

Justice Sunday 2008

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The First Parish in Wayland, Massachusetts

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It's not like this wasn't as busy a week as most, but somehow I ended up writing most of at least three sermons. The good news is, I won't give them all. The Rummage Sale can still go on.

But today is what the UU Service Committee hopes we will recognize as Justice Sunday and, first, a chance to recognize the importance of justice work, which is what they do nationally and internationally on our behalf, with our support; but also, second, a chance to focus on a theme they have chosen for special attention in any given year, such as this year, the cost of the war in Iraq. And then third, like many preachers, I am still reacting to the popular chastisement of one of our professional super-stars, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, Jr., a nationally-recognized champion of justice who it could be argued has been subjected to a lack of just treatment in the press in recent weeks. (The opposite could also be argued.)

Let us take up the importance of justice work first. While justice is also a term in the judicial system, being what we hope that the courts will provide, part of the civil structure of society, in religious tradition it has a broader meaning, and a powerful one. It means fairness in society in a broader sense than mere adherence to the letter of the law. It means people are treated fairly, are not persecuted, oppressed, or taken advantage of.

It is nowhere better conveyed than in the fifth chapter of the book of Amos in Hebrew and Christian scripture. Amos was one of the Hebrew prophets, people like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve so-called minor prophets like Amos himself who called on the nation and its people to reform their foolish, idolatrous, or unjust ways. Jesus would later preach in this tradition, and later still, Martin Luther King Jr. and Jeremiah Wright Jr., former minister of the church attended by Barak Obama.

I heard someone on a television news analysis this week contrast the prophetic voice of Jeremiah Wright with the prophets of old. Having no idea what he was talking about, the analyst distinguished between Wright, who has offered pretty far-fetched conspiracy theories on occasion, and the ancient Hebrew prophets, who the analyst contended did not do that. Ha! The analyst should have bothered to read the old prophets; some like Hosea and Micah far outdo Jeremiah Wright for paranoia, conspiracy theory, and

the like. Micah is fondly remembered for his gentle lines, “what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” [6:8]. But these modest aspirations occur in the midst of an extended tirade – also called a jeremiad -- about what he perceived as his country’s unjust ways.

Built into the inflammatory prophetic rhetoric, then and since, is a passion for justice, for fair treatment for all and a special regard for those disadvantaged: the widow, the orphan, the day laborer, the slow-witted, the gullible, the poor, all those without much power or privilege to defend against life’s exigencies without the support of the community at large.

And so we have Amos, “a rough shepherd and dresser of sycamore trees from a village south of Bethlehem. He burst in on the national shrine of the northern kingdom of Israel at Bethel, and spoke bluntly for God against the social ills of the nation” twenty-eight hundred years ago.

He said, “Hear ye this word which I take up for a lamentation over you, O house of Israel,” and then he predicted great ruin for the nation, as was the custom of prophets, if they did not heed his admonitions. He said, “For thus saith Jehovah unto the house of Israel, ...

“Ye who turn justice to wormwood, and cast down righteousness to the earth, seek him that makes the Pleiades and Orion, and turns the shadow of death into the morning, and makes the day dark with night; that calls for the waters of the sea, and pours them out upon the face of the earth (Jehovah is his name); that brings sudden destruction upon the strong, so that destruction cometh upon the fortress.”

So Amos believes his admonition comes from the very Creator and Ruler of the Universe, even if society hasn’t welcomed his message yet. “They hate him that reproves in the gate, and they abhor him that speaks uprightly,” he reports.

But what was it Amos was declaring on behalf of Jehovah? It was, “Forasmuch therefore as ye trample upon the poor, and take exactions from him of wheat: ye have built houses of hewn stone, but ye shall not dwell in them; ye have planted pleasant vineyards, but ye shall not drink the wine thereof.

“For I know how manifold are your transgressions, and how mighty are your sins -- ye that afflict the just, that take a bribe, and that turn aside the needy in the gate from their right .

“Seek good, and not evil, that ye may live; and so Jehovah, the God of hosts, will be with you....

“Hate the evil, and love the good, and establish justice in the gate: it may be that Jehovah, the God of hosts, will be gracious....

“I hate, I despise your feasts, and I will take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Yea, though ye offer me your burnt-offerings and meal-offerings, I will not accept them; neither will I regard the peace-offerings of your fat beasts. Take thou away from me the noise of thy songs; for I will not hear the melody of thy viols. But let justice roll down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream.”

That last line is one that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., used so effectively in his address at the March on Washington, standing in front of the Lincoln Memorial, addressing the huge crowd. It is used in one of the hymns we often sing, “We’ll Build a Land.”

Jeremiah Wright expresses the same social passion as Amos, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Jesus when he speaks, embodying the prophetic biblical tradition. As you might imagine, as a fellow preacher I am feeling somewhat defensive about Mr. Wright, who did a great job addressing the UU clergy before a recent General Assembly. He is bright, entertaining, insightful, and passionately compassionate and justice-seeking in outlook, even if a few of the positions and language that have been publicized recently are not to his credit. I am thinking of the charge that “the government invented the HIV virus as a means of genocide against people of color.”

Yet most of the several stands and statements for which he has been condemned are not at all shocking or even controversial to me, albeit he expresses them at times in the heightened rhetoric of the prophetic tradition as it manifests itself in some preaching by black Christian ministers, especially older ones. If there is a sermon snippet that you have heard and been upset by, like when he said “God damn America” three times, for injustices that persist, please go online and listen to the whole sermon – it is forty minutes of energy and strength, knowledge and error, conviction and hyperbole, and right in the tradition of Micah and Amos. In fact, he says, after the first of the three times, “That’s in the Bible.”

Nearly all the statements that members of the press have claimed to be shocked by are neither altogether false nor novel. It was not Wright who said, “The greatest purveyor of violence in the world today [is] my own government.” That was Martin Luther King, Jr., and we have a holiday to honor him.

The noted religious historian Martin Marty noted the “incomprehension and naiveté of some reporters who lack background in the civil rights and African-American movements of several decades ago,” which he found evident in the reporting on Wright.

The senior minister of the church attended by the Clintons while they were in the White House released a statement defending Wright and decrying his treatment in the press that said in part, "To evaluate his dynamic ministry on the basis of two or three sound bites does a grave injustice to Dr. Wright, the members of his congregation, and the African-American church which has been the spiritual refuge of a people that has suffered from discrimination, disadvantage, and violence."

And yet you rarely hear me take up the cudgel and wield it in the prophetic manner I obviously admire. Yes, I return again and again to the importance of our manifesting our religious values in action, individually and together. But I have given up the effort to emulate the style of the Hebrew prophets long ago, even as I share some of their outlooks and goals. As a parish minister, I don't think berating is an effective technique, or at least not one that suits me well.

So I have a less confrontational message when it comes to the cost of the war than the Service Committee may have hoped me to offer. Here goes:

War is a terrible thing and the cost of it a tragedy, the cost in lives, in turmoil, and in money that could be spent on things that enhance life rather than things that destroy it.

I think I can avoid the appearance of partisan bias here – John McCain made the same point this past week, as have the Democratic candidates. McCain said, "I despise war." In doing so, he stands in a long tradition on the part of the military, those who know better than most and often first-hand the consequences of war.

The Service Committee decided this year the theme it would suggest for the annual Justice Sunday it promotes in our congregations would be "The Cost of Iraq: Who Pays the Price?" The price is paid by our soldiers, by our institutions and infrastructure that go under-funded, by the Iraqi people, by our children and grandchildren who will still be paying off the debt.

War is not a good thing, and this one has not gone well for many, who paid and go on paying a high price.

But maybe you have heard that before. Maybe you would just as soon I spared you another accounting of the toll the war has taken, the other uses to which the money could have been spent. Although if you go to the website uusc.org you will find a link to a two-minute clip from the American Friends Service Committee that notes that the \$720 million a day the we spend on the war would provide 6,482 homes, 84 new elementary schools, etc. A day. The clip ends, while you were watching, another \$691,000 was spent on the war.

But I think the news has gotten out that the war has taken, is taking, a heavy toll.

That is not to say that the Service Committee should not be trying to keep the issue alive for discussion, for stands and decisions. Heaven knows, it is easy enough almost to tune out the war. Skip or ignore that story or two a day in the papers or on TV – a recent study of one TV news channel found reporting on the war accounted for 4% of the station's on-air content. And it can seem that it has been the same few stories year after year, most of them terribly sad. It can all blur.

No doubt a number of you, like Carol and me, watch the names, faces, ages, and home towns of our servicepersons killed in Iraq or Afghanistan at the end of the evening news on WGBH. Some conservatives have asserted this is an anti-war ploy, and I suppose it could have that effect on some. But for me, it helps me not forget what is going on.

And if some people watching become more fired up to end the war, others could as easily get fired up to honor the memory of the dead by redoubling our effort to make this war a victory.

That is true of the answer to the Service Committee's question for today as well. Yes, the price for the war is high and paid by many, as McCain just said, before he went on to say how important it was to him, therefore, that we stay and fight until we prevail – just as for many of us, myself included, the high cost adds pressure to extract ourselves as expeditiously as can be done.

So good for the Service Committee to use some manner of influence to encourage us to stay engaged with the issue of the on-going war, and do whatever we can that would seem to move matters in the direction we want, even though there is not consensus what that direction should be. But there should be consensus we should try not to forget that we are paying mightily to put the lives of others in peril.

But while none of us is going to stop the war or cause its success, though we may have an effect and should try, in the meantime we can all do things closer at hand that count on the side of justice. Discouragement on every side about the war should not depress our level of social engagement. There are stands to be taken on matters in the state, in the towns, where we could take sides for what we perceive as the good and the true. And help. And help, like the librarian of Basra and all her supporters [from the morning's story].

There is an abundance of ways of pitching in – starting today with the rummage sale, part of whose profits go to support charities and the church. We can join and support the Service Committee. And before you know it,

we will all have a chance to be part of the Interfaith Hospitality Network volunteer team, helping the homeless.

We may not be the best at burnt-offerings, meal-offerings, and solemn assemblies (though we are not going to give up our viols or any other music). But let us ever continue in works of fairness, of mercy, of love, and of justice. Even Amos might think we were doing our part. Amen.