

Chalmers United Church
March 18, 2018

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Good Morning.

How happy I am to be with you this morning.

Thank you for the invitation to speak on justice
A topic dear to my heart.

But to you in the United Church,
It has also been a subject dear to your hearts.

I have always admired the United Church
For its stance on social justice.

You have a wonderful Social Gospel
That is older than the official Social Teaching in our church.

So this might be like
Speaking to the choir,

But I suppose
We can always take another shot in the arm, so to speak, of justice

Perhaps I'm speaking more for myself.

You know when I first began to prepare for this reflection I misread the Scripture passages on Lynn's email. I thought I read the 1st reading was from Jeremiah 3.

What a tough reading chapter 3 was.
It was all about Israel's unfaithfulness.

Jeremiah had lived through one of the most troubled periods of the Near East.
He witnessed the fall of a great empire and the rise of an even greater one.

The political dependence on Assyria brought a resurgence of idolatry in the blending of the Mesopotamian astral gods and the Canaanite fertility deities.

This religious and political situation persisted – with its ups (during Josiah's reign) and downs, (pretty well the rest of the time) but through it all a number of people remained **faithful to the covenant**.

It's in the midst of these political conditions God calls Jeremiah to be prophet to Judah and to the nations.
His prophetic ministry lasted 40 years and his interventions were numerous.

And because the **Word of God is a Living Word**,
Jeremiah is talking to us, as well, today about our unfaithfulness.
Serious unfaithfulness not only individually
but more importantly, I think, our unfaithfulness
as a people, as Christians, as a "first world" nation.

In Chapter 3 he compares out infidelity to prostitution and our repentance, a pretence:
"you refuse to be ashamed."
You take your sin "so lightly."
"You have done all the evil that you could."
What a condemnation!

Thank God, there is more.
Unbelievably more!

"Return, faithless people," says the Lord.
*"I will **not** look on you in anger for **I am merciful.***
I will not be angry for ever....
I will heal your faithlessness."

“Only acknowledge your guilt and ... return, O faithless children.”

I remember a Retreat Director saying to me years ago,
“Pauline, never look at your sins, your unfaithfulness,
without also reflecting on and holding the merciful love of God.
Never look at one without the other.”

I never forgot that advice.

We must hold **both polarities** in the creative tension of our faith in order
Not to be overwhelmed with evil.

Not to succumb to our sinfulness - individually and globally-
is a great gift
is a great grace.

Then, just a few days ago I reread Lynn’s email.
The scripture reading is not from Chapter 3 but 31!
What a beautiful reading this one is.

This chapter is all about the **joyful return of the exiles from Babylon** –
The people who survived the sword and found grace in the wilderness.

In this chapter we hear God saying to the faithful remnant and to us this morning:

*I have loved you with an everlasting love.
I have continued my faithfulness to you.
I will build you up.
You shall dance and make merry with your tambourines.
You planters shall plant and enjoy your fruit.*

*I will make a **new covenant**
I will write it on their hearts
I will be their God and they shall be my people.
They shall know me –from the least to the greatest-
For I will forgive their iniquity, and **remember their sin no more.***

No better Good News than that!

Some would say this is the **climax of Jerimiah’s message** and
even the **summit of all prophecy.**

It certainly is the healing of the wounds of Chapter 3 as well as
The consolation of the suffering exile and the exuberant joy of their return.

It is the only time that “New Covenant” is used in the Hebrew Scriptures.
Both Covenants are God- centred.
The people are the same people.

The newness is not found in essentials
but in the realm of its realization and of its means.
It will not be broken for all will know and be faithful because it is written on our hearts.

Therefore, the newness is not found in laws,
but through **interiorization of commitment** with the primacy of **interior values**
such as love, knowledge and obedience to God
conditions of true practice of religion.

Basically a reality of love and mercy.
The covenant is eternal and cannot be broken
as we are given a **new heart and a new spirit** as Ezekiel will prophesize.

If we look at **Psalms 51** we also see the same attributes of God.
I love this psalm.
I want it read at my funeral, or at least read to me as I am dying.

*“Have mercy on me, O God,
According to your steadfast love;
According to your **abundant mercy.**”*

Our God is not a stingy God,
Our Provident God is about **abundance** – especially abundant mercy and love –
for All –
not just you and me –
but for ALL!.
Sometimes hard to get our heads around that.

The psalmist continues:
*“Indeed I was born guilty, (sounds like a little ‘cop out,’ doesn’t it?)
A sinner when my mother conceived me.”* (Yeah, blame it in them.)

Yes, we’ve been born into a sinful world, but
We have also been born into a wonderful world –

A world full of **beauty and goodness** and with an awe of
our lakes and rivers,
our forests and mountains,
our meadows of wild flowers and our animals and trees
and our beautiful children.

But look what we are doing to it all though our irresponsible activity.
We're prostituting creation with our pollution.
We're destroying people through
exclusion and poverty and war.

Therein lies out sin.
Our global greedy sin!

And the psalmist continues:
*"You desire truth in my inward being;
Therefore, teach me wisdom in my secret heart...
Let me hear joy and gladness..."*

*Create in me a clean heart, O God,
And put a right spirit within me.
Restore to me the joy of salvation,
And sustain me in a willing spirit."*

This is no fake prayer.
This is a Good News prayer.

God desires truth and so do we – in our inmost being,
"So," we demand, "**give it to us,
Teach it to us.**"

Well, listen, be still,
I will give you understanding **in the secret of your heart –
where wisdom and truth reside.**
Deep within you.

Let us open our eyes and our hearts and our minds.
Be aware of our own goodness and
the original goodness of others and all creation.

Through the author of Hebrews we hear God say, not only to Jesus, but to us:
*You are my **Beloved Ones.***

*Today I have begotten you.
I claim you as my own.
My love and my mercies are fresh for you each morning.*

Lastly let us turn now to the Gospel passage according to John.

It is a sad and serious passage.

Well, it's Lent, after all –

a time of serious thinking, fasting, prayer, reflection, and almsgiving.

A time for waking up to see what is.

In this Gospel Jesus' soul is troubled.

He gets a serious sense that **his hour has come.**

As we look at our world today with its injustice, environmental degradation, poverty, war, lies, great inequality..... **is our soul not also troubled?**

Are we, too, not getting a sense at times that **our hour, too, has come?**

The mystery of evil in our world at times is overwhelming:

- Severe climate change we are told is the “new normal.”
- The Doomsday Clock has moved ahead by another second or two. This is serious stuff. Yet Canada won't even sign the nuclear ban test treaty. Nonviolence is considered unrealistic.
- Poverty – the source of all evil and war with its accompanying refugee problem is big time today.
- Human trafficking of women and children. Human slavery isn't over yet.
- Food banks can't keep up to the need – so they have restrictions

And we through excessive time and money spent on distractions

Are inclined to dull these big issues

turning us into blind and lame ostriches

So, what are we being called to do?

What is God asking of us?

Let's look at how another prophet of old

Answered that question:

What does God ask of us?

Only this: he says

To seek or learn kindness/to love tenderly

To do justice

To walk humbly with our God.

Kindness and respect are so important.

I have to pray for these gifts daily.

Learn Kindness:

Do you remember that wonderful, fiercely intelligent and immensely compassionate woman and challenging activist,

once called the conscience of Canada, June Collwood, who had done so much with her life?

Just before she died a young journalist who was interviewing her asked if she had any regrets.

After a thoughtful pause, she simply answered, *“I wish I had been more kind.”*

Learn Kindness.

Do Justice – 2 strong words full of action and attitude.

You know **Justice is different than charity.**

Charity work is very popular; it receives high praise.

Justice, not so much, yet both are needed.

On our coat of arms are the words, ***“A heart dedicated to charity.”***

There is no end to the charity work you soon discover.

Keeps you busy – so busy in fact that we didn’t stop to think, WHY.

For example, Why are they poor, hungry, sick, begging on the street?

Good as they are,

our great food-providers, services and donations to charitable organizations are noble endeavours, but they assist people for the short term.

THEY DO NOT PROVIDE A SUSTAINABLE SOLUTION TO FOOD and housing INSECURITY in our community.

This kind of service is one of **CHARITY** and charity is a stop gap.

Nevertheless, it is essential today.

It is actually a privilege to give; but it “doesn’t cut it.”

We don’t give alms to the poor as gift, but as a **right**.

Indeed, it was St. Vincent de Paul himself who said
that when giving charity to the poor we should ask their forgiveness.

Why?

Because we may give them a bowl of soup or a grocery hampers.
But they give up their dignity.

I don't mean to exalt the poor.

Sometimes the poor can be hard taskmasters.

One **can be** "taken."

But one shouldn't be surprised by it.
They've had to learn to take care of themselves
in different ways that we do.

I remember one time I had listened to a sad story a young fellow told me that he needed
works boots so we went out together and
I brought him new work boots,
only to discover that he had told the sad story to others – one being this UC community
who also had gone out and bought him new work boots.

I was so **disappointed in him.**

In fact, I was downright angry.

I went storming out of my office and tripped upon a bookmark
that was lying on the floor.

In beautiful calligraphy, over equally beautiful water colours,
were the words from Luke's Gospel, "Give to anyone who asks."

AND I HAD MAKE that bookmark.- Good on you, Lally!

It rather put me in my place.

They can be clever and resourceful but

They shouldn't have to survive in devious kind of ways.

One night a couple of years ago in these frigid temperature

I met a man who asked for 75 cents.

I talked to him for a while and asked him where he was planning to stay for the night.

He didn't know.

Ryandale was full, and

he had used up his time at Harbour Lights

(One can only stay there 5 consecutive nights in a week.)

I told him about In from the Cold

and said that if he caused no trouble

they wouldn't turn him away

but he said they had run out of mattresses the night before.

Of course, I gave him money.

Our excess, at least, belongs to God's poor

**It is degrading to ask.
It's work, too – degrading work to beg.**

Some would say we shouldn't give to street people..

We should give instead to charitable agencies

Because beggars might misuse our money.

They might buy booze or drugs with OUR money – **whose money???**

Is this not “Conditional Charity?”

“ Conditional Justice?”

Is this not just like the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs)
with which our international aid is tied up?

This morning I was reflecting on this and thought,

Why even the universe doesn't do this to us.

“For the sun shines on the just and unjust alike.”

Charity is a mutually blessed virtue ...

It blesses those that give and those that receive;

BUT

***Charity gives cold comfort in the long run
if nor accompanied by justice.***

Hidden under our very acts of charity is the danger

That we will accept hunger and homelessness as normal

that we will unknowingly perpetuate

a system that keeps the poor poor.

If charity doesn't solve the problem, what is the solution?

The real cause of poverty is

A lack of true awareness,

Our greed expressed in excessive consumerism,

Unjust trading practices and

Unjust systemic policies and structures.

The real cause is the lack of political will to provide justice for all.

As my friend, Sister Peggy Flanagan stated

It is good to give to those less fortunate, near and abroad,

the crumbs that fall from the table of plenty,

but there will come a time when the poor around the world

will rightly demand a seat at that table.

That is only just.

One of the greatest learnings for me when I went into our Justice and Peace Office years ago has been that

POVERTY – the greatest social evil in our world today affecting health, education, family life, peace in the world - IS POLITICAL

- Not necessarily the result of individual moral failure
- Or poor life choices entirely
- But of governments and corporations that idolize the market and put profits before not only people but indeed before all creation.
- **It is not by chance that people are poor.**

SO, ... WE HAVE TO BE POLITICAL.

- **Be attentive - Know what's going on**
- **Be intelligent- Make connections**
 - How come we have such poverty in such a wealthy country as Canada?
- **Be a critical thinker - Ask why**
 - We used to when we were 2 years old
 - Try and find answers today
- **Be responsible - Get involved**

After all, we belong to a community.
So let us be a responsible, contributing citizens within that COMMUNITY...

And a community or society is always judged by how it treats its most vulnerable, its poorest.

- **We need to learn to be a voice for the voiceless**

Mahatma Gandhi says,

“No matter what you do will seem insignificant; -what was more insignificant than our weekly Friday Silent Vigil - but you must do it and be the change you wish to see in the world.”

Dom Helder Camara,
courageous and progressive former archbishop of Brazil and
advocate for liberation theology,
a contemporary prophet, I'd say, once said,

*“When I feed the poor, they call me a saint;
when I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist.”*

“Do Justice,” says the prophet.
And what is justice????

Kids know what justice is. It's Fairness, of course.
Giving back what belongs to another.

Until all in our land
 have meaningful employment,
 are suitably clothed,
 eating well,
 living in a decent place called home, and
 treated with respect no matter the colour of skin, orientation or religion,
there is no justice in our land.

Jane Addams, the first American woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize said,
*The good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain
until it is secured for all of us and incorporated into our common life.*

**Justice is all about right relationships.
And it's about truth.**

I had a friend, who was giving a talk somewhat along these lines and
 she was struggling with the word, "Justice."
 She didn't like it. I could tell.
So she wanted to use a "softer" word like compassion.
 When all of a sudden a woman jumped up from the back and said,
 "When I can't feed my kids AND pay the rent,
 it's not your compassion that I want, Sister.
 It's justice!"

You see the difference.
Poverty is a nightmare!
 Justice asks the tough questions.
 Justice demands the truth.

And Justice is work – hard work – often an unpopular work!

**Prophets of old and the prophets of today call us
 to read the signs of the times
 in the light of the Gospel
 to act with courage, faith, righteous anger and nonviolence.**

These folks have a knack of exposing the cracks or tears in the social fabric,
 letting the light of the Gospel come through,
 and envisioning new ways of mending these tears and cracks.

And we must not become discouraged.

Remember Great Prophets failed, so to speak:

Moses never saw the Promised Land

Yet he led his people in the direction and they arrived

Jesus never saw the fulfillment of his Kingdom

Yet his followers continue to live and struggle for it today.

Ghandi never saw India at peace

Yet the way of nonviolence is the only way.

Martin Luther King Junior never saw his dream come true

Yet civil rights is the law today.

AND THEY ALL WALKED HUMBLY WITH THEIR GOD!

It is important for us to remain in the struggle as God's Beloved Ones.