

The Weightier Matters of the Law
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
March 15, 2009
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture:
Amos 3:21-24
Micah 6:6-8
Matthew 23:23

Did you see the news video of Bernie Madoff walking into the Federal Courthouse in Manhattan on Thursday?

You've heard about Madoff, I'll bet. For decades he took billions from trusting investors, mostly Jewish, and reported that he was investing the money and earning them unusually high returns. It turns out it was all a scam, a Ponzi scheme, as they call it, in honor of the man who perfected this kind of scam, a man named Ponzi.

There were no investments. All the money, gone, at least the most of it that Madoff didn't hide in Swiss bank accounts. The nest eggs of hundreds of thousands of individuals' and families,' gone. They included the family of Charlotte Rabbi Judy Schindler, a friend of our family's, who, I thought, modeled true faith in how she reacted to the news. Let's focus on all that we still have, she said in the paper, and move forward.

Not everyone is full of such grace, of course. So when Madoff walked the 60 feet from his car to the front doors of the courthouse, out in plain view, he had arranged protection, two guys, who together probably weighed 500 pounds, one at Madoff's right arm and the other at his left.

It came out later that Madoff had a bullet proof vest on under his expensive suit. I suppose he worried that one of his scammed investors might try to get justice the old-fashion way, even before Madoff got to jail.

That was just one example in the last couple of days of how we see the issue of justice in our world. When you really look and listen for them, similar examples abound.

I heard a radio news report Thursday about how work-at-home scams are hitting more and more people who are looking for ways to make a living in these tough economic times. Same song, different verse. The scammers take money to "set up" people in a business that then never really earns any money.

"There is a special place in hell" for these scammers, said a local representative of the Better Business Bureau. For the record, that is the theology of justice of the Better Business Bureau, not the church.

And then Friday morning, the paper carried a small item about a third example of how justice is done, sometimes in unexpected ways. This one brings a smile to your face.

It seems a drug dealer in Rosemont, Minnesota was being chased by the police. He threw his marijuana stash, his scales and a big bag of cash out the window of his car to hide the evidence. I suppose he hoped he could come back and find it if he could outfox the cops. But instead, a 16-year old with a learning disability found the sack of \$18,000 and started giving the cash out to others, a \$100-bill at a time. He gave away \$11,000.

“He’s a good kid,” said the sheriff. “He was just trying to help people in need.”

The story didn’t say whether the drug dealer went to jail. But, in another way, justice was served that day in Rosemont, Minnesota.

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As you may know, we at Caldwell are taking a deep look at the subject of justice and the church this year. We will do it through various ways at various times throughout the year. The Adult Sunday school class just wrapped up a 6-week look at the prophets of the Old Testament, who had a lot to say on the subject on behalf of God.

Tonight at 6 p.m. here in the sanctuary, we will host the first of a series of public forums examining just what justice means here in the early 21st century to people of faith. Three outstanding leaders, representing national, state and local perspectives, the church, secular philanthropy and local ministry to the homeless, make up our panel and I hope you will come.

As the Red Bus Sunday school class wrapped up its look at the prophets, we asked ourselves: What are the different kinds of justice we see in the world?

Vigilante justice, one person said, the kind Charles Bronson handed out in the movies and that Bernie Madoff apparently feared. Legal justice. Environmental justice. Economic justice. Justice in education. Justice as represented in our society’s institutions.

So, we continued, where does the church fit in? What is God’s idea of justice?

I’ll be the first to say that justice was not always a mainstay of my own Christian pilgrimage. Perhaps I am not the only one. Our Christian agendas may have been built much more on the cornerstones of faith and hope and love and caring for those in need, in God’s name.

This congregation does a marvelous job of caring for each other in the church. When one of us is in need, we turn out and go to work. Baby sitting, cooking meals, visiting sick and shut-in members, giving rides and, of course, praying. Your care for others among us impresses and inspires me every week.

And, you might say, we don't stop there. We do an enormous amount for those beyond our doors. We build Habitat Homes and cook meals to be served at the men's shelter. We provide below-market office space to a non-profit organization that provides after-school activities for kids. We've set aside an office for free use by a community counseling agency.

We raise and give thousands to the food banks for the hungry as well as bringing in canned goods. In the next few weeks, we will be planting a big vegetable garden to grow food for others. We provide our gym seven days a week free to an organization which helps keep at-risk youth out of trouble. Ten of us will travel to Guatemala in December to minister there. The list goes on.

To be clear, friends, scripture and the living witness to God in the world call us to do those things. You model a devotion to mission that is disproportionate to the size of our congregation. Thanks be to God.

But God also calls us to focus on the diseases that mark our society, not just the symptoms. And God's word is unequivocal.

The prophet Jeremiah says God is "the sure defender of the poor and the oppressed."¹ Note I did not say helper, but 'defender.'

Jeremiah also says in chapter 5, verse 28, that "justice *belongs* to the needy," which can be translated as saying justice is the "right" of the needy, something society owes to the least of these.²

When we show special regard for the poor and the weak, we are "agents of the divine will," Isaiah says.³

Then comes what, for me at least, is the clincher in this matter of whether we can be people of faith without being agents of justice. We heard it in both Old Testament readings this morning:

Speaking for God, Amos says God is not interested in even our worship if we are not striving to be God's agents for justice in the world.

"Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream," Amos says.

He is echoed by the prophet Micah in a verse that is a favorite of many of you:

¹ Harper Collins Bible Dictionary, Paul Achtemeier, editor, Justice listing, p. 557. Citing Jeremiah 9:23-24

² Ibid, my italics

³ Ibid, Isaiah 59:15-16

“What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”

One scholar’s interpretation of those verses makes it plain.

“The demand for justice is so central,” he says, “that other responses to God are empty or diminished if they exist without it.”⁴

God said it long before the cell phone advertisement: Can you hear me now?

This centrality of justice to our life with God is evidenced in how justice sweeps through all of scripture.

As we noted in Sunday school last week, there are far fewer instances of the actual word ‘justice’ in the New Testament ... because Jesus was justice. He did tell parables about justice. But most of all, he exemplified it. Christ chose time and again to defend the poor, the sick and the outcast, to show the world that that is where we meet and experience God.

And that’s something we should keep in mind in these 40 days of Lent.

But Jesus channels Amos and Micah clearly in the 23rd verse of the 23rd chapter of Matthew. He is speaking specifically to the scribes and the Pharisees, the high church officials of the day who tended toward overdoses of piety.

Jesus has just pronounced what we know as “the greatest commandment.” Say it with me:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and with all your mind ... and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

But he is not through with the scribes and the Pharisees there. He proceeds to make seven pronouncements. Each begins with the words “Woe to you ...” or, as Eugene Peterson translates it, “you are hopeless” if you don’t straighten out your understanding of how to balance the worship of God with the service of God.

The scribes and Pharisees, you see, were paying too much attention to their piety, as defined in their minds by the Law. They were giving themselves way too much credit for how straight they sat in church and how devoted they acted in front of others.

Your priorities are all wrong, Christ says. The “weightier matters of the law,” he says, “are justice and mercy and faith.”

Matthew captures their wrong priorities in a great turn of phrase.

⁴ Ibid, p. 558

“You strain out a gnat, but you swallow a camel.”

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In these forty days of Lent, a group of Caldwell members is taking time to get to know one another better, including building a deeper sense of what they think are some of the greater injustices of our community.

Is it the failure to provide quality education for all of our children?

Is it that 5,000 people in Charlotte are homeless? Or that thousands more are on the threshold of homelessness because of a shortage of affordable housing?

Is it the multitude of factors that result in the hopelessness and despair of a generation of young African American males, leaving too many to turn to crime and violence as a “way out.”

What injustices are on your mind, what cancers in our community are we called to address in God’s name as people of faith? Or, to put in Christ’s words, what can we as the church no longer “swallow?”

If you are interested in joining these conversations, contact Jeff Sinn, who leads the Justice half of our Mission and Justice Committee.

If you want to know more, come to our forum tonight.

We will continue to study this subject of justice. Be on the lookout for opportunities throughout this year. And we will pray that God will lead us to a clearer understanding of how we should respond to God’s grace by serving all of our neighbors.

To be sure, we won’t relax our efforts to serve those who suffer the symptoms of the social diseases that weaken our community and our nation. But we will find a way to attack the diseases themselves.

I should warn you. Following such a path may take many of us into unfamiliar and uncomfortable territory. Confronting institutional authorities can be like that. As Christ said, the weight of answering this call is heavier than other parts of our faith.

But we know one thing for sure, and we meditate on that one thing in these forty days that lead us to the cross: In Jesus Christ, God has been to that uncomfortable territory before. God meets for us there, just as God meets us here in worship.

May God show us the way and give us the strength to follow in Christ’s footsteps.

Amen.