



The Promotion of Social Righteousness

SCRIPTURE:
Amos 5:21-24

October 10, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

There was a time when someone came to Jesus and asked, “What is the most important commandment of them all? What is life about?” Jesus said, “Love.” Love is what makes a life human; love is what makes a human life holy. So, love God with all that you are and love your neighbor as yourself. There’s nothing more important. Christianity is about relationships. Our faith shows up in marriages, in friendships, in parenting and in communities.

This is so important that the prophet Amos said God doesn’t want your love unless you love your neighbor, too. Amos said it this way: I hate your feasts and your solemn assemblies. Amos says God is talking about worship. God says: Don’t come to church and express your love for me if you are not treating each other faithfully. Faith is a relational, social reality.

We have been exploring the great ends and the final one to consider is this: The church exists for the promotion of social righteousness. Jesus shows up not just in our hearts, but in our relationships. That’s where the rubber hits the road and that’s challenging because relationships are difficult. We don’t all think alike, don’t all see the world the same way, don’t fall down on the issues in the same way.

There’s a moment in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* when Marie returns from worship and tells her cousin Ophelia, “O, Dr. G preached a splendid sermon... it was just such a sermon as you ought to hear; it expressed all my views exactly.”¹

Don’t you wish you could hear a sermon like that? A sermon that expressed all your views exactly? I can’t even hear a sermon like that and I’m doing the preaching. The problem is that when a sermon really proclaims the gospel, or if I actually

understand the text, the word is not our own. In the mysterious working of God’s Spirit, the word comes from God.

One of the ways we navigate a world that doesn’t express itself consistently with all our views is we develop a list of things we don’t talk about. It is well intended. It’s an effort to keep the peace. You know that dance. We discern that our neighbor does not share the same view as us on this or that, so we change the subject, maybe toss out a comment like a warning shot—don’t go here, danger awaits. Let’s not talk about this.

We do that in families and with friends—and we certainly do that in church. We develop lists of things that we can’t talk about in church. This practice has a history of about 150 years.

One hundred and fifty years ago, there was a Presbyterian named James Henley Thornwell. He taught at Columbia Seminary, where our own Rodger Nishioka taught—although Rodger was not there 150 years ago. One of my great, great (I don’t remember how many greats) grandfathers was friends with Thornwell. It is reported that Thornwell took care of him in his last days and my how-ever-many-greats-grandfather died in Thornwell’s home.

Thornwell is known for a theological doctrine called “the spirituality of the church.” In this doctrine, Thornwell asserted that Christian faith is about matters of the inner life. It is about our spirits. He’s right about that, it seems to me. But Thornwell continued; he said that matters of societal life are off-limits to the faith. God doesn’t care about issues in society. Does it sound strange to say it that way? God doesn’t care about society? Thornwell was talking about slavery. He said that the existence of

1 Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Barnes and Noble Ed: 1995), p. 182.

slavery is a state matter and that means the church has no concern about its existence. We must keep our conversation—keep our focus—on spiritual matters only. Leave matters of societal right or wrong... leave that alone. God is uninterested. Of course, Thornwell was more interested in supporting slavery than following the gospel.

I hope somewhere in your heart you see his theology was wrong. We simply can't pretend that God has no interest in societal ills. Thornwell's doctrine has several problems.

The first is Thornwell denies that Christ is Lord. Thornwell claimed that Jesus is Lord of your inner life, but not of your communal life. Well, it begs the question: Who then is God of the communal life? Politics? Capitalism? Culture? Wisdom from Uncle Eddie? No, Jesus is Lord of all, which includes my relationship to the world.

A second concern is that Thornwell forgets that Christianity is about loving the neighbor. God loves this world and that means every aspect of it is within the realm of God's concern and, therefore, the realm of the Christian's faith.

Now you may think I am being unfair, picking on a theologian of 150 years ago and imposing our more contemporary ethos on the past—particularly one who took care of my great-something grandfather. But that's not what I'm trying to do. The truth is, I think there is a lot of Thornwell in everybody. Oh, I don't know any Presbyterian who thinks that slavery is a good idea. But I think sometimes we can place limits on the Lordship of Christ... I follow Christ with this aspect of my life, but not that. Don't talk about that. We limit the Lordship of Christ to certain aspects of life, but others are governed by other loyalties.

Amos understood this. Amos says there are two conditions that should flow through us as people of faith: justice and righteousness.

Justice. It is getting things right. Justice is the social pursuit to make sure we treat one another fairly. It's a social reality. When society is out of whack, when the systems of society leave some without the possibility of a humane living, faith doesn't say it is unfortunate, but, rather, it is wrong. All of the prophets declared this. Rabbi Abraham Joshua

Heschel says that the prophets were profoundly sensitive to those who suffer and they were mystified that it didn't bother everyone. But often there is a lack of concern for the suffering of others.

I got a notice from the State of New York saying that I owed a toll, for my license tag had been photographed on the toll road. The notice included a picture of a tag I could not read on a car that was not mine. It couldn't be, as my car has not been in New York in over ten years. I said, "That's not me. I'm not paying that. This is not fair." Then I got another notice requiring the toll be paid as well as a late fee of \$50. It was unjust.

This will surprise you. I tried to contact them to explain that it wasn't me; it's not my car. This is not fair. You know what? They didn't care. Shocking, right? No. The truth is we live in a world that often fails to care about the suffering of others. I think that is particularly true about those on the bottom.

But God cares from the bottom up. God cares. I heard someone say this week that a parent is only as happy as their least happy child. I think we get that trait from God, which is why God wants us to labor to ensure that all of God's children are cared for. No exceptions. The poor and the prisoner, the sick and the homeless, the ones who make good choices and the ones who make bad choices. It's a matter of social righteousness.

That thrusts people of faith into conversations that can be uncomfortable, as we talk about war and guns and climate and masks and vaccines and well, anything that impacts societal welfare. That's what justice requires.

But Amos doesn't stop there. Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Justice is hard; righteousness is harder. Because righteousness is a relational concept. To be righteous is to be in right relationship with God and to be in right relationship with one another.

We are not a very righteous society these days because we are so divided. You know that. I'm not going to walk around in that too much today. You know how divided we are.

When issues arise, we surround ourselves with those who think like us and ignore or distance ourselves from those who don't. And we dismiss others

as crazy or stupid or evil.

But the call to righteousness does not allow us to dismiss others, even others with whom we disagree. It's not enough to be right about the issues, as important as that is. We also have to be righteous which means in as much as it is up to us, to stay in relationship with others, even others with whom we disagree.

A few years ago, our denomination was bitterly divided over the issue of including the LGBTQ+ community. It caused splits all over the country, including right here in Kansas City. There were some pastors in our Presbytery who opposed inclusion. They went to our friend, Rev. David Nzioka. David grew up in Africa where the primary issues are issues of survival. Matters of inclusion have not risen to the level of concern that they have here. These pastors said, "David, we know you agree with us on this issue. Why don't you pull your church out of the denomination?"

David said, "You don't know me. I may disagree with my church on an issue here or there, but this is still my church. This is the church that has nourished me and taught me that Jesus is Lord, and to turn my back on my church would be to crucify my Lord all over again. I'm staying, even when it is hard, I'm staying."

That's what righteousness looks like. There are a lot of factors and circumstances and realities of injustice in this world. We cannot be casual about them. We must do our homework and our prayer work and try to align our hearts with Christ. That's justice. But we must be righteous as well, which means we hold on to one another.

When the people of God promote social righteousness, there is a chance that justice will roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream. And when that happens, Jesus is recognized as Lord of all.