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February 5, 2017
First Congregational Church UCC
Burlington, VT

How to make your bones strong: good topic for Super Bowl Sunday, don't you think? It'll take most of the sermon to get to that topic, though, so I'm starting with Black History Month and a famous statement from MLK, Jr.:

"The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

It turns out that King borrowed this phrase from a 19th century white abolitionist, Theodore Parker. It doesn't matter to me who said it first; but I claim it as a major theme in the Bible.

The point of today's scripture from Isaiah, and the point of this sermon, is simple: God calls us to assist in bending that arc of history toward justice, as much as we can, even if it's just a little bit.

Did you like the semi-dramatic reading of the scripture today? Instead of just hearing words, I wanted you to see that God has brought his people to trial, accusing them of injustice. The court scene is common in the Old Testament. In this story, the Israelites have just returned from 40 years' exile in Babylon and they face a huge task of rebuilding and recreating not just their buildings but their culture. They want God's help and so they stage a showy drama of sacrifice and ritual typical of the old Temple worship. They make an excuse in response to God's accusation against them: but it sounds like a pity party: "Oh God, we have so much to do, we really need you to hear us and help us."

In contrast the people seem incapable of hearing what God has to say to them about their failures. The defense they mount in the court is so weak:

'Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?'

How often do we get stuck in this kind of rationalization? Albert Einstein is apparently the one who first said: "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. " That seems to happen a lot in churches: we keep on doing the same thing over and over again, even though it doesn't seem to be working like it used to.

In response God pokes fun at these archaic temple rituals they've been doing – the same old, same old – as they pretend to seek God's favor: groveling in sackcloth and ashes with bowed heads. Is this the fast that I choose? God asks them, rhetorically. NO. Don't keep wasting your time!

And then God makes it explicitly clear what they ARE supposed to do through the preached words of Isaiah:

To loose the bonds of injustice,

to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free,

and to break every yoke

To share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them.....

I don't know about you, but I get chills when I hear these words. For many of the years I served in Berkshire County, our area conference minister was Peter Wells who, besides being a superb pastor, is a giant of social justice. He taught us something about this passage which I still have implanted in my head and it's this image: a continuum from charity to justice that moves along the following trajectory

(1)To loose the bonds of injustice

– an act of charity, something that doesn't actually change the position of a slave in bondage, just loosening the yoke, but at least makes them more comfortable and increases the chance of survival.

(2) To undo the thongs of the yoke and let them go free -

- this is an act of justice, to allow those who are enslaved or exploited to be free to do what they will, to work for themselves

But we're not done yet

(3) And lastly to break every yoke – that is, to destroy all the tools and instruments of slavery, symbolized by the yoke but actually including a wide range of institutionalized oppression – that is the pinnacle of justice. To get rid not only of the physical but also the social and cultural bonds which keep people from being free – that is the ultimate goal of all justice seekers.

How does God want us to emerge from a time of worship ?

As a weak and powerless bunch who say, “Oh, I can’t go on if I don’t have God’s pity every week. Poor me. Please fix for me, God. “ Um, that’s not what we hear in this passage. It seems as though God wants us to come out of worship as strong-boned warriors for justice. God wants us to be people who take every action based not on whether it draws us closer into safety, but on whether we are courageous assistants in that task of bending the arc of the moral universe toward justice.

Here’s a story about another very famous black man, the abolitionist, orator, and freed slave Frederick Douglass. Of course his deeds of justice happened well over 150 years ago, so it’s unlikely that we will see them happening “more and more” as was suggested at the prayer breakfast. Douglass had this to say about the power of religious ritual:

”I prayed for twenty years but received no answer until I prayed with my feet.” The bones of his feet and the golden tongue in his mouth grew strong enough to carry him into conversation with the president of the United States, Abraham Lincoln.

There’s a model of leadership for you. Just how can we make our own bones strong enough that we have the courage and the chutzpah to pray with our feet? That’s the prayer that we most need at this time in history: not one that hides us away on Sunday

morning, but one that takes us out into the streets and byways of our city, ready to act in every way for justice.

And then what ?

Isaiah says God appears strongly in our lives when we are in the midst of doing justice. Any hope to rebuild and restore ourselves as a community must come through seeking charity and justice for our neighbors. We are not the victims, and we must not be the victimizers. We, too, are called to pray with our feet. To stand up for justice in each and every circumstance. To become leaders in the struggle.

If... then: this is a conditional promise – remember your logic?

If we are the ones who stand up and walk for justice, then God will show up in our lives with all kinds of wonderful consequences.

Then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

Wow, Israelites, you can step into these big moccasins God has set before you. You can do it all, if only you start with the foundation of justice.

Oh wait, I forgot. I'm not Isaiah, and you are not the people of Jerusalem

It's a bit of an exaggeration to say that you are like those Babylonian exiles returning home to ruins. Sure, our building needs repair but it's not falling down. There are fewer of you than there once were, but you didn't have to live far from home. It's an imperfect comparison.

But if the moccasin fits, wear it. I mean, this church is not in the shape or size it once was. There is definitely some rebuilding and repairing and restoring to do, and it almost certainly won't "look" like it did before, at least in terms of what we do. The good news? Every time there is rebuilding, there is a new opportunity to lay foundations of justice.

If God brought us to court, would we be accused of a pity-party? Could it be said that we keep on doing things in the same way expecting them to work as they used to? Should we just wallow in the dust and ashes? Or can we take the model of Frederick Douglass and pray with our feet, working together to create a foundation of justice .

Benediction:

God sends us to be light to those huddled in the shadows of fear.
God send us to be salt to those whose lives and hopes lost flavor
God sends us out to bend the arc of the moral universe.
Go in peace to love and serve God.

(cue: they delight to draw near to God.)

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