

Flossmoor Community Church
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Charity Gives But Justice Changes
Isaiah 58:1-10

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I. The Text

Dr. Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy, 20th Century prophets and leaders who dedicated their lives to the cause of justice and equality. Dr. King believed, dreamed and talked of going up to the mountaintop and looking over into a world where all God's children would be judged solely by the content of their character and proclaimed that we would get to the Promise Land. Robert Kennedy in a 1968 speech to the "Voice of America" broadcast worldwide stated more specifically, "Things are moving rapidly in the area of race relations. There is no question in my mind that in the next 40 years a Negro can attain the same position that my brother had as President of the United States. We are making progress and will not accept the status quo." This week as we celebrate the birthday of Dr. King on Monday and the inauguration of Barack Obama on Tuesday, dreams and prophecies thought improbable and by many impossible are being fulfilled. Hallelujah!!!

Long before Dr. King and Robert Kennedy graced this Earth there lived an Old Testament prophet named Isaiah. With his opening words in Isaiah 58, the prophetic purpose is proclaimed. The primary role of prophets was to call God's people to repentance, to demand their return to obedience and to remind the people what it means to live lives in keeping with the covenant. Here he worries that holding so tightly to the laws and doing feel-good charity they have completely missed the opportunity to transform lives and do justice. Listen to the word of God in Isaiah 58 beginning with verse one.

Let us Pray .

I ask you to think and pray with me on the subject: "Charity Gives But Justice Changes"

II. Introduction

The story is told of a Franciscan monk in Australia who was assigned to be guide and escort to Mother Teresa when she visited New South Wales. After having visited her convent and orphanage in India, I understand why he was thrilled and excited at the prospect of being so close to this great woman. He dreamed of how much he would learn from her. But during her visit, he became frustrated. Although he was constantly near her, the friar never had the opportunity to say one word to her. There were always people for her to meet. Finally, the tour was over and she was due to fly to New Guinea. In desperation, the Franciscan friar spoke to Mother Teresa: If I pay my own fare to New Guinea, can I sit next to you on the plane so I can talk to you and learn from you? Mother Teresa looked at him. "You have enough money to pay airfare to New Guinea?" she asked. Yes, he replied eagerly. "Then give that money to the poor," she said. "You'll learn more from that than anything I can tell you." Mother Teresa understood that Jesus' ministry was to the poor and she made it hers as well. She, like Jesus, also understood the need to challenge the status quo and demand a systemic change to end poverty and suffering.

So how do we help the poor? How do we change the life of someone in need so they no longer need our help? Isaiah says it's acts of justice, mercy, compassion, sacrifice. The Hebrew term used to define any charitable endeavor is *tzedakah*, which can be translated by the word "charity" but literally means "righteousness" or "justice." Charity is something very familiar to us all. We hear someone is in need and we give some money or gifts to help. Charity is the first step in giving. *Tzedakah* is the second step. I have always loved Jesus' statement: "No greater love does a man have than he lay down his life for a friend." There is love and then there is a greater love. There is charity then there is the love that Isaiah describes and Dr. King envisions. We as Christians are all called to a higher love. A love that changes. A love beyond merely giving. We are called to three purposes.

III. We Are Called to Compassion: The Spirit not the Letter

When I read the words of Isaiah 58 I get the sense that God is frustrated. He is frustrated that he has to explain what should be obvious. He has to explain the "no brainer." He has to explain that which has been with them for hundreds of years. Something they have had plenty of time to absorb and understand. What is it? It's the Ten Commandments. I guess it shouldn't surprise us. 700 years later after the death of Isaiah someone else had to explain the Ten Commandments: It was Jesus. If you take a close

look at the "Sermon On The Mount" in Matthew 5 it's primarily a teaching and explanation of the Ten Commandments. So I am sure from time to time God sits in heaven with his head in his hands, "Why must I always explain."

I think God should have written an eleventh commandment. Right after Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not covet, He should have written "And you know what I'm talking about. Don't make me explain myself." In our scripture Isaiah mentions what the Israelites must do to keep the spirit of the commandments alive. In response, the Israelites attempted to live their lives for God, but there was one law they missed. That hidden eleventh commandment that whispers in your ear - you know what God is talking about. You know what he means when he says, "Do not murder." He doesn't simply mean don't stick a knife in someone's chest and cause them to die. He means don't participate in all the evil leading up to such an event: The anger, the jealousy, the revenge, the getting even, the rage, the hatred.

We can follow an external interpretation of the Law and keep it perfectly or we can follow an internal interpretation of the Law and allow the commandments to influence our entire world. Which will it be? Do we want to legally keep the commandments or do we want to spiritually keep them? I'm sure you want to keep the spirit of the law. I know that about you. I trust in your Christian character. I have seen your compassion. And that's the key. It's a deep seated compassion in our hearts, that God places there, that enables us to see the true intent of the Law and not just what's written down on paper. Compassion is allowing God to write the law upon on our hearts and not just in our heads. Keeping the commandments means building relationships: Our relationship to our family. Our relationships with one another. Our relationship with the poor. Our relationship with God.

IV. We Are Called to Action: Works not just Words

So God has called us to Compassion. That's our first calling as Christians. Secondly, we are called to Action. Isaiah challenges those worshipers in the temple to get off their knees and onto their feet. God doesn't need their empty praise. God is not honored when they lie about in "sackcloth and ashes." What honors God is for them to be actively helping those whose most basic human needs are not being met.

Let me tell you that I am extremely proud of our church. We give to the community and we give to the world. We help the poor on many occasions with our weekly offerings and we are daily involved in missions such as in New Orleans, Central America and Africa. We are a charitable church. Let

us never grow weary of giving. But let me add that charity is no substitute for Justice. Charity gives but Justice changes. Let me say that again: Charity gives but Justice changes. It changes the lives of the poor for the good and for good.

Justice sends a young girl to school who can't afford it. Justice lends, expecting nothing in return, to the African entrepreneur to start a small family business which sustains his family for a life time. Justice demands that free markets stop preventing the poor from selling their products in the open market at competitive rates. Justice demands that the richest nations forgive the debts of the poorer nations. For all that charity does, it is a band-aid when structures in our corporate and political world prevent real change. Charity is a temporary provision. It provides temporary relief, however it does not deal with the root causes of the problem.

The parable of the good Samaritan is a classic example of a charitable response. The parable does not speak about any attempt on the part of the good Samaritan to do anything about the root causes of highway robbery. He did nothing to provide better road conditions and security measures that would help prevent robberies. He did nothing to provide reform efforts for the robbers or better job conditions for would-be robbers. Nor did he do anything to eliminate the economic disparity between the haves and the have-nots. He took the wounded man to an inn to provide for his temporary needs. However, justice goes beyond the inn. To be sure, sometimes radical change is demanded like right now given the issues and challenges we face in our country today.

This is why I say charity gives but justice changes; it demands the changes necessary for the lives of the poor to be elevated on a level playing field with us all.

The final, greatest type of giving is the establishment of true relationship, a partnership, a binding relationship for mutual aid, between the giver and receiver, the rich and the poor. At that point there really is no longer a "giver" or a "receiver," a "rich" person and a "poor" person. There is only a newly created relationship within the community. It is that highest form of "charitable" relationship, righteousness that is no longer charity but community, that really transforms the world. Pope Benedict has said that "the Church's deepest nature is expressed in her three-fold responsibility: of proclaiming the word of God, celebrating the sacraments and exercising the ministry of charity. These duties presuppose each other and are inseparable." Pope Benedict went on to say: "The Church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible. She cannot and must not replace the states. Yet at the same time she cannot and

must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. She has to play her part to reawaken the spiritual energy and sacrifice necessary for the struggle.

V. We Are Called to Community: Wii not i

And this brings us to our third point: First, we are called to Compassion. Second we are called to Action. And third we are called to Community. We need a major paradigm shift from how "charitable" ministries are conceived and conducted in most churches today. Many ministries major in principles and minor in relationships. As the head of a rescue mission stated not too long ago, "Our biggest problem with Christians is that they all want to take stands for the poor, to come here visit the poor, view the poor, and to "hand-out" food to the poor" especially at Thanksgiving and Christmas. But you can shake a stick at the number of Christians who come here wanting a relationship with the poor. Because more than one billion people worldwide live on less than \$1 a day. We need to reshape the way we help people; strengthening the poor so they can take control, solve their own problems, and rely on themselves. One of the greatest hindrances to socioeconomic progress for the poor is public health. The poor need basic health: Immunization, nutrition, diabetes medication, clean water, treatment centers for the addicted, access to maternity care, cancer treatment, and a host of other disease controls. And it's not enough to simply fund relief efforts, again that is only the first step in helping the world community; we must go a step further and demand that governments, world agencies, and large international corporations get to root causes that hinder real change, and believe me, there are many political and economic structures that hinder real help. As a worldwide community of faith God's people can stand up, act for the poor, and demand change. An unlikely model for the kind of shift that is needed in the church is the new game console by Nintendo called the Wii. That's spelled "we" but pronounced "we." Until now gaming has been something done almost in isolation and by the young. But the Wii can be found in nursing homes and at the center of family entertainment centers. Why? Because Nintendo changed the joy stick and made it work like the real world works. My son and I have played Wii. When we play the bowling game which can be done with multiple people we actually go through the same actions a bowler goes through. Same with tennis and golf and several other games. Suddenly everyone can understand a video game because everyone understands how to bowl, how to swing a racket. The video game is no longer a bunch of buttons but like real life. And let me tell you that's justice because this father can finally beat his son at a video game. The Wii has leveled the playing field between modern kids and out of date dads like me.

Here's my point: Charity requires that I give. Justice requires that I change the game so I am no longer required to give, because everyone can play the game the same as me, so they can live, move, and have their being in the same community as all of us. We face the present reality that the future is greatly threatened around the globe by extreme poverty. We have the power to raise our voices against this situation and demand more action from our governments, our corporations, our churches and ourselves.

Last year I facilitated the two classes on the book, *Encountering Jesus*, by Dr. Zan W. Holmes. We had discussed encountering Jesus through the Bible, Worship, Preaching, the Community and Seeking Justice. In the last session we asked the question, where should we as a church focus our efforts. Both classes said Seeking Justice. Justice is powered by personal commitment and fueled by hope. Growing up most of us pledged that we are: One nation under God indivisible, with liberty and justice for all. Today, as I preach God's word on the eve of Dr. King's birthday and two days before the Inauguration, I stand before you unashamed to tell you that yesterday, I couldn't help but shed a tear as I watched the Inaugural Train go from Philadelphia to Wilmington to Baltimore to Washington. These were tears of HOPE. I believe God put us here on this Earth for a short time to not just live here but to make a difference. May we as God's church be committed and hopeful as we continue to be charitable while seeking Justice. Justice for all that transforms not just our community but changes hearts, minds and lives across the world. If I can help somebody, then my living will not be in vain.