships and moves people to take political actions. However, working for justice is hard work and it requires time, risk taking, financial resources and it can create conflict and there is no guarantee of success. Clearly the charity VS justice debate is not an easy one.

You know the argument, do you feed the man to help him for one day or do you teach him to fish so that he can feed himself. Although I like the idea, the answer there is much more simplistic than the reality of the works and mission of charity and justice. The man does not just need to learn how to fish, but he needs the time to do it, the equipment to do it, and the accessibility to a fresh water source with an abundant supply of fish. Feeding him might be easier than changing all the barriers to his being self reliant. And what is he to do before that? Starve to death. No, he needs us to work in both camps. As a Social Worker, we think about the world in terms of systems. We all are affected by many systems which interrelate and work much like a machine. To change situations we look at what entry points we can work with, which system we can enter and change, knowing that if you change one thing, you make a change within the whole. This type of work is justice work but it can not be seen as the only social work needed. As you work to change the systems which prevent the individual from reaching his potential, you also need to aid him until he does. If people are hungry, while we work on changing the causes of hunger, we still need to feed individuals.

Another way of looking at the situation is the old medical parable. When a patient comes to you for help because of an illness that is causing him to bleed do you put a band aid on it and stop the bleeding or do you address the root of the problem which is the illness? Everyone has heard this old argument of band aid work vs. changing the causes of the illness. Clearly both need to be done. The system that is causing the illness should be changed, but clearly we do not want the bleeding victim to die before we have healed the illness. And we know that problems of justice will not be solved before we get at the societal or governmental roots of why they are there and work to change them. And changing a society or the powers that be is a lot harder and a lot longer term than putting a band aid on where the pain hurts or where the bleeding is. And we know that as followers of Christ, it is our place to be in both places. If we truly follow Jesus' teachings, the welfare of all God's children is our welfare as well. To quote The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., "As long as there is poverty in the world I can never be rich, Even if I have a billion dollars... I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be."

But this really is not the question that was addressed in the “you asked for it” sermon topic request. The question is “Why so many people are interested in charity, in providing for the immediate needs, while so few are interested in justice, in clearing up the needs?” I have been asking people this question for the past few weeks and have asked them what should be preached in the sermon. One member said that the debate is one that plays out in our charitable giving within our community as well. He said, just look at the work of United Way and Community Shares. They could be studied as organizations whose missions are either charity or justice work. And another person told me something that I have been contemplating since she said it. Pastor’s Assistant, Donna Evans, told me that to her the sermon topic was easy. She said she would preach it in two words.... “Jesus wept.” Jesus was both God and human and cried for us. If Jesus cared so much, then we should as well. It is truly something to meditate on as we think about our mission work in the church.

And these two words might be the answer to the debate. You see the work of the disciple is to bring about God’s incarnate word. We are to make God and Christ’s message alive to others. Christianity becomes existential and not just theory and private faith. We are to show God’s good news. We are to allow others to live and experience God’s Good News. And in our works of charity and justice we do just that. As we do mission work we BECOME Christ to others. We are doing Christ’s work and in the mission programs in our church, we are truly Christ’s body, Christ’s hands and heart. Others experience God through what we do. What a great evangelical tool! However, when we begin to do justice work is when we begin to see Christ in others. And to experience the living incarnate Christ, we need both charity and works of justice.

I worked at a large church in Columbus early in my ministry. The mission committee wanted to tackle a large mission program, but wasn’t sure what it should be. We invited people from the Hunger Project to talk to us about issues around hunger. Their presentation was compelling but very academic and did not put a face on this world wide problem. We decided that we needed involve the whole church membership in a hands-on feeding project that could touch all 3500 members of the church. We began serving a weekly meal to a homeless shelter in Columbus which was cooked at the members homes and then combined at the church where it was then taken down to the shelter and served each week by a DIFFERENT small group of the church. It was definitely an act of charity where we acted as Christ feeding a hot meal to a hungry person. God was incarnate within us. The men were still homeless, and would be hungry the next night as well, but we offered a band aid to the men’s struggles.

But the miracle is that within a year when the majority of the congregation had served the meal, people moved from wanting only to feed the men, to wanting to solve the problems that made them hungry. You see, God was incarnate again. The congregation of the church began to see God in the men they were serving. They were Christ to the men and the men were Christ to the members of the church. The scripture passage from Matthew began to make sense! And once that happened, the congregation became very active in all sorts of justice activities. The causes of homelessness were addressed.

What is the good news in this debate of Charity or Justice for us at Fairmount? The good news is that it isn't an either or but an and. Yes both should be done and more should be done of both types of ministry. We are to be Christ to other people, showing Christ's love and concern for others and we are to see Christ in others and work to empower them to be all that they can be.

“Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you into our homes, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you? And Jesus said, I tell you, whenever you did this for one of the least important of these, you did it too me.” Christ calls us into a ministry of a very real and living God. Let us pray that we can be the living God to others and see the living God in all of God's children. Amen!