

Title: Loving Justice  
Text: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Luke 1:46-55  
Date: December 14, 2008  
Immanuel Baptist Church  
Chuck Queen, Pastor

William Sloan Coffin has said, "I believe Christianity is a worldview that undergirds progressive thought and action. I believe the church doesn't so much have a social ethic as it is a social ethic." I would like to tweak that just a little bit and say that the gospel of Jesus Christ does not simply have or produce a social ethic it is a social ethic.

Our passage today from the Hebrew Bible is the passage Jesus read in the synagogue of Nazareth in Luke 4. It was the Sabbath and Jesus was either asked or volunteered to give the reading from the prophets. Jesus read the opening two verses of Isaiah 61 which for Luke served as Jesus' job description.

The thing that is fascinating about Jesus' reading of Isaiah 61 in Luke is where Jesus stops the reading. Isaiah reads in v. 2: "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God." But Jesus ends the reading with "the year of the Lord's favor" and says nothing about "the day of vengeance." And with all eyes fastened on him he says, "Today, this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Why did Jesus omit the reference the day of vengeance? Because in the ministry of Jesus the emphasis falls on the day of the Lord's favor, not the day of vengeance. This is where John the Baptist and Jesus differed. In Luke's account of John's preaching in chapter 3 the emphasis falls on judgment. According to Luke John says to the crowds coming out to be baptized: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? . . . The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." Maybe it was the desert environment; too many nights sleeping on rocks. For John, God's reign involved a Divine Clean Up and there was no time to waste.

Later on in Luke's Gospel (chapter 7) John is described as the one who sang a funeral dirge, while Jesus played a dancing tune. In fact, Jesus is judged by some of the religious leaders as a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners. How do you think Jesus got that reputation? He ate with "sinners," even the most notorious of sinners—tax collectors.

I don't want to leave the impression that Jesus said nothing about the judgment of God, he certainly did. But Jesus' references to judgment in Luke's Gospel are quite vague and general, speaking mostly about God's judgment on that generation because of their rejection of God's reign (Luke 11:29-32).

Jesus spoke of judgment, but Jesus emphasized grace and if we are to be true to the good news of Jesus then we must do the same. How we understand judgment and grace depends largely where we put the emphasis. If we put the emphasis on judgment then grace is mainly the means of being rescued from the wrath or vengeance of God. And we are more likely to interpret judgment as retributive punishment—sinners getting their due.

I don't know about you but I'm not very excited about getting what is my due. Something tells me that I wouldn't fare all that well if I got what I deserved. I have made a mess of too many things. And I suspect you have too.

But if we put the emphasis on grace then we are more likely to see judgment, not as punitive justice, but as restorative justice, the means by which God disciplines and redeems God's children and helps us to grow and mature and learn how to love.

Jesus didn't come to save us from God; Jesus came to save us from evil. We don't need to be saved from God, because God loves us. We need to be saved from our greed, our prejudice, our anger, and our selfishness. It's from our sins that we need to be saved, not from God.

Consider the difference between these two approaches. John lived out in the desert and people came out to him there. He spoke of snakes fleeing from a raging wildfire. He evoked a sense of fear. "Judgment is imminent," he cried, "The ax is already at the root of the tree."

Fear can, of course, effect changes in behavior. And fear may be a good thing in certain emergency situations. I heard about this guy working the four to midnight shift who walked home every night. His route passed a cemetery and one night, when he was in a particular hurry, he decided to cut through the cemetery to save time. It lopped off about five minutes from his normal time so he decided to make that his regular path. On one particularly dark night he had the misfortune of falling into a freshly dug grave. He yelled. No one came. He tried to climb out, but the hole was too deep. Finally he resigned to wait till morning. He pulled his coat up around him and settled down in one corner of the grave and went to sleep. He was awakened quite suddenly in an hour or so by the noise of a falling body. A second man had stumbled into the same grave. Sleepily, the first arrival watched his companion trying frantically to crawl out. After a minute or two of being amused by his wild attempts he spoke up, "Hey Buddy, you will never get out that way." Well—he did!

Fear can effect a change in action, but it cannot transform one's character. Fear can alter our actions for a time, but fear cannot change the source from which our actions proceed. John's message evoked a sense of fear. Jesus tried to love people into conversion. John's

approach was “The Divine Clean Up is underway. Repent and be accepted.” Jesus’ approach was: “God’s gracious rule has drawn near. You are accepted, now repent.”

Brennan Manning tells the story of an Irish priest who, on a walking tour of a rural parish, sees an old peasant kneeling by the side of the road, praying. Impressed, the priest says to the man, “You must be very close to God.” The peasant looks up from his prayers, thinks for a moment, and then smiles, “Yes, God is very fond of me.” This was the message that Jesus emphasized: “God is very fond of you.”

In announcing “the year of the Lord’s favor” Jesus is connecting the good news of God’s reign with the year of Jubilee. Built into Israel’s legislation were special provisions to defend and protect the helpless, particularly the poor, in order to prevent their oppression. Every sabbatical year the land was given a vacation, debts were erased, and slaves or indentured servants were released. On the year of Jubilee, which concluded a “week” of sabbatical cycles (every 49<sup>th</sup> or 50<sup>th</sup> year), in addition to the normal sabbatical shake up, the ownership of the land returned to the owners who held it at the beginning. Debts were forgiven, slaves were liberated, and the land was restored to their original owners. When Jesus says in the synagogue of Nazareth, “Today, this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing,” Jesus is saying that God’s reign, which he proclaimed and manifested, is about the redistribution of natural and human resources, freedom from oppression, lifting the poor out of poverty, and celebrating God’s deliverance.

This is what Isaiah is talking about when he says, “For I the Lord love justice.” This is God’s justice. This is what Jesus lived and announced as good news to the poor. God’s justice raises the poor out of poverty, restores hope and dignity to the downtrodden, frees the oppressed, and eliminates greed and the hoarding of wealth by the elite. Certainly God’s new world is about forgiving the sins we commit against each other, but it is equally about forgiving debts, literal debts, and making provision for the disadvantaged. That is God’s justice and that’s what Jesus announced as being at the heart of God’s new world, God’s rule on earth. So you see, Jesus’ gospel, Jesus’ message of good news is not just about a social ethic, it is a social ethic.

Fred Craddock recalls in his church as a child, the first time a missionary couple came from the Congo in Africa. They were agricultural missionaries. Their denomination had just started sending agricultural missionaries, sent to teach the people how to feed themselves. This bright, fun couple explained to the congregation that when they went to that village where they were, the scrawny little chickens that picked in the street laid about an egg and half a year. The chickens were not fit to eat. So they brought in a new way to raise chickens and a new strain of chickens. In a few years they had big, plump chickens for the table, and they had dozens and dozens of eggs. They could sell eggs, and they could sell chickens, and they were doing great.

When the talk was over, somebody in Craddock's church said, "I'm not sending any money to missions anymore—over there raising chickens. We gave our money for them to go over there and save their souls! (Sounds like the Southern Baptist Convention doesn't it?) Raising chickens. I'm not giving another dime to that." Craddock ends his story with a question: "Does anyone have a clue about the way some people think?"

Fred tells another story about the time he was teaching homiletics and New Testament at a small school in Oklahoma. They were hanging on by their financial fingernails. The president of the school said to Fred, "I'm in touch with a man who is concerned about improving the quality of preaching in Oklahoma. He has a lot of money and I believe he's going to give a sizable gift to our preaching program. Will you go with me to talk to him?"

Fred was delighted to go, so Fred and the president went to visit the man at his office. He was ready for them; he had the gift ready. He said, "Before we finish this I think we ought to pray." Neither Fred nor the president prayed. The man prayed. He had the money and he had the prayer. Amen.

He took his pen and was about to sign the check. His lawyer had everything prepared. This was a large donation. But before he signed he looked up and said, "Now, this all goes for the preaching program?" They said, "Yes sir, that's what it goes for." He started to write, but paused again and said, "Now, you do understand, none of this goes for women or for blacks."

The president stood up. Fred stood up. The president said, "I'm sorry, we cannot accept your money under those conditions." They started to leave. Then the man said, "Well, there are plenty of schools that will." And he was right. That man had given to schools and churches over sixty million dollars, but not a penny to women or African-Americans.

I have a question and I want you to give some serious thought. Why is it that so many Christians and churches, instead of leading the way in the struggle against injustice, why is it that so many stand in the way, either by directly opposing issues of justice or by doing nothing to promote them? It took Southern Baptists an entire century to finally repent of their participation in and support of slavery. And the vast majority of Southern Baptist Churches supported segregation and the Jim Crow laws. Why is it that still today so many Christians stand against basic civil rights for homosexual couples? Why do so many oppose women who are called and gifted to pastor from fulfilling their pastoral calling? Why do so many Christians typically oppose legislation that would lessen the disparity between the wealthy and the poor? How can that be when the good news of Jesus is not just about a social ethic, but is a social ethic?

God says, "I love justice." Jesus says that he was sent and anointed by God to preach good news to the poor and set the oppressed free. If we are followers of Jesus then we must love

justice and loving justice mean working, serving, praying, and advocating for justice. It means doing what we can to alleviate the needs of the disadvantaged and it means doing what we can to change the system that creates such a disparity between the rich and the poor.

Mary's Song of Praise (the Magnificat) announces that God's new world will involve a future reversal. When God comes to rule the world, the world will be turned upside down; it will be flipped inside out. The mighty and the powerful will be brought down from their thrones and the humble will be lifted up. The wealthy will be sent away empty handed but the hungry will be filled with good things. If that's the way things are going to come down, I hope that we find ourselves somewhere on the side of justice.

When God raised Jesus from the dead that conveyed a message of victory over death. And we have the promise and hope that death is not end, that there is more. But Christianity's emphasis on the afterlife distorts the gospel of Jesus. When Jesus announced the coming of God's new world, when Jesus proclaimed God's rule, Jesus was talking about here and now, here on earth, where we live, where the human project is being carried out. The gospel of Jesus compels us to love and pursue justice, to love grace and forgiveness, right now, where we live, and let God take care of things to come. The prophet declares, "For I, the Lord, love justice."

Gracious Lord,

Forgive us for our indifference toward and neglect of that which Jesus gave his life to and died for—the plight of the poor, the downtrodden, the oppressed, and those held captive by the domination systems of the world. May we not be afraid of you, O God, but may we come to love you with all our heart and mind and soul. And may we love what you love and give our lives for that which Jesus gave his life for—that justice, that your good will and purpose might be done on earth. Open our minds, stir our hearts, and move our wills, that we might be followers of Jesus, not just in name, but in deed and truth. For the sake of your kingdom. Amen.