

The Necessity of Justice for Christians

Stephen Van Kuiken
North Congregational U.C.C.
Columbus, OH
July 23, 2023

Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. —Matthew 6:10

Ancient Witness: Micah 6:6-8

It is not easy or popular to talk about social justice in the church. Those who do are often criticized for being “too political.” Some ministers even lose their jobs. And there are powerful forces that discourage preachers and laypeople from considering issues of justice in the church.

I remembered what Glenn Beck, a political commentator said back in 2010. He said,

Look for the words social justice or economic justice on your church website. If you find it, run as fast as you can... Now, am I advising people to leave their church? Yes! If you have a priest that is pushing social justice, go find another parish.

Wow. I found this disturbing on so many levels. And he was talking about congregations like the ones I’ve served. There’s lots of pressure, even in some progressive churches, not to preach about social justice. But we are called to do this, even at our own peril.

There’s an important distinction that is best seen between *justice* and *charity*. As people of faith, we concern ourselves not just with charity, not just with addressing the immediate pain and hunger of others. But we concern ourselves with the *right ordering of life*, with the *root causes* of that pain and hunger. Justice is not about doing good things within a particular system; it’s about working to change the system, itself.

The theologian, Daniel Day Williams said, “Justice is the order that love requires.” “Love needs law,” he said. And in our religious tradition, charity is no substitute for justice. The prophet did not say, “let *charity* roll down like mighty waters.” No, “let *justice* roll down like mighty waters!” William Sloane Coffin said that if he had one wish for the churches of America, it would be that they would see the difference between justice and charity:

Charity is a matter of personal attributes; justice, a matter of public policy. Charity seeks to alleviate the effects of injustice, justice seeks to alleviate the causes of it. Charity in no way affects the status quo, while justice leads inevitably to political confrontation.

So, *Justice is always social*. That is, it is different from individual acts of charity. Justice involves the *collective* action of society itself. It’s about establishing a *fair system*. Acts of compassion are good. Sometimes you need to address the immediate pain or hunger or suffering. But justice takes us further to address root causes. As Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.” It is about changing laws and policies and how our social system is organized. Bandages are important to stop the immediate bleeding, but justice helps

people from being cut and wounded in the first place. So the kind of justice we are talking about is distributive, not retributive. It is a justice that heals, not punishes.

There an old parable about the difference you may have heard:

One summer in the village, the people in the town gathered for a picnic. As they leisurely shared food and conversation, someone noticed a baby in the river, struggling and crying. The baby was going to drown!

Someone rushed to save the baby. Then, they noticed another screaming baby in the river, and they pulled that baby out. Soon, more babies were seen drowning in the river, and the townspeople were pulling them out as fast as they could. It took great effort, and they began to organize their activities in order to save the babies as they came down the river. As everyone else was busy in the rescue efforts to save the babies, two of the townspeople started to run away along the shore of the river.

“Where are you going?” shouted one of the rescuers. “We need you here to help us save these babies!”

“We are going upstream to stop whoever is throwing them in!”

Certainly we need compassion or charity *and* justice. The compassion of the Good Samaritan is needed to bind up the wounds. But we cannot stop there. As Martin Luther King, Jr. said,

One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway.

The church, it seems obvious to me, affirms the call to work for *both* charity and justice. And yet, justice is far more unpopular. And we need desperately more churches who are willing to stand up for social justice despite those who would try to shout us down.

You know, the cross is one of the central symbols of our faith. And the cross was not something you got when you were compassionate. It came because you *threatened the established order*. Who got the cross?

Those who stood up for religious expression.

Those who stood up for fair and equal treatment for racial minorities and women.

Those, in each generation, who stood up to power, to aggression, to violence.

Those who stood up, like Jesus, for the poor against predatory wealth and a system that is rigged against the weak.

Who got the cross? As John Dominic Crossan concluded in his magnum opus, *The Birth of Christianity*,

Those who work for compassion are often canonized.

Those who work for justice are often crucified.

And as followers of Jesus, are we not also called to this risky path? Are we not called to take up the cross and follow this him? Are we not called to be a threat to the established order and to work for greater justice in the land?

With those first communities of Christians, the establishment leaders said, “Look, these people *have turned the world upside down.*” (Acts 17:6) And if you remember, Jesus himself was accused of sedition and revolutionary behavior by the Roman and Jewish authorities, the keepers of the status quo.

God’s work was always to turn the world upside down. Mary sang that God “had put down the might from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich God has sent empty away.” (Luke 2:52-53)

Every Sunday we pray in unison the Lord’s Prayer that says, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.” (Matthew 6:10) May *your* kingdom come, O God, not just in heaven but *on earth!* Perhaps we have forgotten that this is a direct challenge to the status quo, to the way of all earthly empires. The word, “kingdom” is translated from the Greek word, *basileia*, which also means “empire.”

Perhaps we have forgotten that calling Jesus “Lord,” was a direct challenge to Caesar, the Lord and Emperor of the Roman Empire. Calling Jesus “Lord” was a subversive and politically charged thing to do. It was a challenge to the way of the empire. It still is. Jesus’ followers pray for a new kingdom and a new government with different rules and a different structure. They pray and work for a transformation of the nation to reflect more and more the compassion and justice of God.

There are many aspects to Jesus: the teacher, the mystic, the healer. But one of the aspects that is the first to be forgotten is Jesus, the social prophet. Jesus located himself in the great tradition of the prophets. He advocated a kind of peace that went beyond the personal peace of our hearts, to a kind of peace that established an entirely new order on earth. Who were the prophets? They were the truth-tellers. And they spoke to the kings. They addressed those in power, the decision-makers. In a democracy or republic, modern prophets like Martin Luther King, Jr. appeal to senators and representatives, but mostly to “we the people.” “The church needs to be reminded,” King said, “that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state.” As Christians, this is our prophetic role—to call forth greater justice and greater peace in our society.

The former Brazilian Archbishop Helder Camara once said, “When I feed the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.” And he wrote about three levels of societal violence:

Level One is violence of oppression and injustice. This is the violence that people experience when they live in poverty, hunger and deprivation. One could call this “systemic violence.” Level Two is the violence that emerges from this despair—rebellion and revolt. I would also include random, senseless violence and crime that comes out of hopelessness and rage. Level Three violence is the response to level two violence: repression and imprisonment.

A just society starts with level one, the violence of poverty and inequality. It all starts there. The prophet, Jeremiah, talked about a false peace that ignores it:

Prophets and priests are frauds, every one of them! They bind my people's wounds, but only skin deep, when they say, "Peace, peace," when there is no peace.

And Jesus challenged this superficial peace of Rome, the *Pax Romana*. He addressed the violence of oppression and injustice and was himself violently executed for sedition as a political threat of the empire.

This is an aspect of Jesus that is probably the most difficult to hear, and so this is why it is probably absent. Yes, Jesus leads us to a peace within our hearts that is unshakable and personal. But he also leads us to a peace that is external and in direct conflict with the world. Jesus called attention to the kingdom of heaven, which is internal. "It is within you," he said. But he also called for this kingdom to be established "on earth, as it is in heaven." In other words, he called for a new order, a new kingdom, a new set of laws, a transformation of society, a nonviolent revolution. He expected his followers to work to establish this new reign of peace.

When I hear someone say, "But you're being too political, Steve," I think to myself, how does one work for justice and not be political? It's impossible. Because political engagement is how we address systemic change. Sorry to break it to you, but being political is a requirement if you want to be a follower of Jesus. And even if you don't want to be political, that's impossible, too. Saying nothing says something. Not addressing issues of justice endorses and gives tacit approval to the status quo. One cannot *not* be political! As the late Bishop Desmond Tutu said, "If an elephant has his foot on the tail of a mouse, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality."

Elie Wiesel, who survived the holocaust as a young boy once wrote,

I swore never to be silent whenever or wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.

Some say, "But Steve, the gospel is more than political." I agree. Justice is not the only thing, but it is an essential thing. It may not be sufficient, but it is necessary. Social justice is not optional; it is required. "What does God require of you, O Mortal?" Love kindness? No one would debate that. Walk with humility? Yes, of course. But let's never forget: Do Justice!

I'm sorry to say, Mr. Beck, but true Christians are also social justice Christians. What does God require? Establish justice—

for the poor
for exploited workers
for LGBTQ folks
for immigrants
for the oppressed

Establish racial justice, environmental justice, voter justice.

May we work for a new kingdom, a new government, a new social order of equality, fairness and dignity on earth and not just in heaven.