

A COMMUNITY OF JUSTICE: God's Oneness with the Powerless

Text: Luke 4:14-21

Theme: The Lord is with the powerless and we are called to join him there.

Series: Get a Life...Give it Away

During the month of February we are examining what it means to be a servant people. Each week we are attempting to set in place tiles in a mosaic so that a picture of servanthood begins to emerge. The first tiles in this mosaic picture the truth that we are to be a servant people because we worship a serving God. Two Sundays ago we entered the upper room with the disciples on that eve of Jesus' crucifixion and watched how Jesus prefigured his own voluntary death on the cross by washing the feet of each of his followers. What we are to be for each other within the Christian community is Jesus on bended knee. We say to one another, "*Paraservirle*"—which is Spanish for "**in order to serve you.**" This is the mark of a Christian.

Last Sunday we added some tiles to the mosaic by seeing that God chose the church to be a servant community to the rebellious world that he loved. **"God so loved the world that He gave His only Son..." (John 3:16).** Yet how will the world know this? Through us. We are the means that God has chosen to let the world know of His love. No holy huddles here. We don't just cozy up around a warm fire place and hoard the love for ourselves. We are sent out into this cold and dark world where broken lives exist, because someone did it for us. George MacLeod, the founder of the Iona Community wrote prophetically, **"I simply argue that the Cross should be raised in the center of the marketplace as well as on the steeple of the church. I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified on altar between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves; on the town's garbage heap; at the kind of place where cynics talk smut, and thieves curse, and soldiers gamble. Because that is where He died. That is what He died for. And that is what He died about. And that is where church people ought to be, and what church people ought to be about."**

So last Sunday, I attempted to give us some guidance on where that place of service in the world might be. I said one of the ways we get in touch with our passion for service is at the intersection of the compassion of Christ flowing through us to a point of need, trouble or challenge in the lives of others. A key question is: Where does the compassion of Christ (his sympathy and outrage) in you intersect with the brokenness of people's lives?

This morning we are going to drill down even deeper into what this compassion looks like. The God of compassion has a particular heart for the powerless. The thesis of this message is that the Lord is with the powerless and where the Lord is we are called to be also. At the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, he entered the synagogue on the Sabbath and gave what we might call his inaugural

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address, stating what his administration is going to be all about. In absolute concert with and fulfillment of the Old Testament, especially the prophet Isaiah, Jesus' messiahship is about good news for the poor, freedom for prisoners, sight for the blind, release of the oppressed.

Read Luke 4:14-21

It has been observed that Christianity is the most material of all the religious faiths. By that it is meant that the incarnate Jesus fully assumed our physical, flesh and blood, bodily, or material existence. This material world counts. True, at the core of the human problem is a spiritual need for reconciliation between God and man, yet Jesus is also deeply concerned with those who are easily pushed to the edge of society and can be forgotten. The gospel is always concerned about life's most basic necessities-- food to survive, clothes for protection, shelter from the weather. In addition the Lord is not only concerned with the physical well being of individuals, but also with the forces set in play that leaves a high percentage of those in this world without these basic necessities. Throughout the Scriptures there is a prophetic message: the responsibility of those who have to provide for those who do not have; a condemnation of the oppression of the powerful, and an affirmation that God is champion of the powerless.

What we, who are the economically privileged of this world, often miss in Scripture is a pervasive emphasis that God identifies with and is the advocate on behalf of the powerless. Rick Warren has become a familiar pastoral figure to many of us because of his book, *The Purpose Driven Life* and regular appearances in the media. He has taken over as the number 1 evangelical spokesperson. Rick and his wife, Kay, have recently been taken by the plight of orphans, especially in Rwanda. In a recent *Christianity Today* article Warren said that he was recently driven to look at Scripture with "new eyes." He had missed so much of what was there about the poor. **"I found those 2000 verses on the poor. How did I miss that? I went to Bible college, two seminaries, and I got a doctorate. How did I miss God's compassion for the poor? I was not seeing all the purposes of God."** The second most prominent theme in Scripture is about God's heart for the poor and His response to injustice. The first is idolatry. The two are not unconnected. Idolatry leads to neglect and exploitation of the powerless.

Let's first get a feel for the breadth of this message biblically and then draw some conclusions as to what this means for us at Christ Church at this time.

One of the best ways to enter this topic is to examine the questions, biblically, who are the poor, and why are they poor? By my best estimation, there are four categories or reasons for poverty in Scripture.

1. Poverty is a chosen lifestyle for righteousness sake. Some seem to have been given a spiritual gift of being able to rid themselves of all but the necessities

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of life. (I am not one of them.) By their own choice they devote themselves solely to Christ and his identification with the poor. Paul speaks in I Cor. 13 of those who give all they possess to the poor. Those who enter Roman Catholic orders take vows of poverty, best illustrated by the diminutive nun, Mother Teresa, whose Sisters of Charity take care of the destitute, diseased and dying on the streets of Calcutta.

2. Poverty is the result of calamity. A natural disaster occurs and wipes out all physical possessions and means of livelihood. Through no fault of one's own one is a victim of forces beyond one's control. The year 2005 has to be the year in recent memory where this was dramatically brought home through an immense tsunami and three hurricanes on our soil. The obvious biblical example here is Job. The Scripture describes Job as **"the greatest man among the people of the East."** Instantaneously he lost seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, and seven sons and three daughters.

3. Poverty is the result of sin or laziness. Sinful behavior, such as drunkenness, can cost a job, family and friendships. Others are poor because they lack industry and drive. The apostle Paul addressed some in the Christian community in **II Thessalonians 3:11: "We hear that some among you are idle...Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat."** Paul punctuates this truth with the often quoted line, **"If a man will not work, he shall not eat" (II Thes. 3:10).** Tough love. In our competitive, free market economy where we believe that anyone can succeed with a little effort, we might believe that this is the primary reason for poverty. But it isn't.

4. Poverty is a consequence of oppression by the powerful. By far the predominate emphasis in Scripture and of greatest concern to the Lord is that poverty is the result of exploitation by economic and political manipulators. The Bible from cover to cover concerns itself overwhelmingly with a group identified as the needy, poor, oppressed, widows, orphans, and sojourners (strangers in the land). What these people have in common is that they can easily have their rights taken away from them. They are the vulnerable, weak, and defenseless. They are open to abuse and the prey of the powerful.

The Scriptures have an altered view of justice from the predominate image we cherish in our society. What is the picture of justice in American society? It is certainly blindfolded lady justice holding balance scales in her left hand and the sword of justice in the right. The law is blind according to this picture. Neither your station in life, your economic position, your privilege of birth, nor your position of power should give anyone an advantage before the even-handed law that is no respecter of persons. The evidence will be tried and weighed in the balance. We say that no one is above the law, not even the President of the United States. This is a beautiful ideal.

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The Scripture, on the other hand, is seemingly far more realistic about the bent nature of human beings, which pictures God not as even handed, but one who sides with those who are powerless. To egalitarian ears, this is a hard truth to accept. The theologian Karl Barth says it like this, **“God in no wise takes up a neutral position between the poor and the rich person. The rich may take care of their own future. He is on the side of the poor... Thus the Bible is on the side of the poor and the destitute. He who the Bible calls God is on the side of the poor.”**

What evidence do we have for this understanding of justice slanted toward the powerless? Let me pick up three themes that run throughout the Old Testament, especially.

1. God holds those who have to be responsible for those who have not.

Built into the structure of Israel's life was a safeguard for the poor. The law in Deuteronomy makes social provision for the weaker members of society.

“If there is among you a poor man, one of your brethren, in any of your towns within your land which the Lord God gives you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him, and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be” (Deut. 15:7,8).

At harvest time, the farmers were instructed not to glean all the olives from the trees or the grapes from the vines. They were to leave enough for the sojourner, fatherless and the widow. **“To be the people of God meant a life lived in a society regulated to make provision for weak and marginalized members of that society. It was not possible to be right with God without showing active concern for those who lacked means of support.”**

2. God vigorously condemns the oppression of the powerless. Of special concern to the prophets was how the courts could easily become an instrument of the powerful. To show how skeptical God is toward the abuse of power, there is in the prophets an equation of the needy with the “innocent” and the “righteous”. It is almost assumed that if someone is poor in the court system that they are probably innocent and potential victims of exploitation. In **Amos 5:12** we read, **“You oppress the righteous...and deprive the poor of justice in the courts.”** Righteous and poor are equated in Amos' thought. Anticipating how the courts could be misused, we read in the law in **Exodus 23:6-8**, **“Do not deny justice to your poor people in their lawsuits. Have nothing to do with a false charge, and do not put an innocent or honest person to death, for I will not acquit the guilty. Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds those who see and twists the words of the righteous”.**

The prophet Amos in the 8th century BC lived at a time when there was a great disparity between the wealthy and the poor. This poor fig-picker was sent to the

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divided northern kingdom of Israel. He thunderously brought down God's condemnation on the wealthy, **"You trample the poor and force him to give you grain. Therefore, though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them; though you have planted lush vineyards, you will not drink their wine" (Amos 5:11).** They got what they had by exploiting the labor of another.

Lily and I had the privilege of spending the summer of 1972 in Mendenhall, MI. Yes, this is the same Mendenhall Ministries, with which Christ Church is partnering. That summer we got to know John Perkins, the founder of Mendenhall Ministries, and a powerful voice for economic justice within the Christian community worldwide. He regaled us with many of his life shaping stories. John, an African American and native of Mississippi, said that very early in his life he received an economics lesson on how things work in this world. At age 11 in the 1940's he was away from home visiting relatives. He decided he wanted to bring a gift back to his family, so he hired himself out as a day laborer to a white farmer. At the end of a 12 hour day, he put out his hand to receive his pay and was awarded 15 cents for his efforts. It dawned on him how all this was set up. The farmer owned the plow, the land and the means of production. All John had was his labor. He also knew that the last black man to talk back had been chained to the back of a car and dragged through the streets. The voice of Amos obviously would not have been welcomed.

3. God is the champion of the oppressed. God hears the cries of the oppressed and delivers them from oppression. The nation of Israel was formed from a slave people. For four hundred years the Hebrew people labored under the whip of the economic tyranny of the Egyptian overlords. When they complained it was more work and less straw. They cried to God as their backs broke under the burdens they bore. Scripture records God's response to these cries, **"The Lord said, 'I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them'" (Exodus 3:7-8).** God chose a people who knew the chains of oppression. After the Exodus when God was establishing Israel as a nation, he instilled in them a sense of justice based upon a shared experience. In Exodus 22 the Lord says, **"Do not mistreat an alien or oppress him, for you were aliens in Egypt" (Exodus 22:21).** In this same context, the Lord says not to exploit a vulnerable widow or orphan, don't take advantage of those who are in need of financial assistance, for if they cry out to me, I will hear them, **"for I am compassionate."** Biblical justice is **"bend-over- backward"** compassion for those who are on the margin.

With blaring clarity, it is the prophet Amos who sounds the trumpet clarion call to justice.

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But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream" (Amos 5:21, 23, 24).

What is biblical justice? It sharing what we have with those in need, it is standing against the oppression of the powerful, and it a recognition that God Himself is the defender of the weak. God's justice is not even-handed, he aligns Himself with the dispossessed.

For those of us who are privileged, what do we do with this message of God's bias toward the poor? It means that it would behoove us to align ourselves with the heart of God. I think this means at least three things:

1. First, we need to ask ourselves, what is our attitude toward the poor and oppressed? As one who has benefited greatly from my privilege of birth, education, and opportunity to a level that the vast majority of the world cannot conceive, it is still all-to-easy to wrap myself in a blanket of pride, **"Look, what I have done with my own effort. Why haven't you done the same?"** I can all too readily look down upon those with less with a sense of disdain. *Pull yourself up like I had to do; nothing was ever given to me. Work is its own reward; poverty is your own fault.* It does not do any good, of course, to reinforce victimization or allow excuses from those who are struggling to better themselves, but at the same time based upon my position of privilege it is my responsibility to empower and fight for justice, which would remove inequities and barriers that would keep people of economic or racial groups oppressed.

So, the first issue is one of self-examination. What is my attitude toward God's powerless? Is my attitude the same as God's compassion or do I note a pride and maybe even disgust that I must repent of before God?

2. Know that God often uses the lowly to be the leaders in his kingdom. Jesus' inaugural message of liberation is addressed to those who will have particular receptivity because they know their need. **"He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor...freedom for the prisoners...recovery of sight to the blind...release of the oppressed".** One of greatest hidden revivals going on today, says Charles Colson, is what is happening in the prisons of our land. In recent weeks, I have had some thrilling first hand exposure to this truth. Because of visits to a friend in prison here in the area, I had the opportunity to get a sense of considerable Christian ministry taking place among those incarcerated. I have had the privilege of accompanying our own Gordon McLean, to the Sheriff's Cook County Boot Camp for young offenders. At any given time 256 youth of primarily teenage years spend 17 weeks in a military style training instead of having to serve a much longer sentence. I observed Christian ministry going on in an unrestrained fashion: Mentoring groups, bible studies, with many coming face to face with themselves and the

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Lord. Some of the sharpest young men who are our future leaders are finding new life in prison and have promise of powerful ministries on the outside. Just this week I sent a case of my book *Discipleship Essentials* to a prison in Indiana at the request of an inmate who was working with the Chaplain to establish discipleship groups. He had 12 men already signed up but needed the resources. When a team of us went to the Dominican Republic to be a part of *Kid's Alive* work with orphans, we were taken by the vision that the future leadership within the Dominican Republic would come through the lives of these rescued children who would be built into disciples of Jesus and leaders of their country. *The gospel is not only slanted for the powerless, it is from the powerless that our future leaders will come.*

3. Finally, the last implication of the Lord being with the powerless, is that we are simply called to show up where Jesus already is. Jesus says himself, if you want to find me, join me where I can be found. I am with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the imprisoned. In Matthew 25:31-46 Jesus paints the scene at the end of the age. In this scene He is no longer the suffering servant. He is now the exalted Son of Man who has come in glory. The curtain has come down on history and we have all been summoned before the throne. We are told in frightening fashion that we will all be separated into sheep or goats. Sheep on the right; goats on the left. What is it that will determine where you end up?

He will say to those on his right, **“Come, you who are blessed by the Father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.”** To the extent that we feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, invite in the stranger, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned, then we will be welcomed by Jesus. Why is this so important? Jesus said, **“whatever you did for the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”** Mother Teresa understood this as well as anyone has. She said of her ministry to the discarded of society, **“The dying, the crippled, the mentally ill, the unwanted, the unloved—these are Jesus in disguise. Sometimes a quite distressing disguise.”** She did not romanticize the difficulty of sharing life with the poor. In response to the question, **“What is God's gift to you?”** She said, **“The poor people.”** How are they a gift to you? **“I have an opportunity to be 24 hours a day with Jesus.”** She understood that this kind of charity is not condescending, but rather ascending: she was privileged to serve God himself in disguise.

Most of us are not even close to where this mighty little woman was. I know I am not. But the question is, where are we connecting with and putting our lives next to these whom Jesus says are the ones that he hangs around with?

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Each of us has to go through our own conversion process when it comes to having God turn our heart toward the powerless. Often it is a painful process of being broken. This is what happened to Kay Warren, wife of Rick. She became aware of the AIDS pandemic in Africa, and had to decide to tune it out or become personally involved. It was her call to a place of brokenness in the world.

Let me close with her words, **“I made a conscious choice to say, ‘Yes’. I had a pretty good suspicion that I was saying yes to a bucket load of pain. In that moment, God shattered my heart. He just took my heart and put it through the woodchip machine. My heart came out on the other side in more pieces than I could gather up in my arms. It changed the direction of my life. I will never be the same. Never. I can never go back. I am a seriously disturbed woman.”** May her tribe increase.