

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: January 18, 2015
Sermon Title: Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Scripture Litany on Justice (various)

Scripture Litany on Justice

Deacon:

The Lord works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed.
(Psalm 103:6)

Congregation:

Follow justice and justice alone, so that you may live and possess the land
the Lord your God is giving to you. (Deuteronomy 16:20)

Deacon:

Defend the cause of the weak . . . maintain the rights of the poor and
oppressed. (Psalm 82:3)
This is what the Lord says, maintain justice and do what is right.
(Isaiah 56:1)

You know what is right: do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.
(Micah 6:8)

Congregation:

Let justice roll down like the water, and righteousness like an ever-flowing
stream. (Amos 5:24)

Deacon:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by Thy name, Thy Kingdom come,
Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. (Matthew 6)

TOGETHER:

The Lord is known by justice . . . he loves justice . . . blessed are they who
maintain justice . . . by justice a ruler gives a country stability . . . For the
Lord is a God of justice . . . Evil people do not understand justice . . . When
justice is done, it brings joy. (Various)

The opening scene of the powerful new movie, "Selma," is unbearable to
watch. Four little girls, dressed in their Sunday best, descend the stairs of

the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, on a Sunday morning. And for those who know our American history, we know what happens. Yet another "slaughter of the innocents," perpetrated by the world's worst cowards who bombed the church to smithereens, killing the little girls.

We are all horrified by the barbarism of ISIS and their God-hating buddies who take child abuse to the most abominable levels. And yet in my lifetime that's what Christians did to other Christians right here in America. I'll bet anything that the devils who planted the bomb in that Birmingham church were baptized Christians, probably Protestants. That's a strange irony, isn't it? The eternal contradiction between faith and evil and the eternal partnership between faith and evil.

Our Scriptures today portray that eternal paradox that is Faith. We worship a God who loves justice, demands justice, stands foursquare for justice. Yet justice is mocked every day the world over, despite thousands of years of civilization, 2,000 years of Christianity, 240 years of America; despite high culture and lofty ideals and sacred texts; despite plenty of religion; despite evidence and courts and witnesses and videotape; despite progress, justice can still be elusive, precious and mocked.

I went to a very religious prep school, what is now the Northfield Mount Herman School, founded by America's foremost Christian evangelical, D. L. Moody. We had mandatory Bible classes, mandatory chapel, mandatory Sunday church. I preached there back in June. It was the single most intimidating, scary, nerve-racking event of my life. Try preaching to a church full of people you hung out with when you were 13, half of whom I dated and the other half I borrowed money from. I actually said that to them.

Events like that flood you with memories, and as I climbed to the pulpit in June, one word flashed into my brain: Habakkuk. *Habakkuk*. I suddenly remembered that our headmaster, whenever he preached, preached from the Book of Habakkuk, one of the least-known, least-quoted books of the Bible. Habakkuk. I'll bet you can't even spell it! Anyway, Habakkuk was one of those Old Testament prophets, the ones we've never heard of, never use in church: Nahum, Haggai, Zephaniah, Zechariah, Malachi . . . and Habakkuk.

He worked around six centuries before Christ, and he wasn't happy. Life didn't seem fair. God didn't seem fair. The world was full of miserable people doing miserable things; rotten people doing rotten things; lots of bad guys from bad countries doing bad things. Habakkuk was fed up, not just with the bad people; he was also fed up with God!

It's popular nowadays to ask, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" But Habakkuk had his own twist on that. He wanted to know, "Why do good things happen to bad people? Why do bad people get away with so much?"

Leo Durocher, a notorious curmudgeonly baseball manager, famously said, "Nice guys finish last," which strongly implies, "Bad guys finish first," and it does seem that way. And that's what infuriated Habakkuk to the point where the whole Book of Habakkuk is a testy exchange between him and God about where the heck is God and when the heck is God going to take a stand and start helping, be proactive, do the right thing? Right in the very first verse, Habakkuk confronts God, "How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? I see violence and cry out 'Violence!' but you do not help! Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? There is strife and conflict everywhere. The law is paralyzed, the wicked hem in the righteous, and justice is perverted." (Habakkuk 1:1-4)

To which God responds, "Don't worry, I've got a handle on everything! I'm going to take some of the bad guys and get them to go after the really bad guys," sort of an Old Testament version of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." Like watching Iran help Iraq defeat ISIS, watching Russia and Syria defeat Islamic terrorists, watching the Nigerian government defeat Boko Haram. To which Habakkuk responds, "Are you nuts?" To which God responds, somewhat gently, "Wait. Watch. Listen. Trust."

Indeed. The one verse Habakkuk is famous for is God's pronouncement, "The righteous will live by faith." (Habakkuk 2:4) "The righteous, the good guys, the good people, the good religion, the good nation, the righteous live by faith." *To live by faith.* Well, it's not easy, especially in troubled times, whether it's personal trouble or worldwide trouble. To live by faith is a choice, a choice to believe in tomorrow, a choice to believe that there is a way, there is a plan, there is hope.

If you've seen the movie "Unbroken," or read the book, you know that when the hero Lou Zamperini crashes into the Pacific during World War II, three of the airmen survived, clinging to a thoughtfully equipped rubber raft. In the raft is a good supply of specially made highly concentrated chocolate bars, enough to keep the three soldiers nourished and energized for several days. It's a hopeful sign. They are assured of tomorrow and tomorrow and several tomorrows down the road. But that night, one of the soldiers eats ALL the chocolate. He couldn't "live by faith." He could not believe in tomorrow. The rottenness of his today, the injustice of his today, the uncertainty of his today was all he could think about. In one of the interesting twists of the story, the young man full of chocolate was the only one not to survive. Especially in the book, you get the sense he died of despair.

God tells Habakkuk, "The righteous will live by faith," and the Bible later declares, "Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we cannot see." *Faith is being SURE of what we hope for and CERTAIN of what we cannot see.* That's a powerful way to live, and that's a choice.

Martin Luther King lived in turbulent times, the kind of times that we live in today . . . the kind of times that made Habakkuk yell at God, the kind of times Jesus lived in. "The times that try men's souls," (Thomas Paine) when "the best of times and the worst of times" (Charles Dickens) live side by side.

Yet those times bring out the best in us. Habakkuk accept God's challenges; he chooses to "live by faith," knowing that the day will come "when God has crushed the leader of the land of wickedness . . . so I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us. Though everything else fails, yet I will rejoice in the Lord. I will be joyful in God my Savior." (Habakkuk 3:13, 16-19)

That's a statement of faith, isn't it? To stand in the middle of terror, as we do today, and stand in the middle of injustice, as Dr. King and Habakkuk did, and declare confidently, "I will wait patiently for calamity to come upon the enemy invading us. I will rejoice in the Lord and be joyful in God my Savior!" That's Habakkuk's choice. Jesus's choice is even more stunning. "Love your enemies," he dares, "love your enemies."

Now, there's a challenge. I don't care how we shape it, explain it, or rationalize it, seeing "love" and "enemies" in the same sentence is a real stretch. But Martin Luther King figured it out, and I am starting to. In our Bible Study this year, I've suddenly realized that Jesus's life and teachings are meant as a strategy. Jesus isn't interested in theology and doctrine and dogma. It wasn't Jesus who came up with Transubstantiation, the Trinity, the Apostles' Creed, or the Rapture.

Jesus stuck with strategy, providing a plan for daily life meant to benefit our daily life. Jesus emphasized ways to minimize stress, maximize happiness, keep us focused, and lower the temperature (which may not be a good phrase to use in the midst of this frigid winter). And one way is "Love your enemies." Why? Because sometimes it works. Dr. King actually addresses this. He wrote, "Now there is a final reason Jesus says, 'Love your enemies.' It is this: that love has within it a redemptive power that transforms individuals. Just keep being friendly, just keep loving, and they can't stand it too long. Oh, they'll react in many ways in the beginning, they'll react with guilt feelings, and sometimes they'll hate you a little more at that transition period, but just keep loving them. And by the power of your love, they break down under the load. That's why Jesus says, 'Love.' There is something

about love that builds us and is creative. There is something about hate that tears us down and is destructive. So, 'Love your enemies.'"

Let me say even before you think it, "Yeah, and they killed him." Sure enough, they did kill him, and that's where faith comes in, doesn't it? "Faith is to be sure of what we hope for, and certain of what we cannot see." Maybe we don't see results in our lifetime. Maybe we get killed for doing what's right. Maybe there is an eternal life that makes it all worthwhile. Maybe it's our children who benefit from our efforts, *and* sometimes, maybe doing the right thing the right way does pay off in this life.

Dr. King made his choice with eyes wide open, knowing the risks, knowing the consequences, knowing the results; believing in the cause of justice with this life, believing in heaven's justice in the next life, knowing he was a winner either way. He did not seek martyrdom, he did not flaunt martyrdom, he did not want martyrdom, but he dared to risk martyrdom. Justice was that important. That's what led King to say, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere . . . If I cannot do great things, I can do small things in a great way . . . Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that . . . Faith is taking the first step, even when you can't see the whole staircase. I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear." (Nguyen, Vi-An. "15 of Martin Luther King Jr.'s Most Inspiring Motivational Quotes." *Parade's Community Table*. N.p., 20 Jan. 2014. Web. 21 Jan. 2015.)

Race is a complicated issue isn't it? Just saying, "Race is a complicated issue" is complicated. The attorney general was severely criticized for saying, "In things racial, we continue to be, in too many ways, essentially a nation of cowards; certain topics are off limits." I first heard that sentiment 17 years ago when Ted Carter, a very wonderful and thoughtful and dignified member of our church, took me to lunch and urged me to push our church deeper into Bridgeport to confront what he called "our national cowardice when it comes to race."

Our president and the New York City mayor have been harshly criticized for admitting racial realities like "the talk" that parents have with their children of color about encounters with the police. What was odd is that so many of the people I heard on radio and TV condemning Obama and de Blasio quickly added, "Of course, everyone should talk to their children about how to deal with the police," but somehow it was O.K. for them to say it, just not parents of children of color. Race is a complicated issue.

For those of us of a certain age, we can't help but be impressed, even amazed, at the progress made in America in matters of justice, fairness, race, and all sorts of issues of equality.

I remember my father running out of the house early one morning. Queens, the 1950s . . . there had been a cross burning on a neighbor's lawn a few blocks over. In the '60s, my college years saw the civil rights movement, Dr. King murdered, two Kennedys killed, Malcolm X murdered, my college shut down by protests, my seminary shut down by protests, cities were on fire.

My first real job was in Brooklyn. I'd get off the subway and run for cover, darting from parked car to mailbox to trucks, avoiding gunfire on the way to the church where I worked. Black soldiers went off to Vietnam, unable to go to certain schools, certain swimming pools, certain restaurants. And if they came back dead, they were unwelcome in certain cemeteries.

The college I went to had fraternities that didn't allow Jews, didn't allow blacks. The world I grew up in made Dr. King . . . it made Dr. King . . . it made him think, question, believe, and act. But he did not act alone. He had God on his side, he had the Bible on his side, he had churches on his side.

Every year Warde High School students come to our church as part of a day-long field trip to various religious places. I am given an hour with them to explain Protestantism, Congregationalism, and Christianity, plus our attitude toward war, homosexuality, other religions, and civil rights. For the civil rights part I make it very easy. I tell them the whole civil rights thing is about us, it's our family. Most of the slave traders were Protestants. Most of the slave owners were Protestants. Most of the slaves were made into Protestants. The abolitionist movement was mostly Protestants. The civil rights leaders were mostly Protestant ministers. They held their meetings and rallies in Protestant churches. And on the marches they sang our old Protestant hymns.

And if you remember Dr. King's famous march from Selma to Montgomery, when you see the film, you'll remember that the march failed before it even got out of Selma. Police brutality, beatings, politics, all took their toll. At that point, on the precipice of failure, Dr. King sent out a clarion call across America for clergy, for people of faith, to come to Selma and join the march.

People came. Some were killed, but people came. One of them was my father. My father was pastor of a little church in Queens, didn't have much money (he was making about a \$6,000 salary), but he flew to Alabama to march with Dr. King. Last year I told you that only recently did I ask my father how his church responded. He said, "I never told them. I was afraid of their reaction." All those years, I imagined he got back, was welcomed like a hero, probably preached about it the next Sunday, with the church giving him a standing ovation, taking up an extra collection to pay for his ticket, maybe articles in the *New York Daily News* about my dad's marching for

justice with Dr. King. Instead, the reality was he wasn't sure of how even his friends would react. So he didn't tell them.

Well, we've come to the end of the sermon. Where are we? What have we learned? Our Bible cries out for justice. "Follow justice, and justice alone . . . Maintain justice, and do what is right . . . Let justice roll down like the waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Our Bible is clear. Our God is clear. But historically our record as God's church is mixed. Sometimes we stood for justice. Sometimes we stood still. Sometimes we turned our backs.

The good news is the church has moved in the right direction, emulating Dr. King's famous quote, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." (Theodore Parker, via Martin Luther King Jr.) And that's been true of the church. The bad news is people don't look to the church much anymore. We haven't lost our way, but we've lost our sway. The way to have sway is to look at the best Christianity has had to offer and let that be our best foot forward.

In my many years with Habitat for Humanity, I crisscrossed America meeting African-Americans all around our country, from great legendary civil rights leaders to tenant farmers, from sharecroppers to the greatest preachers, from ghetto squatters and shack dwellers to community leaders and stalwarts of American life. All people of faith.

In those days, most Habitat work was church based, led by church people, done by church people, all people of faith. I didn't meet with rage. I didn't meet with despair. I didn't meet with bitterness. I met with people of faith, people who had stood up for justice every step of their lives and paid for it. Those who were beaten up and beaten down could still choose to "live by faith," then let us, with our blessed lives, match faith with faith. And be able to sing and mean it:

"Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory

*Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;
he is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
he has loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword;
his truth is marching on.*

*Glory, glory, hallelujah!
Glory, glory, hallelujah!
Glory, glory, hallelujah!
His truth is marching on.*

*He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat;
he is sifting out all human hearts before his judgment seat;
O be swift, my soul, to answer him; be jubilant, my feet!
Our God is marching on. [Refrain]*

*In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,
with a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me;
as he died to make us holy, let us die to make all free,
while God is marching on. [Refrain]*