

Fall 2017
Reflections from the Peace with Justice Commission
Theme: Peace and Justice in Times of Angst

October 1

Lessons: Exodus 17:1-7 (Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32)
Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16
Philippians 2:1-13
Matthew 21:23-32

In the late 1980s, I was a graduate student and Teaching Fellow in the History of Christianity. I remember observing as the curmudgeonly professor for whom I was teaching at the time ask sotto voce when he saw a student with a “Question Authority” pin, “Why doesn’t anyone ever wear a “Submit to Authority” pin? The notion that people once wore “Question Authority” pins as a sign of pride or a political statement seems oddly quaint in 2017. We have seen all manner of authorities challenged and losing their prestige. Authorities—whether religious, or intellectual, or even political are being questioned as never before and people have lost confidence in the institutions we once held in high esteem.

In this week’s gospel reading, we encounter a conflict between Jesus and the religious leadership of his day over the nature and sources of authority. This story is an episode in the intensifying conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities. It occurs the day after his Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem and his attack on the moneychangers. When they ask, “By whose authority are you doing these things?” they are referring to those specific events.

It is a conflict full of tension and no little comedy because in his response, Jesus puts his opponents in a difficult position and they refuse to answer his question. Jesus wins the debate but the leaders’ question still stands, for Jesus and for us. When reading this text, we are likely to place ourselves in Jesus’ position, the ones whose authority is being challenged. More likely, we would do better to identify with the religious authorities, challenging an upstart to explain herself. We would do well to reflect on where our sympathies truly lie, especially in an era when Christianity is looking power, prestige, and membership.

Rev. Dr. D. Jonathan Grieser
Grace Episcopal Church, Madison

October 8
Still Under Grace?

Lessons: Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20
Psalm 19
Philippians 3.4b-14
Matthew 21.33-46

We have become a nation in transition. The very foundations of this society, established by this country's forefathers, founded upon a trust in God, have begun to crumble under our feet. God created us for relationship. Relationship with him and relationship with humankind. We have forgotten God, as evidenced by our treatment of our fellow man. We profess that all men are created equal, and yet we enact laws that veil racism, discrimination, marginalization and disenfranchisement. It seems that in today's culture we celebrate sin and mock moral virtue; and in doing so, we fail to heed the words of the Prophet: "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil; who put darkness for light, and light for darkness; who put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter. (Isaiah 5:20)

God has invited everyone into a life of opportunity and responsibility. He has given to us a pattern for such life; it is to act justly, love mercy and live humbly before him. (Micah 6:8) God will not continue to tolerate the mistreatment of the least. He is a God of love, but he is also a God of judgement. Hear the words of God as expressed in the Book of Revelations: "Consider how far you have fallen! Return to me, change the way that you think and act, and do what you did at the first". The ball is in our court, will we get back to loving God with all and our neighbor as ourselves?

Rev. Joseph Baring
St. Paul AME Church, Madison

October 15

Lessons: Exodus 32:1–14
Psalm 106:1–6, 19–23
Philippians 4:1–9
Matthew 22:1–14

The apostle Paul in the letter to the Philippians invites us to think upon “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” (NRSV)

In the age of “fake” news, how do we know “truth”? When leadership promotes violence and disdain, what does it mean to be “honorable”? What does it mean to be just when proclamations made by Twitter impact the well-being of so many? Is there anything that is pure, and if so, by whose definition? Pleasing—to self, people have figured it out. Pleasing to God is another concern.

Like our brothers and sisters before us, as demonstrated in the Exodus and Matthew passages, we have gone astray. We have failed to stay connected to God. We grew impatient and thought we could do better. We wanted something here and now, even if it led to our destruction. It may seem like we are on a path to complete destruction and that there is no turning back from the tragedy that lies ahead. We do not need to head down the path of destruction. In God’s world, a new beginning is offered each day, each moment and with each breath. “New every morning is your love great God of light and all day long you are working for good in the world.” (United Methodist Hymnal – morning prayer) So we begin again with God. We come to God with “prayers and petitions with thanksgiving and the peace that transcends all understanding will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” (Phil 4)

We turn from the path of destruction by building relationships.

First with God and then with each other.

Rev. Ellen Rasmussen
Brown Deer United Methodist Church

October 22

Lessons: Exodus 33:12–23
Psalm 99
1 Thessalonians 1:1–10
Matthew 22:15–22

Summer and autumn, the season when we reap what we have sown, have brought us quite a harvest...unprecedented natural disasters—hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, wildfires—and intensifying political storms, just as destructive in unleashing division, hatred, fear, and violence. The seeds of racism, prejudice, and economic injustice were planted long ago. We are reaping difficult times.

Jesus as a Jew living under Roman occupation also experienced difficult times. As a troublemaker, he drew the attention of the Pharisees who plot to trap him in Matthew 22:15-22 with the question of paying taxes. His response gives us guidance for living in the reality of a political world as a follower of Jesus. We have responsibilities as we participate in the political system, but that participation is informed by the knowledge of whom we belong to. The coin to pay taxes belonged to the emperor because it was stamped with his image. We are created in the image of God. We are stamped with the image of God and belong to God, a God of justice, peace and love, who cares for all people, for all creation. Do we take our identity seriously enough to advocate for God's creation? Do we speak out against unjust treatment of people of a different color, a different faith, a different gender identity, a different background? Do we give voice to those whose voices are excluded in policy decision-making? What seeds are we sowing now to reap God's harvest of justice, peace, and love?

Gloria Carter
Church Women United

October 29

Lessons: Deuteronomy 34:1–12
Psalm 90:1–6, 13–17
1 Thessalonians 2:1–8
Matthew 22:34–46

We live in a world of discord, hate, vehement political arguments, a world of uncertainty, terrorism....

Let's remember two things:

1. We have no enduring city here.
Our dwelling place is in and with God (Ps. 90:1).
I had an elderly parishioner years ago who would often repeat a poem, in Armenian, which she had learned as a young girl in an orphanage (after witnessing the death of her family and the horrific genocide of her people*).
This world is vain and empty.
A great multitude has passed and been fooled.
Let it not be that we too are fooled.
We have no enduring city here.
We look to the city that is to come (Hebrews 13:14)

She wasn't hiding from a world of discord, but rather she had the wisdom to see beyond this ephemeral and passing world...to a "City" yet to come.

2. Also remember: We are here and we are called upon to proclaim the Good News, not only of the Kingdom, but also of the presence of the Lord here, on earth. We are called to make Christ present. The best way to do that is in today's Gospel: "Love the Lord your God....Love your neighbor as yourself."

Yes, the world is a mess. But Christ has confidence in us. Confidence that we will make his love, mercy, compassion, and peace present through our vocation as Christians.

*1915 Genocide of the Armenians in Ottoman Turkey

Fr. Yeprem Kelegian
St. Mesrob Armenian Apostolic Church, Racine

November 5

Lessons: Joshua 3:7-17
Psalm 107:1-7, 33-37
I Thessalonians 2:9-13
Matthew 23:1-12

The theme of this set of lectionary reflections, Peace and Justice in Times of Angst, fits All Saints Sunday. This is the marker in the church's calendar to recollect those who have died, where the congregation holds grief all together. This day invites confronting sorrow, is steeped in loss, may be short on peace but full of angst.

Compounded with that, members of your community may be feeling the anniversary of Election Day 2016. As All Saints Sunday beckons us to remember the lives of those who have died, this also beckons us to look back at the past year.

Perhaps the most vivid image is Revelation's great multitude that has gone through the great ordeal. This counters our country's standard narrative of dominance. Power and strength can't be claimed those with the most threatening nuclear arsenal, because blessing and glory and might belong to the Lamb who was slain, now and forever. This is the song we join with that vast crowd from every nation—which means not of white supremacy or patriotic nationalism separated by a wall, but the family of God that stretches in connections around the globe, even through hurt and death. Paired with Jesus' words of surprising blessing, this calls and permits us to re-examine our sadness and failings, to re-evaluate our goals and morals. If even death, the last enemy, has lost its sting, what does this promise mean now amid loss or frustration? Since oppression and death cannot separate us from the love and life of God through Christ Jesus, how are we called to live as God's saints?

If you're not observing All Saints Sunday, these reflections are still apt. In the readings for the Time after Pentecost, the prophet Micah calls us not to mutter empty words about feeding the hungry while abhorring justice and perverting equity, while Jesus continues to call us to lives of humble service, "to bear the weight of human need" as an old hymn says.

Rev. Nicholas Utphall
Advent Lutheran Church, Madison

November 12

Lessons: Joshua 24:1-3a
Psalm 78:1-7
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
Matthew 25:1-13

The Joshua lesson teaches about choices. We are bombarded by opportunities to make choices every day, as well as, by opinions to guide us to making the “right” choice. Too many options are overwhelming. Not enough options can be harmful. Some choices help us move forward. Some hold us hostage. Others cause us to fall. There are always consequences to the choices that we make and there are always implications for the larger community. Whether the larger community recognizes that, however, is another issue.

This is the Sunday closest to Veterans Day. We have men and women, our brothers and sisters, who have chosen to serve in the U.S. Armed Forces, Reserve and National Guard (one is not considered a veteran unless one has served full-time active duty or has been deployed by presidential order for 30 days or more). The U.S. has a long history of being involved in war and the current stretch is sixteen years and counting. Our sisters and brothers choose to serve on behalf of all of us. As part of community, we need to serve and provide for our brothers and sisters when they return and for their families if they do not return. Suicide rates for U.S. Veterans is more than double the suicide rate for the general population. How are we responding to this? What resources are we making available to help our sisters and brothers heal, to move into recover and eventually, a new wholeness? Are we investing in their full recovery? Are we holding ourselves (we are the government) accountable?

There is also another choice that could have been made. We could have chosen peace. We could have chosen to expend our efforts to create a just peace. We could have chosen to not make war an option.

The Greatest Commandment is to love God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength and with all our mind; the second, is to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Let today be the day that we choose love and not make war anymore.

For the days that we have chosen war, let us do all in power to bring healing, hope and restoration to our brothers and sisters who have served.

Rev. Ellen Rasmussen
Brown Deer United Methodist Church

November 19

Lessons: Judges 4:1–7
Psalm 123 or Psalm 76
1 Thessalonians 5:1–11
Matthew 25:14–30

“I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.” (vs. 23)

No matter how many times I read this text, I keep coming back to this one verse. We live in a world with many demands. Our family, work, and personal commitments and concerns demand our daily attention. And then, the unfolding dramas in the world also demand our attention. How are we to respond to crisis after crisis in our world when our energy and attention is already scattered in so many directions? What do we do with our grief and anger when many in the world seem to thrive on division and hate?

We remember that we have been put in charge of many things and all of it is in our grasp because we are not alone. We are held in the joy of God’s love in all we do. Each of us has been given a life to live from God who created us to be in this world as part of the divine image of love, healing, and wholeness. We are not in charge of everything and there is a lot we cannot control, but we can look at the many ways this life is a gift and continue to focus our faith and our actions on bringing the truth of God’s joy to others.

Greg Carey, Professor of New Testament at Lancaster Theological Seminary asks this question of the text: Does the parable of the talents admonish disciples that they’d better get useful or they might face judgment? Or does the parable subvert traditional images of an authoritarian and threatening Jesus?

I would suggest that yes, the parable does indeed admonish us to “get on with it” and be useful – useful in love and in using our gifts to continue to proclaim the message we know is at the heart of the gospel. God is love and Jesus came so that justice and peace would be seen and experienced in the flesh. May we have courage and joy to be his followers.

Questions to Ponder:

Where do you see the divine image at work through your life?

How can you use one of your gifts to delight in God’s joy and bring healing to someone else?

How is your joy part of bringing peace and justice to our world?

What does discipleship in this text look like for you? Does the parable of the talents admonish disciples that they’d better get useful or they might face judgment? Or does the parable subvert traditional images of an authoritarian and threatening Jesus?

Rev. Ann Beaty
First Congregational UCC, Madison

November 26

Lessons: Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24
Psalm 100
Ephesians 1:15-23
Matthew 25:31-46

The Bible does not lay out a specific form of government for the society in which the people of God live, nor does it advocate a specific economic system. However, it does provide important criteria for evaluating any system in which Christians find themselves as they help to fulfill its mission of serving all its people. (Recall Jeremiah 29.7: “Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you.”)

Today’s text from Matthew 25.31-45, in which the Son of Man is said to address “all the nations,” is a challenging text to consider when evaluating how just our society is, and how well the government and economic system meet the needs of all our people.

In a nation in which everyone except First Nations peoples have family roots from somewhere else, how does this nation fare when judged by the criteria of providing food, drink, and clothing for the poor, welcoming the “stranger” (a biblical word for immigrant), and in attending to prisoners? These questions seem particularly apt regarding DACA and the aftermath of Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria and the attendant discussions about spending priorities and the impact of lax environmental regulations, and other governmental demands for the money. The Son of Man mentioned care for the sick, which brings to the fore questions of national health care, spending priorities, and whether health care is a right or a privilege of the well off.

Stated more generally, as our nation faces an uncertain future on a number of fronts, what does this text say to us about the good news of the gospel of peace and justice that as followers of Jesus Christ we are called to proclaim?

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