

“The Path of Love and Justice”

a message by Dr. Bruce Havens

BASED ON THE THEME, “A STRANGE PATH TO GLORY”

Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.

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John 12:1-11 [NRSV]

¹Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ²There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

⁴But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵“Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” ⁶(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.)

⁷Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

⁹When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ¹⁰So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, ¹¹since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.

Recently Glenn Beck, a TV commentator, was quoted as saying if you went to your church’s web site, or heard your pastor or your church leaders talk about “social justice,” run from your church, go tell your bishop and be very afraid because these are code words for Nazism and Communism. Now, I don’t know where Glenn Beck got his theology degree, but if you think he is right, I warn you right now, you better run screaming from here because I am about to use those words. Or you can stay and I will tell you why he could not be more wrong and why you ought to care about this more deeply than anything else in your faith.

This morning’s Scripture seems to be about the disturbance Jesus and Lazarus create for those who did not like what they stood for. It starts simply enough. Jesus has gone to his friends’ house to share a meal. While he is there one of his friends gives him a foot massage. Judas, who was evidently there as well, takes offense – and in the pretext of caring about the poor – asks why the money spent to anoint Jesus’ feet wasn’t used for the needs of the poor. In response Jesus says, “The poor you will have with you always.” The whole purpose of the Christian life depends on how you hear this verse.

I say this because we believe that salvation was accomplished by Jesus.

We do not have to do anything to achieve salvation except trust that Jesus has done this for us. Because we believe this, then what we ought to care most about in our faith is what we do in response to this fact. I would argue that the whole purpose of the Christian life is to live in response to this knowledge. Some would say the whole purpose of the Christian life is to tell others about this – they call it evangelism. Others would argue that the key to the Christian life is to share with others the good news of this salvation by doing what God has called us to do, and to follow the example of what we saw Jesus do.

What few people recognize – and Glenn Beck seems absolutely ignorant of - is that Jesus stood for justice and his stance was in line with the Biblical record of his people and his God. If we want to do what Jesus did, then we must stand with Jesus for justice. Jesus said we should not neglect the responsibility to tithe while at the same time not neglecting the duty to do justice. He overthrew the cultural and religious injustices by his actions showing that women were not second-class beings, that sinners were not to be ostracized, and that foreigners were not hated by God. He challenged the economic powers by overturning the tables in the Temple. He even subverted the taxation of Rome by proposing that Caesar ought only get what was Caesar's while God should get what was God's – few people recognize that this does not legitimate Caesar; after all – does “it” not all belong to God? In short Jesus' life was a testament to God's concern for justice

for all. However, we know that economic, political, and religious justice is elusive not just now, but throughout human history.

Robert Linthicum has written a book called, *The City of God, the City of Satan* in which he talks about God's intention for the three main areas of our public lives. He says that the Bible shows that the religious systems were intended to help bring us closer to God. He says the Biblical texts show that God intended the political systems to assure just laws and enforce them fairly and evenly, and that economic systems were intended by God to assure a fair distribution of God's bounty. Now some of this flies in the face of current political philosophy, I know, and there are even those who want to twist Biblical history to make it fit their politics, but I have never heard a better description of the Biblical vision for human society. The problem, says Linthicum, is none of these three systems is living up to what God intended.

Linthicum shows the Biblical texts that illustrate that even then God's people were not living up to this. The religious systems were described as “wolves” attacking their own and eating them up. They were more concerned with controlling people's thinking and benefitting financially from their people. The political systems were allowing the wealthiest people to manipulate the courts and to leave others outside with no hope of justice. And the economic system allowed the widows, orphans, and the powerless among them suffer. It

is nothing new, but we have new excuses that we use to allow it.

One of those excuses is uniquely American, where we filter everything through the “rights” of the individual. We believe in individual rights, freedoms, salvation, and individual or as we call it private property. In contrast, God almost always speaks to Israel as a community, as a nation, as a people. God almost always put the good of the whole ahead of the individual. Paul did the same thing when he talked to his churches in the New Testament.

The second part of the problem is that many have chosen to believe that somehow government should do nothing but *at best* ensure that there is “fair economic opportunity” for all, by the barest definition. Caring for those unable to “take advantage” of the economic opportunity ought to fall on non-profits and churches. In other words, charity is the solution to the problem of the poor.

Some even quote these words of Jesus from these verses, “the poor you have with you always,” and they have made this sound like an excuse for allowing there to be people left out of God’s bounty, not allowed to share in God’s justice, and not welcome as a part of God’s love. The challenge is to clarify what is charity or – as Micah calls it- “loving mercy” over against doing justice.

ICARE has helped clarify this for me over the years by helping me see that mercy is dragging the drowning man out of the water. Justice is going upstream

with a bunch of people and stopping those who are throwing people in the water. Justice changes the system, while charity simply tries to alleviate its effects. We walk humbly with God through our worship and our studies, but everything else we do as a church except ICARE is mercy – City Rescue, Arlington Community Services, even Family Promise. While God says we should love mercy, God also says we should DO JUSTICE. You see Glenn Beck, unless Micah was a Nazi or Jesus was a Communist, social justice isn’t an invention of the enemies of America – unless America is on the wrong side of God.

This past month I read an article that challenged me to think about another implication of doing justice in relation to doing “mercy.” The writer of this article is Dr. David Hilfiker, who has worked with homeless men since 1983, most recently with those with AIDS in Washington D.C. So he certainly has walked the walk. The title of his article is very provocative – “When Charity Chokes Justice.” His basic argument is that God never intended “charity” to replace justice. He argues soup kitchens and homeless shelters and the like should be emergency responses to short term needs. Instead they have become long-term government policy to meet the basic human rights of those unable to take advantage of the so-called equal economic opportunities for all.

Some people have even argued that somehow non-profits can do this more “efficiently” than government. He

points out this is because they are dependent upon hundreds of thousands of free volunteer hours, where as a funded program would have to pay them as employees. He further points out that if non-profits took over just three government aid programs – welfare for families, disability payments, and food stamps every single church, synagogue, and mosque or other religious organization would have to raise their budget by \$300,000 per year just to cover the costs of those programs. Ultimately his point is not that we should not do mercy/ charity. He is pointing out that we must remember charity is a response to the fact that things are not the way they should be. Justice is about seeking to make things the way they should be.

The poor you will have with you always, Jesus said. I would suggest that Jesus is commenting on the sinfulness of humanity and human systems, not blessing reality as it is, or excusing us from doing justice. In this country we have taken to blaming the poor for being poor. We have taken to accusing the victim of being at fault. We have a political philosophy that rejects any claim God makes on us to make things right for those who cannot make things right for themselves. To do that we have had to demonize anyone who does not believe as we do politically, religiously, or culturally. In order to ignore that God says “I am my *sister*’s keeper,” I have to believe not only does my sister not deserve justice or mercy, but she is not my sister. This is a sinister and evil

attitude that cannot free us from our God-given calling.

Let us not play Judas to Jesus. Let us not pretend we care for the poor while we are only interested in stealing from the common purse. Let us not be accused of using Jesus’ words against Jesus’ own mission – to proclaim the presence of the Kingdom of God and the welcome God extends to all to enter into it. Most of all, let us not forget that the Kingdom of God is one where all will share in the bounty of God. All will be protected by the grace and mercy of God, and all will encounter the presence of God. You and I are called to bring this Kingdom into reality as an act of our faith in response to Jesus’ gift of salvation.

It seems to me we can do one of two things. We can follow Glenn Beck and go running and screaming out of here convinced that this is Bolshevik rantings. Or we can follow Jesus Christ and strive to do justice. I ask you to join me in doing this one thing for justice – come to the Nehemiah Assembly tomorrow night at 7:00 p.m. Be a witness for the justice of the Lord one time a year even as you walk humbly with our Lord 52 times a year, and love mercy by volunteering for one of our ministries other times a year.

Let us not allow charity to choke justice or the reality of the poor be an excuse not to make things right for the poor. Let us not be satisfied with making things better for the poor instead of making things right for the poor. AMEN.