**A Call to Justice**

**Isaiah 58:1-12; James 1:19-27**

1/18/15

Thought for Meditation:

Piety (spiritual practices) that does not produce a passion for God-exalting social justice and practical mercy is worthless…. God promises that we will break forth like the dawn if our piety produces a passion for social justice and practical mercy. *John Piper*

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

Friday afternoon Tanya and I went to see Selma, the movie that shows Martin Luther King Jr. as he led the march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. It was the event that brought the Civil Rights Movement to national prominence and led to the Civil Rights Act of 1965.

Tomorrow is the holiday when we remember and honor Martin Luther King Jr. He was actually born on January 15, 1929, down in Atlanta, Georgia. He died on April 4, 1968. He was only 39 years old.

The King holiday was signed into law in 1983 and first observed in 1986. I’m not sure why the delay. What is interesting is that it wasn’t until the year 2000 that every state in our country actually observed it. What I find even more fascinating is that many churches, white churches including Sharon, don’t take it as a holiday. I imagine that there are a variety of reasons for that. I have a sense that one reason is that many churches don’t think that racism and justice issues are central to the Christian life and to the ministry of the church.

What I would like to suggest this morning is that justice, including racism, is central to the Christian life. Working for justice is one aspect of a faithful and obedient response to God’s grace and love. Let’s look at the Scriptures and see what the Bible has to say about justice.

I want to start with our passage from Isaiah. Let me give you the context. God sent Israel into exile as punishment for two basic sins: idolatry – worshipping other gods, and injustice – not treating other people with compassion and love. After 70 years in Babylon they returned to the Promised Land. They thought everything would go back to the good-old-days, which of course, never works.

The Israelites started complaining to God. “God, you aren’t treating us right. We fast and do all the right religious things, but you aren’t listening to our prayers.” The rest of the passage is God responding to their complaint. “Here is why I’m not answering your prayers.” Then God gives two reasons. First, their religious practices, including fasting, are self-focused. They fast for what they can get out of it. They draw attention to themselves and want everyone around them to notice them.

A few years ago I stopped fasting during Lent. For a number of years I had given up desserts, or given up one meal a week or even one meal a day. Then I realized that as I fasted I was focused on how much weight I could lose, or Easter became the day I could eat sweets again. Not a very good motive. It was a self-focused religious practice.

The second problem that Isaiah points out is that their fasting was harmful to others. They oppressed their workers and they argued with other people. Probably what that meant is that they required their servants to fast, but still expected them to do all their work. It’s hard to do manual labor when you haven’t eaten. It also might have meant that as they fasted and got hungry they became grumpy – I know that when I’m hungry I’m not always the nicest person to be around – and took out their frustrations on people around them.

Isaiah goes on to describe three different aspects to a faithful response to God. These are justice issues. These are what God wants from us. The first part involves working for freedom.

“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke? (Isaiah 58:6)

We live in a world in which many people are held captive against their will. I’m not talking about people who have been convicted of a crime, but people who having done nothing wrong but are still captives. 200 Nigerian school girls were kidnapped by Boko Haram. Three journalists in Egypt are in prison for doing their job. I’m sure that if you search the news you could find stories of hundreds, maybe thousands of people who are captives.

However, the captives of our world are not always behind bars or locked doors. Some of you may remember Ben Weir, the Presbyterian pastor who was held captive in Lebanon. He is actually a shirt-tail relative of mine. After he was released he and his wife, Carol, wrote a book called “Hostage Bound, Hostage Free.” Carol wasn’t behind bars but she was just as much a prisoner as he was – held captive by the fear that she might never see her husband again. Some people are held captive by memories of abuse. Others are prisoners of alcohol or drugs. There are many prisoners of our materialistic, media-saturated culture that tells us our value is based on how much money we make and how many things we own. Our worth is determined by how good looking, talented and successful we are. Our world is filled with captives. Maybe even some of you are being held captive right now. Working for justice includes helping set people free.

The second way we can work for justice involves caring for the physical needs of people. Isaiah calls us to share our food with the hungry, our homes with the homeless and our clothes with the naked. This congregation does a good job of this, especially feeding the hungry. The Food Pantry is a wonderful ministry. If you haven’t been involved in it I would encourage you to start. They probably could use more volunteers and I know that they could always use more food donations. For more than a month Tanya and I have talked about bringing food for the One Can Ministry, but we keep forgetting. I’d like to challenge everyone to remember it.

The third part of a faithful response to God involves healthy relationships with other people. Isaiah talks about not hiding from your own kin. Later on he talks about not speaking evil of others, or pointing your finger in accusation. Stating that in a positive way, working for justice as a faithful response to God includes building healthy relationships with our family and friends, even within the body of Christ.

With all that has happened here at Sharon over the past several years I imagine that one of the needs in this church is for healing of relationships. I don’t know what that means for any of you as individuals. Probably that means that some of you need to ask for forgiveness. Others need to forgive. Or maybe it means calling those who have stopped attending worship and saying, “We miss you. Hope you are doing okay and that you come back soon.” Working for justice involves working on healthy relationships.

I’d like to mention one other justice issue that is part of a faithful response to God. It comes from our passage in James. “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress” (James 1:27). Caring for those who cannot care for themselves, caring for those who are lonely, depressed or afraid, caring for anyone and everyone, is part of a faithful response to God’s love and an act of justice.

I’ll be honest with you. Social justice ministry is not one of my strengths. As an individual and as a pastor, when I hear justice issues in our world, and I’ve only mentioned a few, I tend to get overwhelmed. I don’t know how we are called to a ministry of justice. What I do know is that part of a faithful response to God involves working for justice.

I want to be careful not to give the message that we need to do these things so that God loves us. That is not a Christian message. We participate in justice ministries because we are loved, not so that we are loved. I also want to point out the amazing promises that Isaiah gives to us as we work for justice.

First, when we respond to God’s love by working for justice God’s light will overcome the darkness that surrounds us. “Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,… then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday” (Isaiah 58:8a, 10b).

Frederick Buechner describes darkness like this:

Darkness suggests a world where nobody can see very well – either themselves, or each other, or where they are heading, or even where they are standing at the moment. Darkness conveys a sense of uncertainty, of being lost, of being afraid. Darkness suggests conflict, conflict between races, between nations, between individuals…

If we are people who pray, darkness is apt to be a lot of what our prayers are about. If we are people who do not pray, it is apt to be darkness in one form or another that has stopped our mouths.

The promise we have is that when we work for justice the darkness of our lives will be overcome by Jesus Christ, who is the light of the world.

The second promise we have is healing. “Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly” (Isaiah 58:8a-b). We are called to work on healing our relationships. However, healing is not something we can do by our own strength. Healing is the work that God does for us, through us, and in us.

About the first week that I was here I overheard a comment, I don’t even know who said it, but it went something like this. “I hope he doesn’t preach about forgiveness. I’m tired of hearing about that.” I haven’t, and I won’t. You know that as followers of Jesus Christ we are called to forgive. You also probably know how hard forgiveness is. In fact, without God it is impossible.

Forgiveness and the healing of relationships is only possible through the presence of God working in our lives. In fact, I’ve had people tell me that they can’t forgive. Here is my suggestion, tell God that you can’t forgive and give him permission to work in your life so that you are able to forgive. We have the promise that God brings healing.

The third promise is for guidance. “Your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you,… The Lord will guide you continually” (Isaiah 58:81-c, 11a).

I don’t know where God is leading the Sharon church. Together we have to discover that and discern where God is leading us. However, as we do that we have the wonderful promise that God is leading us.

Finally, we have the promise of God’s protection. “Your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard” (Isaiah 58:8).

Whatever the future holds, through all the dangers and problems that we have to face, through the changes we have to struggle with, we have the amazing promise that God is Lord of this church and will protect us.

If you have not seen the movie Selma, I encourage you to do so. It was a powerful movie; disturbing, challenging, and encouraging. It ends with King giving his speech on the steps of the state capital, in Montgomery. At the end of the speech he asks the question, “How long will it take?” He answers the question. “How long? Not long, because no lie can live forever… How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. How long? Not long.”

It’s been 50 years since the march from Selma to Montgomery. As we’ve heard over the last few months, the past few years, racial issues are still part of our society. There is still work to do. We are called to work for justice. But as we work we have hope because God is still at work. As King said at the end of his speech, “How long? Not long, because ‘Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord…. Glory, glory, hallelujah. His truth is marching on.’”