

DOING SOCIAL JUSTICE WITH POLITICALLY DIVERSE COMMUNITIES THEOLOGICAL AND PASTORAL PERSPECTIVES

The Beginning of the Galilean Ministry

14 Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

The Rejection of Jesus at Nazareth

16 When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

*¹⁸ 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.*

*He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,*

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' ²²All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, 'Is not this Joseph's son?' ²³He said to them, 'Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, "Doctor, cure yourself!" And you will say, "Do here also in your home town the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum."' ²⁴And he said, 'Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town. ²⁵But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.' ²⁸When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. ³⁰But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

A myth often heard in parishes is that the church needs to stay away from politics. That is impossible. What you choose to talk about or not talk about is a highly political decision. Your silence favors some political perspectives over others and blesses the status quo. Consequently, some people in your church will feel they don't have a voice or are not welcome as you avoid the so called untouchable subjects. In fact, your task might be to try to amplify that voice. Make a list of the things you think people would be too afraid to talk about and then start there.

One favorite piece of advice is that if we do pastoral care well it gives you room to do social justice. That is true to a degree. You really need to connect with people and let them know that you care about them. Pastoral care is essential but we must be careful not to use it so we can something else. Social justice work is intrinsic to doing good pastoral care which includes advocating for changing attitudes, policies and laws which inhibit people from being fully human. If someone comes to your office, tears up, and tells you that can't afford their housing

costs and need help with the light bill, this may be an indicator of some imbalance or injustice in your community that may require a government solution. Ask, how many people in your community have to spend more than 30% of their income on Housing and then ask if you can do something about it. You are a bearer of hope. Don't fail to address the whole person by failing to offer comprehensive care.

A healthy congregation is engaged in justice work and mission. This work begins with relationships. Relationships with your parishioners and relationships with people in your community. The word parish does not refer to the four walls of your church but a geographic location which your church serves. Your parishioners are not just the people who come to your church and pay their pledge. Your parish includes many people, some of whom may never come to your church, which are deserving of your care interest and attention. So we must get out there. Go to town hearings. Attend political events. Show up at protests. Go to homeless shelters. Be present in nursing homes. Attend events at your local school. Go to places where you feel you are out of your comfort zone. Be present, listen well, and don't feel you need to speak or control the situation. And don't just go by yourself. But bring the members of your church with you. Actually, it makes sense to learn of their interests in the community and then go with them to events that interest them.

It is not true that the church can't advocate for policies and laws which it thinks will benefit the community and especially the poor and disenfranchised. To the contrary, the church has a duty to do so and always has.

Assume that the statistics in your community generally reflect the demographic in your congregation. There might be some variations. But you will have a significant percentage who are spending too much on health care, housing and child care and will see little appreciable benefit from the tax bill. The needs of those parishioners are just as important as anyone else. Do not fall into the trap that these problems are reserved for people in another part of the state or another part of town. Assume the percentage of people in your church is about the same percentage of people who struggle in your community. You are a pastor to all of them.

Most churches have political diversity at least the healthy ones do. There may be a debate in your church about whether the government can address our economic needs or whether it is better to cut government programs and give people more of the money to spend themselves. There are some things which the government needs to handle and some things best handled by the private sector.

Government is important. Government provides for the common good and welfare of all. It helps us do things we cannot accomplish on our own. For example, good public roads cannot be built or repaired without our collective tax dollars. Businesses and individuals alike rely on good roads, sewers, water system so that they can flourish. We have also said as society that we must provide a basic safety net of social security because there was a time when the needs of elderly people in destitute poverty could not be met by private charities. This is when churches stepped up and said that there needs to be basic protection like providing a pension for elderly people and those who had the misfortune of becoming disabled. It is still true today that there are other services the Government needs to provide and we need to tax people to pay for it.

Government, however, can be seen as an impediment. It's that thing which takes a lot of money from us which we could better use by ourselves. I think there are people who have been abused by taxation. You may have small business owners who really feel nicked and dimed while more wealthy businesses get a better break. They feel like they have really high health care costs for their employees but feel ill equipped to pay for them. They are leery of one more mandate. They might say "just let me keep more of my money and I will do the right thing."

Most people have very good reasons for why they vote for one person over another based on their upbringing and life experience.

Now you might lean one direction or another. And when you preach, your bias may show. If you engage scripture faithfully, you darn well will develop a bias. Yes, it will show. Some people will be heartened by what you say, Others may be angry with you and accuse you of doing bidding for the Democrats or the Republicans. They say things like you are too liberal or too conservative depending on their leanings. With this pressure, we may choose to say very little of consequence for fear we will tick some one off. If we are fully going to do our job and live up to our ordination vows, we need to figure out how to get out of this trap.

Ask your Council to free you from the pressure of having everyone agree with you. You are there to preach a Gospel which provoke, comfort, challenge, enlightens and heals. You are there to help stimulate thinking and challenge people come to their own sense of what it means to be faithful. Remind people of what Martin Luther, said 500 years ago, "If you preach the gospel in all its aspects with the exception of the issues that deal specifically with your time, you are not preaching the Gospel at all."

Create spaces for people to talk about ideas. Have forums. Create Bible studies and places for people to pray. Be a host to public conversations. Invite guests to a forum which might challenge your own cherished ideas and thinking. For instance, in one church I invited Howard Dean one Week and the former Republican governor a few weeks later. The church might be one of the last places in our democracy where we can practice civil discourse.

Worship provides a very important space where we bring our diversity, our yearnings and struggles before a God who embraces all of who we are and what we think and feel. Art, music, silence, prayer, whimsy, inclusion, faithful words, graciousness and hospitality all matter and create a space where people are free to explore and search.

If you feel that there are things happening in the world or the community which are damaging and diminishing to people, you have a moral duty to say something. Your silence can be cruel and may cause some people in your church who are struggling to feel diminished.

Think ecumenical and interfaith. Know the tradition of your denomination and its social statements but bring the gifts of that tradition into the public conversation.

Resist carelessly using labels like Republican or Democrat, Liberal or Conservative to categorize people and their perspective. Don't let people categorize you either. Our job is to get

in touch with people's real needs and concerns and then evaluate whether the rhetoric of those representing us are addressing people's reality. For instance, be leery of the person who says they have a really great deal for you on your taxes. Ask more questions. Do the math. That politician's claims might start to fall apart. Not all Democrats care about poor people. And not all Republicans despise them. Ask more questions. What are the policies.

Justice needs to happen in the community—and at home. Seeking justice in your community is part of your mission. That work becomes more authentic if your own house is in order and marked by just relationships. How are people paid? How are people welcomed? Can people bring their whole selves to your church or leave a lot of their pain at home to keep up a façade? We can demand fair wages in our community and then turn around and pay our janitor poorly.

It is true that the pastor or the church cannot endorse a candidate for office. We can, however, build a relationship with people in elected office and hold them accountable for their policies and votes. When it comes to elections, turn your congregation's sanctuary into a public space where issues can be debated and where you can hold candidate forums.

Do not be afraid to build relationships with people of different faiths or no faith. Be engaged in secular advocacy groups. Find ways to speak to your faith in the public square even if the situation feels highly secular. Harness the organizing efforts and staff of others and lend your encouragement. The church cannot do all this by itself and is very pretentious and misguided if it thinks that it can. You can also work with organizing groups which end up endorsing candidates but you should keep your distance a bit and keep the focus on the organization's policy work.

You are ordained to offer a public witness and be accountable for that witness. When you go to press conferences, speak. Take people with you. Have them speak. If you do not speak, you yield the microphone to religious folks who offer theological distortions which people will think represents the best thinking of the church when it does not. This is a chance to give people a different picture than the daily political-religious gruel they are subjected to on television.

Please understand that ministry is both a joyful and risky business. You proclaim the gospel and build up the community. Sometimes those offerings are accepted and sometimes not. The world and the situation around you can change dramatically and you and the church might be able to address that change but it won't be without stress and you might not always succeed. It's hard but you can't beat yourself up too much if you fail because many of us, if we are doing anything of significance, sometimes do fail. Learn the best you can from failure but see it as a chance to offer your gifts in another sphere.

Doing justice is not all up to you. We must rely on God's grace. I like the Lutheran Mission statement: God's Work, Our Hands. We are not God but instruments of God--and quite imperfect at that.

The church, the building is there to do mission. If your church is a fortress, you considerably limit your options. I like Pope John Paul 23 challenge that we "throw open the windows of the church and let the fresh air of the spirit blow through."