

“WALKING IN LOVE, PART 5: USING OUR VOICE (TO SPEAK FOR JUSTICE)”

Luke 6:20-26; Jeremiah 1:4-8; 22:11-16

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You may have seen these billboards around town over the past few months: a cute but sad looking little girl with an appeal for funds from an organization dedicated to helping children in need. The slogan across the picture reads something like this: “eliminating poverty one child at a time.” There’s a real heart-tugging appeal there. Who wouldn’t want to help a child? And this is an “ask” that’s pretty do-able, if not for everybody, for a great many people. A way to make a meaningful difference in at least one life. It feels personal; it puts a face on what often seems like a giant blob of a problem that we can’t get our arms around.

But it’s wrong. Not the work this group does. I feel pretty sure that their work helps many children, and probably changes some of their lives in significant ways. But what they ask us to believe is still wrong: poverty will never be eliminated “one child at a time.” Because that child doesn’t exist all by herself; she’s part of a family, a community, a culture that doesn’t prioritize the needs of children, an economic system that incentivizes low wages. Because poverty is created by a whole bunch of things – education, what kind of jobs are available, the cost of housing, health and mental health issues, discrimination, lack of community resources like public transportation, and more. Because poverty is systemic; that is, it’s deeply intertwined with the way our economy works, with public policy at all levels, with educational disparities, with enormous gaps in generational wealth and advantage, and with the realities of who has access to political power.

Some folks don’t want to believe these things. Many folks who live comfortably and securely continue to believe (with little evidence) that poor people are poor simply because they are lazy. We love a story about a person who started with nothing, worked hard, and made a fortune. And sure, that does happen. But that’s an outlier scenario, not proof that it can happen for everyone. Statistically, the fact is that the most accurate predictor of a person’s economic status is the economic status of his or her parents. It isn’t easy, or usual, for an individual to escape poverty. There’s much more at play than individual choices. I suspect that most of us understand that.

What’s more of a challenge for us, I think, is that an issue like poverty is, well, an *issue* – a big, complicated problem without a single straightforward solution, hard to understand, let alone tackle. Getting involved in working for change might feel like the right thing to do, but it offers far less immediate reward. It doesn’t give us that same sense of “loving our neighbor” that comes with directly helping a hungry person, or giving to an organization that promises to end poverty one child at a time. But this might be a situation where our feelings aren’t the best guide. If we truly love children, if we say we love our neighbors as Jesus asks us to do, then it must matter to us how economic systems and public policy and all those bigger issues impact them. If changing a policy or a structure or a system prevents the suffering of more people,

then how can we not want to do that? When I have a hard time seeing how supporting some change will really make a difference to anybody, I remember the late, great Illinois Senator Paul Simon, who said “Someone who sits down and writes a letter about hunger almost literally has to be saving a life.”

Love is what helps us remember that every “issue” including controversial ones we tend to shy away from, has *people* at its center – and they are often the most vulnerable of our neighbors. Perhaps love for “the least of these” is what can help us become more willing to use our voices to advocate for different public policy priorities, changed attitudes, a better safety net, a healthier environment. I really like what Dr. Cornell West said about this: “Justice is what love looks like in public.”

Speaking up about justice is not an easy or comfortable thing to do. It is, however, a very Biblical thing to do! Jeremiah was just one of the prophets whose call was to confront the powers of his day with message that justice for the poor and vulnerable matters to God. Jeremiah, as we heard, was somewhat reluctant to accept that call to a prophetic role. He didn’t feel gifted or equipped for it. And he probably knew it would be hard, and often unwelcome, if not met with out-and-out hostility. The sections of Jeremiah we heard today are just a tiny sampling of all that he has to say about the failures of justice that have become embedded in his society. Sometimes readers are put off by Jeremiah’s uncompromising indictments. For that matter, some of Jesus’ words startle us a little.

But the strong words of the prophets are a gift to us. They remind us that injustice is an affront to God, and that religiosity without concern for justice is an even greater affront. They remind us that any sacred vs. secular distinction between “spiritual things” and “social justice” is a false distinction. They remind us that God cares about people - including those who are mostly ignored by the powerful. And they remind us that we too have voices, and that we share this calling to use them to speak up for justice.

This calling asks a lot of us:

We must be willing to be in touch with the world’s pain. We must be willing to see that the suffering or injustice others are experiencing does in some sense belong to us. Writer and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel wrote “the opposite of love is not hate; it’s indifference.” The fact that we are called to love means that we are called out of indifference. We must be willing to see, and not turn away.

And we must be willing to put in the time and effort needed to get a genuine understanding of the ways injustices of various kinds harm our neighbors. We need to resist sound bytes and stereotypes and simplistic explanations. It’s a near-certainty that no matter what issue of injustice you delve into, you will learn some things that surprise you.

We must be willing to acknowledge uncomfortable truths – including that we have believed things that aren’t true, including the ways that we ourselves may be unknowingly a part of

supporting unjust practices, including that living more justly means giving up some things we have felt entitled to.

We must be aware of the privilege that we enjoy and the responsibility to use the voice it gives us carefully, respectfully, and humbly. It's so important that we not assume we know everything that someone else needs. It's important not to assume the right to speak for those who can speak for themselves. But at the same time silence can't be an option for us. We can never forget that silence is itself a statement – an acquiescence that violates the image of God in our sisters and brothers, and a rejection of the love we are called to.

We must be willing to accept that speaking out about justice – whatever the particular issue, whatever the context – will often be met with indifference or denial or hostility. We must be willing – and I think this might be the hardest thing – to hold in our hearts some love and compassion for those who reject justice, while holding firmly to our conviction that we have to care about justice because God cares about justice. It just may be that, sometimes, hearts and minds can change.

We must be hopeful, faithful, sustained by the Biblical vision of justice. We need to trust that even if we see no progress, God continues to work, in the world and in us.

Here are a few thoughts about ways we can use our voices for justice:

-We as people of faith - and love – can support and advocate for putting human needs at the center of all policy decisions, at every level. I can't imagine answering to God for the choices we've made with the excuse that "it was good for the economy," or that "it was just too expensive to right that wrong." We can ask questions about how vulnerable people will be affected. Ask about sustainability. Ask about who benefits most.

-We can figure out where we have been placed to make a difference. Ask yourself: what system or structure am I part of where I can make a difference? Workplace? A school? Your neighborhood? Local government? A pension plan? A community group? The church? Ask "how can I be part of making this more equitable?" More inclusive? More compassionate? More in touch with the needs of the vulnerable? More gentle on the earth?

-Each of us can prayerfully reflect on the different kinds of needs that arise from injustice. There are so many. What tugs at your heart? Hunger? Human rights? War? Climate change? Underfunded schools? The way pollution affects the poorest communities the most? Homelessness? Voter suppression? Access to health care? Mass incarceration? Refugees? Racism? A living wage? No, you can't get involved in every injustice. But you can dig deeply into something. Learn about it. Pray about it. Talk to others about it. Listen. Share what you've learned. Look for a way to get involved.

-Find and support an organization or two that works on those things that concern you most, and advocates for awareness and change and fairness and better policies. There are so many of them. Organizations like Bread for the World that focuses on public policy related to hunger.

Or a local organization like ISAAC that tackles a variety of issues like housing, transportation, and racism in our community. Those are both faith-based organizations that Westminster supports. But there are many, many such groups, large and small, local or worldwide, through which people like you and me unite our voices to advocate for everything from climate justice to human rights, from criminal justice reform to wetlands protection to violence against women. Whether they're faith-based or secular, they reflect a most Biblical concept: that justice is a community-based concept: not me competing against you for *my rights*, but a shared commitment to what *everyone* needs in order to flourish as a loving God intended.

-We should never underestimate the power of our voices and our example to influence people personally. From what you've learned, you can offer a friend a new perspective on the causes of poverty, or homelessness, or mental illness. You can share what you know about the Biblical emphasis on justice, or how you have felt God's call to a particular issue. Your openness to learning and to the need for change can be an example. You can be the one who gathers some folks together to do something or to be a united voice. You can help to instill a sense of compassion, curiosity, and fairness in the children in your life, building a foundation for the next generation's commitment to justice.

During these weeks of Lent, we have been reflecting on what it means to walk in love. Walking in love is a way of saying that we believe the life of faith is not all "in your heart" or "pie in the sky by and by." How we live in the world, day in and day out, matters to God. And it's supposed to be shaped by love, all of it. So we serve others, we forgive, we bless the world, we build relationships that nourish... and we use our voices to speak for justice. Amen.