

"Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a never ending stream" Amos 5:24

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There is some evidence that Jesus believed that you could tell what a man is by the way he behaves. This is true on the level of kindness, charity and good-will. Jesus' story of Lazarus and the rich man, his parable of the good Samaritan, and his own way of relating to people around in love and kindness point to the fact that his disciples should best be known by their love of each other and their fellow man.

On the level of social justice, the church has found it more difficult to accept Jesus' command. Jesus is as clear in the matter of social justice, as he is clear in personal goodness. He drove the money changers from the temple courtyard, he challenged the entrenched power of the leaders, he spoke about the scribes and Pharisees with more scorn than about any other group. What public figure would dare speak today as plainly as Jesus spoke about the leaders of his time?

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites...you cleanse the outside of the cup...but inside you are full of extortion and rapacity....you are like whitewashed tombs...outwardly you appear righteous to men, but within you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity....you serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape being sentenced to hell?"

Now Jesus came to this position because he was in the tradi-

tion of the prophets of Israel. Isaiah, for example, had <sup>2</sup> said: "What to me is your multitude of sacrifices...wash yourselves....remove evil from your doing....seek justice, correct oppression". (1:11-17)

He was talking to the religious people. They had piety without goodness, faith without justice, religion without righteousness. Their life with the Father had no relationship to their life with the fatherless and their fellow men. How is it that religion gets into such a state?

It seems to me there are certain signs which appear to warn us when religion loses its righteousness.

1. The first sign of religion without righteousness appears as men and women begin to live on the level of the trivial.

I suppose the most damaging image of clergy and laypeople alike today is that they are persons who run around clumsily oiling the ecclesiastical machinery, meeting with committees while the world outside is burning, and protecting the purity of the faith from the world for which the church's Lord died.

And actually, the world in general is content to let church people do trivial things. Let, however, a Christian venture onto main street where men suffer, where they curse and die, and where the power structures maintain injustices...and then the world will say to him as it said to Amos: "O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, and eat bread there...but never again prophesy at Bethel". (7:12)

Amos was a prophet of the 8th century before Christ. He was crude, uneducated, and unkempt. He wore a beard, was a dresser of sycamore trees. That means that he put manure of them, and perhaps smelled like it. He wasn't the sort of fellow you would pledge to a fraternity. Amos wasn't not among the social elite. 3

Oh, but the power with which he spoke. He walked down to Bethel from Tekoa, and stood in the market place, and spoke for God: "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even tho you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them.. ..take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a never ending stream".

But Amos was not too general...he got specific. He said the people were wrong because they oppressed the poor, crushed the needy, sold people into slavery. He turned on the indolent rich, he condemned the rich ladies who went to their cottages in the hills and lolled around on Ivory couches. Rudely, but plainly, he called them the "fat cows of Bashan". (4:1) Amos did all that because he knew that religion always loses it righteousness when it practitioners become preoccupied with trivialities for religion always becomes trivial when it seeks to escape the demands of justice and righteousness.



2. A second sign of religion without righteousness is when it no longer identifies with the weak, the poor, and the dispossessed. 4

The church seems to have found ways to relate to the wealthy, the powerful, and the privileged. The faith need not apologize for the penetration it has made...Christianity needs to speak in that direction.

Organized religion, until recently, had found it almost impossible to devise ways to identify with those in need, with those who struggle for the rights of the weak, and those who speak for the voiceless and stand for the downtrodden. It may be that the greatest single challenge the church faces today is to discover ways of deepening its ministry to the outcasts, the poor, and the hurting.

We stand today in the shadow of a constantly recurring Armageddon. In such times people take sides, and they are forced to identify with this or that group...to make compacts with others who seek the same goals.

But in doing so they must align themselves with men and women whose judgements are not always wise and whose decisions are colored by many motives and with people who often hate and sin. So people shy away from group action which pushes for change, lest their own pure motives be tainted and become less than pure.

Thank God, for example, at long last Christians realize

that that the problem of world hunger is bigger than it can handle. So they are aligning themselves with other groups in meeting that challenge. 5

The world ~~problem~~ works through group action. Man today can only be relevant and effective as he acts through groups. To remain aloof from movements that struggle for justice is to identify with the status quo and perpetuate the injustice so rampant around us. But that does not keep their motives pure for the status quo is tainted with sin, evil, and error.

Christians, if they are faithful to Christ, will identify with movements which seek justice; or Christians will identify with status quo groups which resist change. Or they can seek to remain aloof, and write off the urgency of social justice.

But, you say, I am concerned about the downtrodden and the needy. Are you really? Let's take a rather safe identification which you could make with the poor. How much of your resources have you given to the hunger fund over the past 30 months? Or how much time have you spent in ministering to the ill or the bereaved, or the outcast? Christians will identify with the disinherited and those who have need, not because they are good but because they are needful; not because they are grateful but because they often stand alone.

3. Not only does religion lose its righteousness when we become overly concerned with trivialities, and when it

fails to identify with the downtrodden; it also does so when it substitutes words for actions. 6

Churchpeople are expert with words. I know of no organization which has passed more resolutions, sent them to the proper persons, and which have had less practical effect. Churches seem to feel that all they need to do to redeem society is to meet in solemn assembly; pass a bunch of resolutions, and sit back and watch the kingdom come.

Of course, the church needs to state its position; it needs to speak positively and redemptively to the world. But it needs also to act out its proclamations. Saying it doesn't do it.

And individuals are afflicted with the same disease. It is much easier to say something than to do it.

Fortunately, Christians are beginning to do it today. They are actively engaged in relevant ministries in the Ghetto, we in the United Methodist Church are actively involved in strengthening the ethnic minority churches, we are involved in a large scale assault against hunger, and in other sorts of ministries bring life to the lifeless, hope to the hopeless and dignity to those who have robbed of their dignity.

Another man has set the standard for Christians. He was a master of words, and people heard him gladly. Then, as he rode the crest of popularity, he announced the his friends:



"I'm going to act. We are going to Jerusalem". They tried <sup>7</sup> to talk him out of it . . . too dangerous, he was too valuable to sacrifice. They argued that the facts were not all in...that there were better methods available...that the powers in the city would crush him. But he only answered to the most persistent of his friends: "Get behind me Satan". And he went to Jerusalem . . . to act out his words.

Yes, he went...and he died. For all his power, and in spite of the fact he was the Son of God, there was no way he could prevent prevent those who follow him from marching as he marched, from bleeding as he bled, from going to their countless cross in their countless ways. And to all those whose religion has been a religion of doing as well as talking, the suffering they have found in those innumerable crosses has made them free; and they, too, have become the children of God.