

LESSONS IN LIVING

From Righteousness to Justice

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
June 5, 2011

Scripture Readings: Luke: 4:16 -19, Isaiah 42:1-9 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

When I first got on Facebook, I was very popular for about a week and a half - two weeks, something like that. But I kept putting up social justice pieces that I had run across and traffic began to thin a bit, and I noticed that this week the article I posted had one person read it, so there is sort of a defoliant aspect. I understand that feeling, that if you look at the world, if you learn some things about the world, it is so painful that you just want to close the blind. I think that is very human, very natural, very normal. Sometimes, the more you know, the more it hurts and it is understandable you would not want to learn anything more.

Since nobody will read it on Facebook, I thought...*(laughter)* that my friends would definitely want to hear this. I found it very interesting. We have a fantasy about the World Bank and the IMF, International Monetary Fund, that they're beneficial to the Third World. They [do] have some aspects of that, but over time and in their essence, they are very invasive in other cultures and have done devastating work. This is why the World Bank - the [U.S.] President chooses who the leader of it will be. It often winds up being the Secretary of Defense and that should tell you that it's not about banking. Here is an article on the IMF, the International Monetary Fund. It says:

“In the 1990's the small country of Malawi in Southeastern Africa was facing severe economic problems after enduring one of the worst HIV-AIDS epidemics in the world, and surviving a horrible dictatorship. If the IMF had acted in it's official role it would have given loans and guided the country to develop in the same way that Britain and the U.S. and every other successful country had developed, by protecting it's infant industries, subsidizing it's farmers and investing in the education and health of it's people. That's what an institution that was concerned with ordinary people and accountable to them would look like. But the IMF did something very different. They said they would only give assistance if Malawi agreed to the structural adjustments the IMF demanded. They ordered Malawi to sell off almost everything the state owned to private companies and speculators, and to slash spending on the population.”

Sound familiar?

“They demanded that they stop subsidizing fertilizer even though it was the only thing that made it possible for farmers - which is most of the population - to grow anything in the country’s feeble and depleted soil. They told them to prioritize giving money to the international bankers over giving money to the Malawian people. So when in 2001 the IMF found out the Malawian government had built up large stockpiles of grain, in case there was a crop failure, they ordered them to sell it off to private companies at once. They told Malawi to get their priorities straight by using the proceeds to pay off the loan from a large bank the IMF had told them to take out in the first place at a 56% percent annual rate of interest. The Malawian president protested and said this was dangerous, but he had little choice. The grain was sold, the banks were paid. The next year the crops failed. The Malawian government had almost nothing to hand out. The starving population was reduced to eating the bark off trees and any rats that they could capture. At the height of the starvation, the IMF suspended the forty-seven million dollars in aid because the government had slowed in implementing the marketing reforms that had lead to the disaster.”

Now that may not seem like something you would want to hear in a Presbyterian Church, maybe any church. I want to suggest that the passage that we are reading today leads us nowhere else. It is very human to not want to hear it. I understand that. To say, I am going to pull back, there is very little I can do. I have very little control over my own life, I’m going to pull back and I’m going to work on my own meditation or prayer or yoga, I’m going to tend my little garden of the world, and that will be my gift to the rest of the world. Very understandable.

Here’s the problem. We are interconnected in a very deep and profound way. We humans, we living beings are interconnected at a very profound level and when we pull back from one another, we feel powerless, depleted, and it may be that the fatigue that you feel as an American, is not that you have been doing too much for your brothers and your sisters of the world, but you believed the propaganda that you are powerless, that you are so small, so helpless, that you can’t do anything for the rest of the world. The people who’ve been the best friends of humankind have looked at things differently. They weren’t *stronger* people, they weren’t *better* people than you or I. But they believed something different about who they were and their relationship to the rest of the world. I want to talk about three things that they believed. The reason it’s three is because you don’t want to hear four, right? *(laughter)* It could be four, it could be five, it could be twelve, but I would be talking to myself at that point. So, three, we are going for three.

The first thing that the heroes (the best friends of humankind) know is that *your life matters*. That may be something you don’t realize, maybe people have laughed at you in life, or marginalized you or trivialized you, that you don’t realize that you have an impact on the world. When you were a kid you knew it. There was a time in your life when the question of what you were going to be when you grew up was the strongest voice in your head and you kept coming back to it and you kept coming back to it. What I want to suggest is that *that voice is meant to last you a lifetime*. That question, “Who am I? What is my gift to the world?” is a permanent acquisition.

Now in the story of Isaiah it says this is my servant with whom I am well pleased. If that sounds familiar, it sounds sort of like the voice we heard at the baptism, didn't it? "This is my child with whom I am well pleased." Mary was a peasant woman, but she had a hope that Jesus was born into a different kind of world. She taught Jesus to read the Bible differently than probably you were taught. Instead of a book, a big boring book about dead people, it was a book about who he could be. All the heroes and all the prophets were people he wanted to be. So when he gave his first sermon, he quoted from this passage, the passage which says this is my beloved servant, I've called you to bring justice to the world. Jesus starts off saying, "The Spirit of God is upon me to preach good news to the poor." That's where that came from and the list that he is drawing up to heal the sick, to free the slaves, release the captives, are all coming from that passage in Isaiah.

The passage right behind us, (points to banner on wall) the bible is full of these moments, but one of my favorites is right here. It's Micah, and the first part of the book is asking what does God want from us? What can I do? I'm little, I'm small, I'm weak, I've got other things I'm dealing with. What can God possibly want from me? The answer is on the other side of the panel. (points to another banner) You may not be able to see it because of the piano, but take my word for it. It says "Give money to the church"...*(laughter)* NO, it doesn't say anything about church, does it? Doesn't say where you are going to do it, doesn't say how. In your life, in the week ahead, the three things that the Sacred wants of you, from within you, do justice, you can do that, right? Treat people fairly, love kindness, not be embarrassed to be kind and gentle, and to walk humbly with God. You'll still go out into a world that seems small, but the difference will be huge. Every act will have a different effect if you are doing it for the whole world as your calling, your gift to the whole world.

The first thing that the prophets knew was that your life matters. Your resolution to be a human being and nothing less is a revolutionary act. It could cost you your job, it could cost you friends, family, everything, just simply not to sell out your own humanity. That's number one.

Number two is to realize that *love is a power*. I don't think most people believe that, that gentleness, kindness, is more powerful, over time, than violence. You certainly don't see that in movies, books, television. We have heroes of violence and we get fooled into thinking that violence is powerful. It *is* in the short run, but if you look down the road, violent people destroy themselves. That's the prophetic message over and over again. The prophets went to Israel and said if you keep trusting in this empire, you will implode. If you keep selling out your central core values you will turn on each other and you won't even know what hit you. If a prophet came to America today, that is precisely what they would say. If you do not do a radical overhaul of how you are treating each other - particularly the weakest, the poor, the children, the people from other countries - if you do not radically overhaul how you do things, your empire will fall. It doesn't matter how strong it is. We can have every killer drone on the planet and it's not going to be enough, because we will turn on each other. It is already happening. What the prophet was saying is, don't let that call you into despair. Let go of violence, choose kindness and love. Trust it. Know that it protects you. You don't have to protect it. That's the problem with the church. We have a message of love but we don't trust it, so we are violent in protecting love. God loves you, we are going to cram it down your throat. *(laughter)* If you don't believe that God loves you we will make your life a living hell until you convert. Trust it as a power. It says in the verse, "a bruised reed you will not break." You see, when someone is wounded, when they are tired, when they are sad, you don't put another burden on their back. You help them, you heal them.

I ran across a story this week that I found very interesting. There was a little, girl five years old - maybe some of you heard the story - and she heard about people having malaria in Africa. The way I

understand the story is, she asked what she could do, and, of course, everybody says no, you can't do anything. It's too big a problem. But she could not believe that. She believed she could do something. I'm assuming she bought a net. She found out malaria comes from mosquitoes, and she bought a net. That would help one person. That's something, it's not a lot, but it is something. For that one person it would make a huge difference. It so inspired other people that it became a kind of a movement. By the time she was ten, she had given one hundred fifty thousand dollars worth of nets. There is some part of Africa where the rate of malaria was reduced by 20 percent. This is a five year old little girl. Now what was the excuse you had again? Powerless, nothing you can do? Well, that may not be the problem. I believe the problem is that you were told the lie that you don't matter, there's nothing you can do, and that violence is the most powerful thing in the world. The instant you stop believing those two lies, you are halfway down the road.

The last thing, *being gentle* is a revolution in itself. Being a human being is a revolution. Trusting love, being gentle is a revolutionary act.

Finally, realize you are not alone. So often, when we feel powerless, it is when we think we have to do it by ourselves. If you realize there are [people all over the world who stayed up](#) when they were kids saying what can I do? That is your family. That is your spiritual family. We have to find each other. That's what Jesus is talking about here. It doesn't mean you have to get on the world stage. You may just wind up having done one net, and you don't start this big movement, but the world will be one step closer when you do. Whatever you do when you do it for the whole world, it mixes with other people's gifts and ripples out in ways that you can't imagine, you can't predict. It's like if every part in an auto supply store says, I'm just a spark plug, what can I do? I'm just a carburetor, stupid piece of metal, what can I do? It's only when they realize they were meant to fit together that their true purpose becomes obvious to everyone. You have a gift for the world. It may not seem like much to you by itself, but it may be the missing ingredient that will bring an explosive quality to other gifts that people have.

I also looked at earthworms this week. I came in this morning and was typing, and David came in and he saw earthworms, and he said "OK, this is going to be an interesting sermon". And I said "Not necessarily. It could be boring and still weird. I've done that before." What difference does an earthworm make? Earthworms are very small for the most part. An average earthworm in a given year aerates two tons of soil in a year. Here's my thought: you are bigger than an earthworm (*laughter*), you are smarter than an earthworm, and, in my opinion, you are better looking... (*laughter*) than an earthworm. Surely, [being] faithful, constant, being who you are, and giving your gift, and coming together with others to give the gift will change the world. We live in a time when everything is for sale. Everything has become a commodity and people still trust that worldview, but I want to tell you it's a cancer. It is eating everything we see, touch, and care about. You were not made to fit into that machine. If you feel your life has been a failure, you've not gotten where you should go, maybe you didn't fit or you just didn't sell out. Maybe that's what we are really talking about. There was your humanity, your decency that kept you from succeeding in a corrupt system. You've had a calling since you were a child. Maybe you forgot, but I promise you, it's true. There was a time in your life when the question that illumined your heart, that ignited your heart, was who am I, what is my gift to the world? All you have to do is return to that question again. Trust it. Let it take over and remember these three things. It's understandable that you would be overcome by the world, but the love within you is more powerful than you can possibly imagine, and the violence that surrounds us is so ephemeral when you think about it. It cannot last long. The most powerful hurricane cannot last long by its nature. Love is the most powerful force in the Universe. Remember and never forget that your life matters. Remember and never forget that gentleness is a power, and you do not need to be

ashamed of the gentleness that you feel inside. Finally, remember that you are not alone, that your gift will fit with other people's gifts and surprise us all. I love the passage where it says the islands are waiting for your message. Islands were the faraway places. They saw them off in the distance. Nobody had ever been there. The islands are waiting for your message. Go back to that voice that you used to hear. Hear it again and you will discover that it's true. The islands are waiting for your message.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.



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