The Walk of Christ, Pt. 4: The Compassionate Life
Fifth Sunday in Lent
April 10, 2011
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture: Deuteronomy 15:10-11
Matthew 25:31-46

The question hung in the air like a giant balloon whose string no one wanted to grab.

We were gathered here last Sunday night for a forum on education funding cuts. Three progressive, committed leaders had explained the harsh reality. State and local budget shortfalls spell cuts in schools that are likely to fall between calamitous and catastrophic. Parents, teachers and school advocates had been talking about how to blunt the impact of those cuts. After listening for someone else to ask the question, I finally did:

"This morning in this sanctuary," I said, "someone offered a prayer that these budget and program cuts not be made on the backs of our poorest and most vulnerable children. How are we doing on that goal?"

Then the long silence. One speaker looked down at the floor. Another returned my eye contact without opening her mouth. Finally, Liz Clasen-Kelly from the Council on Children's Rights spoke up.

The most vulnerable children and families will bear the brunt because that is how our society is structured, she said with a rare kind of candor. In effect, she added, when you are at the bottom of the ladder, everything comes down on you.

Then, State Sen. Dan Clodfelter, one of the state's best minds on policy and the intricacies of the state budget, weighed in. With equal frankness but an equally heavy tone of lament, he affirmed Liz's comment. As he said several times during the forum, that is the system we have until voters choose to make some changes.

This week we continue our walk in the way of and toward the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. In this season of Lent, we are charting that journey by looking closely at Christ's personal ways, habits, disciplines, words and actions. Those ways gave birth to major faith traditions that, together, make up the Christian life. Today, we pause to consider

the depth and the breadth of the social justice tradition – a way of living the Christian life that is so very close to the heart of this congregation.

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At the outset of his public ministry, Jesus told his disciples: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Some scholars hear those words and focus on that closing phrase, the part of about proclaiming the year of the Lord’s favor. That, these scholars say, is evidence that somehow Jesus’ self-proclamation should be limited in meaning. Jesus, they say, was speaking to the ancient Hebrew tradition of the Jubilee. It was a special year, one out of every seven, when the poor should hear good news, the captives should be set free, the blind might see and the oppressed liberated.

Nonsense, others say. Jesus’ message, Jesus’ commandment to love one’s neighbor, came with no conditions, no restrictions. Commitment to that kind of love, especially for those most in need, has been true north on the compass of the social justice tradition ever since.

It’s worth noting that in the last one-thousand years, that movement has been increasingly led by women. Consider just the American experience. From Abolitionists Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth to Catherine Booth, who co-founded the Salvation Army (which operates the homeless shelter here at Caldwell). Susan B. Anthony fought to give women the vote. In the middle of the 20th century, Catholic activist Dorothy Day championed the poor, the worker, the homeless and women in particular. Mother Teresa gave her life to the “ ‘poorest of the poor’: lepers, abandoned infants, starving families and disabled beggars.”[1] Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery. That attracted Martin Luther King Jr., who, on the day he was killed, was working to improve working conditions of garbage workers. King was followed in his own country by Desmond Tutu, who helped bring down apartheid.

All will be remembered for their actions to create a more just and fair society. But, first, all were people of profound faith.

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[1] Streams of Living Waters, Richard Foster, p. 347

So what about today? What about our times? Who are the champions of justice and equity in America today? Or is it that everything these days is just fine, so we don't need any?
Well, it all depends on whom you listen to – and, Lord knows, there are plenty of voices out there.

Last month, outgoing radio and television personality Glenn Beck begged his followers to be on the lookout.

"I beg you, look for the words 'social justice' or 'economic justice' on your church Website. If you find it, run as fast as you can. Social justice and economic justice are just code words. Now, am I advising people to leave their church? Yes!"

Beck then held up cards with the swastika and the hammer and sickle. His message: concern for justice, reasonable wealth distribution, responsible treatment of workers – they were the messages of both Nazis and Soviet communists. So, if you care about social justice, you must be one or the other. Beck lost his job this week.

Also this month, New York Times columnist Bob Herbert wrote his last column, to take time to write a book. The headline read: "America is losing its way." He wrote:

> There is plenty of economic activity in the U.S., and plenty of wealth. But like the greedy children, the folks at the top are seizing virtually all of the marbles …. As the Economic Policy Institute has reported, the richest 10 percent of Americans received an unconscionable 100 percent of the average income growth in the years 2000-2007, the most recent extended period of economic expansion.
>
> Americans behave as if this is somehow normal or acceptable. It shouldn't be and it didn't used to be. Through much of the post-World War II era, income distribution was far more equitable, with the top 10 percent of families accounting for just a third of average income growth, and the bottom 90 percent receiving two-thirds. That seems like ancient history now.[2]

As I said, it all depends on whose word you take. Last week in the fight over the federal budget we saw more evidence of this chasm between perspectives that seems to have frozen our nation in its tracks. There is no question that America has built up an exploding devastating federal debt. It must be addressed in part by balancing the budget, by living within our means.

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[2] Charlotte Observer, March 29, 2011, p. 9A

But the means of our nation are quite healthy, thank you. Our problem is not a lack of money. It's that we as a nation don't really want to share it, at least as compared to the rest of the world. On a per capita basis, the federal government in the U.S. has the fourth-lowest revenue stream in the world. If we funded our government at the same per capita rate as Canada – not exactly a bastion of communist socialism - the budget would be balanced. Or perhaps we need to amass our armies on the northern border, lest those radical Canadians want to change our way of life.

That is not to say that government is always the best answer. Often – quite often - it is not. It is to say that we have a systemic and structural problem in America that is widening the gap between the haves and the have-nots, perhaps to the point tht we may never have the moral or political will to narrow that gap to anything even approaching a just split.

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For Christians, we must grapple with the reality that can all read the same Bible bt come to such different conclusions about what both the Old and New Testaments say about our obligations to each other.

In the Old Testament, society was, from one end to the other, a covenant community, a community built on the common good and mutual interdependence, not radical individualism. Those who planted fields and vineyards were to leave room for the poor to have their share. Every seventh year, radical redistribution of wealth occurred through the year of Jubilee, when all debts were forgiven and, as we heard in the Old Testament reading, God's people were to show their love for God by giving liberally without holding a grudge.

In that society, God's people were shaped by three principles:

1. Mishpat, which means justice, but a justice as a broad moral code rather than a book of laws.
2. Hessed, which we might translate to gracious compassion or loving kindness, the kind God shows us.
3. Shalom, which means balance and unity in an all-inclusive community.[3]

These were to be the pillars of the kingdom of God on earth.

[3] Foster, p. 166-172

In the New Testament, Jesus radicalized the Ten Commandments in what we know as the Sermon on the Mount. He lived, ate, walked and preached to the outcast and the stranger. He also provided clear, but often unheeded, guidance to the rich and the comfortable.

Our Lord's expectations about justice are the virtual binding of the Bible. Last week, we considered the evangelical tradition of Christianity and our call to reclaim that term. One who has is Jim Wallis. Once Wallis and his friends wanted to know just *how* essential justice is to God's written word. Chapter by chapter and page by page, they took scissors and cut out every reference to justice in society. Recalling this experiment, Wallis wrote:

> I began taking that damaged and fragile Bible out with me when I preached. I'd hold it up high above American congregations and say, "Brothers and sisters, *this* is our American Bible; it is full of holes." Each one of us might as well take our Bibles, a pair of scissors, and begin cutting out all the Scriptures we pay no attention to, all the biblical texts we just ignore.[4]

Tough words from a truth talker – in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets, who said things like: "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream" and "do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God."

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On that last point – that issue of humility – we should take special note. A life committed social justice has its share of perils and potential pitfalls, as Richard Foster notes in the book some are reading along with this series of sermons.

One of the greatest is a loss of humility, the risk of becoming judgmental, the risk of making God's righteousness into our self-righteousness.

There is a fine edge involved here. Yes, God expects us to build a just society. But we should not use our energy pointing out what's wrong with people who don't share our definition of that just society.

Foster writes: "We quickly and harshly condemn people who differ with us on matters of abortion of capital punishment or racism or militarism or other issues. Standards of who

[4] God's Politics, p. 214

is in or out, who is right or wrong become more and more narrowly defined. It is a danger we tend to fall into because the stakes are so high."[5]

In other words, he who is without sin can cast the first stone.

Other perils include confusing the way of Jesus with the way of the world. That is to say, getting so immersed in a particular political ideology that we lose our objectivity, the ability to hold any perspective accountable to God's ways. Nor, Foster says, should we make social justice an end in itself, losing sight of our neighbor's spiritual and emotional needs along the way.

On the other hand, as Foster notes, we get the social justice tradition right when:

First, we demonstrate just living in and through our own personal lives -- how we interact with others day to day. Second, when we live lives of peace and reconciliation in our interpersonal relationships – our marriages, our families, our friends, neighbors and brothers and sisters in faith. And, third, when we aim our social justice efforts toward the institutional structures that perpetuate oppression, division, dehumanization, poverty, ignorance and inequality.

These structures take many forms in this world: systems of government and public education, business and economics, politics, environmentalism, international relations and diplomacy and, yes, religion and the church.

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If all this sounds like an impossible balance to strike, well, that's not a bad start. That's true for all of the Christian disciplines and traditions, individually and, especially, together. Modeling one's life after the only perfect person ever was never advertised as an easy endeavor. Nor is it one from which we should shrink.

The prophet Amos left us with a good visual metaphor when he likened a just society – or a just life, for that matter - to one that is measured with a plumb line. A plumb line, as you may know, is a tool used by builders. In its simplest form, a plumb line is a long string with a heavy weight on one end. The builder holds the line up to a vertical part of the structure and lets gravity take hold of the weight. Once the weight is still, the line shows whether the wall or structure in question is straight and true … or whether it leans to one side – a sure sign that it will come crashing down one day.

[5] Foster, p. 180

What, then, is the standard for how to measure our efforts to build a just society? Jesus made it clear: in as much as any of us has fed the hungry, housed the homeless, clothed the shivering neighbor, called on the sick or visited the prisoner, we have done those things for God in Christ.

May God bless and guide our efforts as we humbly seek to meet Christ's standard in our personal, relational and institutional lives. Amen.