



SAINT MARK'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

A Lent 4, 4th Mark of Mission, Transform Unjust Structures

St. Mark's, Little Rock, 3-26-17

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There's a story told

about village that was located near a river.

One day there were children playing near the water

And they saw a person floating down the river

who needed help.

One of them ran for the adults.

And the adults came and pulled the person out of the river

And took him back to town.

They treated him medically

and began to nurse him back to health.

A few days later

some people from the village

saw another person

floating down the river.

She too was still alive

and so they pulled her from the water,

went to work

treat her and

nursed her back to health.

And the next day

it happened again.

And again they went to work

to restore the person

back to health.

And so it continued to happen

that almost every day

they found another person in distress

floating down the river.

Until finally one day

one of the townspeople

had a moment of clarity

and told the others

“I think its time that we go upstream

And find out

why all these people are floating down the river?”

In this little story

we see two kinds of justice at work in the world:

one - justice by individuals for individuals that we might also call charity

the other – we call social justice

because it involves going upstream

to cause the of things.

Both are biblical

and both are part

of the mission of the church.

Upstream work or social justice

is the essence of the 4th mark of mission

as stated by our Anglican communion

And to is to “transform unjust structures

and pursue peace and reconciliation.

In seminary

I had my own ah ha experience

about the meaning of justice

One my classmates during the first semester asked me

what the justice meant?

I answered “fairness”

And I suppose that was true to a point

especially for one whose main image of justice

was the statue of

lady justice

blindfolded

holding the scales of scales.

But later

as we continued to study Bible in seminary

I was amazed.

Because in the Bible

when it comes to justice

I discovered

that God

does not wear a blind fold.

God sees.

For example at perhaps the most critical juncture
in the entire Old Testament
when the Hebrew people
are enslaved by the Egyptians.

God speaks to Moses
and says

I have seen
the misery of my people.
I have heard their cry;
Indeed I know their sufferings

And I have come down to deliver them

And to call you Moses
to your mission.

Now at this point I want you to notice

that God could have called Moses
to start some kind of underground railroad.

God could have called Moses go back to Egypt
and bring them out 10 or 20 or even a 100 a time.

Nothing wrong with that.

But with 600,000 people in slavery
not counting women and children,
the slaves would be giving birth
faster than Moses
could ever get them out.

Instead

God calls Moses

to go upstream

on a political mission.

“Go now, Moses

and tell Pharoah

Let my people go.”

Years later

in the promised land

God

knows that there is a little bit of Pharoah

in everybody

even the people of God,

and so not wanting anyone to go without food

or the things needed to have a decent life

like clothing, or work

or relief from sickness

God gives the people the Torah

which includes laws

about feeding the hungry

and caring for the sick

or rescuing animals.

For example,

Torah said “Do not harvest all the way to the edge of the field”

that grain belongs to the widow, the orphan

and the immigrant.

God could have mandated charity

God could have simply instructed the people to feed the hungry

But instead God put laws in place

So that the most vulnerable members of society

would have legal access to food

not merely charity.

In the New Testament

We learn that justice is central to Jesus' mission as well.

In fact, Isaiah prophesies about the coming Messiah

"I will put my spirit upon him

says the Lord

And he will bring justice to the earth.

Sure enough

whenever Jesus finds laws, or institutions or social structures

which are harming people instead of helping them,

Jesus challenges them

Jesus transforms them.

When ritual purity laws required

sinners and tax collectors and prostitutes

to be excluded from the community

Jesus includes them.

He shares meals with them

even though it is against the law.

And when the people were hungry

on the Sabbath

it was against the Sabbath law to harvest grain

but Jesus engages in some legal disobedience

he feeds them anyway.

And he did the same
whenever someone needed healing on the Sabbath.

For he knew in his heart
the Sabbath was made for people
not people for the Sabbath.

Now in some ways the mission to transform unjust structures
is the hardest work of all.

Because when we go upstream
we must often confront the powers and principalities of this world

But whenever I am inclined to think that there is nothing I can do
Something or someone always calls me back to remember
That God always worked through one person at time
And often against all odds.

And indeed God is already work in the world
God is already upstream

And I believe calling us
to go there too.

I want to close with a story that I heard this week
about Buckminster Fuller

Fuller's best known as the architect of the geodesic dome
But he was ahead of his time
with other inventions too.

The story goes that one day Fuller was studying the rudders
on a great ship, the Queen Mary.

Fuller calculated that it would take
an enormous amount of power
to turn even one of these rudders
much less several rudders

But then he noticed

that on the back of the massive rudder

there was also

a small rudder attached

called a trim tab.

And it didn't take much energy to turn a trim tab.

But he realized that when a trim tab is turned

it creates a negative pressure

along the large rudder

much like the negative pressure on an airplane wing

And negative pressure

then makes it much easier

to turn the large rudder

and eventually turn

even a great ship.

Fuller said in an instant he realized

that's what he was

- A trim tab

And that's what his life could be.

Although small

and seemingly insignificant ,

He could be a trim tab in the world.

I share this because

Maybe that's all God is asking us to be

as disciples.

None of us can save the world

only God can do that.

What we can be

is a trim tab

and turn upstream.