

Sermon: **JUSTICE IS: RELATIONSHIPS**

Rev. Steve Garnaas-Holmes

Saint Matthew's UMC

February 5, 2017

Jesus said: "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. "You are light for the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to God.

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the realm of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the realm of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never experience the realm of heaven."

—Matthew 5.13-20

Well, Jesus sets a pretty high bar there. He starts out easy. You are the salt of the earth; you're the light of the world. This is who you are. It's good. Stay true to that self that God has created you to be. It feels like what Jesus is saying is all you need to do is just be who God creates you to be.

And then he goes on to say you have to have greater righteousness than Pharisees. Aw man, the Pharisees were really righteous dudes. They had all these rules and procedures and rituals and religious laws that they observed. You couldn't get all that right. It's like eating lunch with a militant vegan. You *know* you're going to make a mistake.

So is Jesus telling us that we've got to get all those laws right? No, that's not what he's telling us. Remember that Jesus knew that even though there are all those laws in the bible, there's only one. There's one rule. Remember? We talked about this last week. There's one rule and it's this: God loves you and everybody else and God wants you to love God and everybody else.

That is what the bible means by righteousness, not getting the rules right but getting the love right. It's not about being right; it's about being in right relationships. It's about being loving, and not just loving to individual people, but loving in all of society.

So John Wesley was always talking about the relationship between personal holiness and social holiness. Isaiah addresses that. In the book of Isaiah, people grumble and whine and they say "Hey God, listen up. We say our prayers, we follow the rules, we fast—and you don't answer our prayers. What's with that?" And God says "No you don't. You're not following the rules. You fast and then you're mean to each other. That doesn't count. That's not following the rules. Here's the kind of fast that I want you to do: to undo the chains of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yokes that oppress people, to take in the homeless, to feed the hungry. That's what I mean by righteousness."

It's relationship. And justice is a whole society built on righteous relationships, relationships in which we love everybody. That's hard because pretty much every society on this planet is constructed around a set of beliefs that are intended to include some people and exclude others. Sometimes it's obvious like a cast system in India. Sometimes there are lunch counters for white people and lunch counters for black people. There are ways you get imprisoned if you're white that are different than they are if you're black. Sometimes these systems of privilege and exclusion are written into the laws and sometimes it's just our habits, but we have ways of living in such a way that we make it clear that not everybody is loved, and we want it that way. That's why we have prisons. To make sure those people know that we don't love them.

So if we're going to do justice we have to work against that. Isaiah is clear, Jesus is clear, John Wesley is clear that there's both personal holiness and social holiness. If we're going to do justice it's going to get political because that's how laws get made. You have to lobby congress; you have to deal with those political issues. And there's also the personal side. You have to have relationships.

One of the difficult things about dealing with justice in this country is that surveys show over and over again that most of us don't have friends who aren't just like us. Most of our friends are white, middle class, Christian, able bodied, suburban people. Think about this. How many black friends do you have? How many friends do you have who are Muslim or homeless or in prison? We don't run into those people. They're somewhere else. They're not in our neighborhoods. They're in jails, they're in nursing homes, they're in mental hospitals. They're somewhere else. So it's hard for us to make those connections.

But Jesus says your righteousness has to exceed just getting things right. Jesus invites us into loving relationships, including relationships with people society says don't matter. We need to

communicate with them that they do matter— in our friendships, not just in the checks that we write. That's a challenge because of the way our culture is set up.

In the late 1940's the primary mode of transportation in this country for long distances was trains. Everybody rode the train. There was a train coming out from San Francisco across the prairies. Like every train in the 1940s everybody was on it. There were some wealthy people going on vacations, some business people on business trips, there were middle class people going to visit relatives. There were some poor folks; there were some blacks who were kind of off in that last little car. There were some Japanese folks who had just been released from the internment camps in California after the war. They were all on the same train but they were in different cars. There was a first class section. There were the people who had the sleeper cars and the berths and the little cabins that you could close the door on. There were second class tickets. Those folks just had seats on the train. And there were some people in that other car. They just had benches. The poor folks and the black folks and the Japanese – they were all back there.

The train was out in the middle of the prairie, in the middle of what people from around here would say is "the middle of nowhere," but the people from where I'm from would say is countryside—and out there, the train broke down. Something went wrong and the engine just quit and the train rolled to a stop. The crew got out and pattered around and realized that there was a part in the engine that had broken that couldn't be fixed. They needed a replacement part which would have to be brought on another train. That would take a long time. So one of the crew got out and walked along the tracks to the next town three or four miles ahead, went to the train station, and explained to the station master what was going on. The station master telephoned the railroad company and they got the part ordered.

The crew member went back out to the train, and there they sat. It was late autumn. The engine wasn't running so there was no power. It was going to get cold that night, especially for the people who didn't have those sleeper berths. There was a little bit of food in the dining car but certainly not enough for everybody on the train for lunch and dinner and breakfast again before the next train got there— and there was no power, so no way to cook the food anyway. So they settled in for a challenging night out there on the prairie.

But then this little group of people came up the tracks, walking along, and before they got to the train another group of people showed up at a crossroad with cars and trucks and farm wagons and sheep trailers and hay sleds and cattle wagons and two school buses and the town fire engine.

You see, the station master knew those people were not going to be okay sitting on that train out in the middle of the night out on the prairie. So he had telephoned the Methodist minister

and the Methodist minister had telephoned the Baptist minister and the Lutheran minister and the Catholic priest and the Mormon bishop. And so the town showed up to take them into town. The women and children and those who needed it got to ride in the cars and the trucks and the farm wagons and the sheep trailers. Most of the kids got to ride in the fire truck. And all the able bodied men and those who could, or who had to, walked up the tracks.

Well by the time that whole crew got to this little town, after walking four miles down a dusty railroad track or riding all that distance in a cattle trailer, they all looked about the same. You couldn't tell the difference between the rich ones and the poor ones. They were all tired and dirty and weary, and also so grateful to be taken in.

They were all ushered into the basement of the Methodist church where the Methodist ladies and Baptist ladies and the Lutheran ladies, (this was the 1940s – so it was all ladies) and the Catholic ladies and the Mormon ladies put on the biggest potluck that town had ever seen. And in the basement of the Methodist church there was no first class section, just long tables with lots of food.

So they all just sat down. The rich folks and the poor folks, the dirty folks and the clean folks, the train folks and the town folks, the Christian and Shinto, white and black, Japanese and church folks, they just sat down together and had a meal. And they talked about their journeys, and their lives.

And that night pretty much everybody in town went home with a guest or two or three. And they put them up and they washed their clothes and they fed them breakfast and they brought them back to the train station in the morning where the train had been fixed and was ready to go. And the people noticed after this happened that the Methodists and Baptists and Lutherans and the Catholics and even the Mormons got along a lot better because they had made some friends.

And the people who had watched the passengers get off the train noticed that when they got back on the train some of them weren't quite sure which car they wanted to get on. Because they had made some friends even though they had started out in different cars. Now they wanted to be together. They all got on the train and it started off down the tracks... toward the realm of heaven.

That's what God means by justice. There are some laws. But there are also relationships, real live friendships. Everybody gets loved. That's why we come to this communion table time and time again, to practice living in that world in which God loves us and everybody else. And we love God and everybody else. That's the part we want to get right. So we practice and we practice and we practice.

Look around this room right now. You might see somebody that seems like they're not like you. Maybe they have different politics, different lifestyle, different age. Maybe one of you has been here forever and one is brand new. Look around at the people in this church who you feel are not like you. I challenge you during the coffee hour to at least begin, if not deepen your friendship. Find out what you have in common. Find out what it is that bridges all our differences because that's what we come to this table to discover.

It turns out that in all of our lives we have experienced breakdowns. We can't do this alone. We need help. We need some extra parts. We need some repairs. We need each other. We need God. And we need to come to a place where God's love, that goes out to everyone regardless of all of our differences, brings us all to the same table where there's no first class section and nobody gets left out. We all need that.

At this table you can't come alone and you can't go by yourself. It's not just about laws and rules and procedures. It's about love that makes us one. Alleluia.