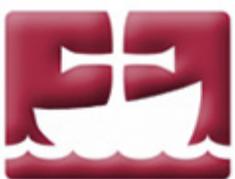


Preparing the Way

A Social Justice Study for Lent
2013



North Carolina Council of Churches
Strength in Unity, Peace through Justice

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Introduction

Lent is the season of the Christian Year that includes the six weeks from Ash Wednesday until the eve of Easter. Traditionally, it represents the 40 days that Jesus spent fasting in the desert before beginning his ministry. As celebrated by Christians, it has become a time of preparation for the celebration of Easter. It is a time for reflection on the suffering and sacrifice of Jesus, his life, his death, burial, and resurrection. It often includes prayer, penance, repentance, almsgiving and self-denial.

Because I come from a non-liturgical faith tradition, my personal experience of the practices of Lent is relatively new. A few people who worship with me now will refer to what they are “giving up” for Lent. Often it is a luxury, like chocolate, or perhaps sweets in general. It may be a habit they would like to give up. However, when Lent ends, they appear to go right back to the luxury, or the bad habit, without seeming to have any deep or life changing Lenten experience.

As I have studied the meaning of Lent, I see an opportunity for a much deeper experience. Rather than focusing on a specific luxury or habit, I believe that Lent is an opportunity to make real and lasting changes through a study of scripture and reflection on the life values of Jesus. It is an opportunity to be renewed and to learn more about how to live a Christ-like life.

The devotionals in this Lenten guide will focus on the areas of social justice that the North Carolina Council of Churches works to address. The Council has been a leader in calling people of faith to justice, compassion and peace. Each devotion will give you new insight, new facts and information, and a way to reflect on how God calls us to care for the vulnerable and excluded, to care for creation, to care about our health and the health of others, and to open our lives to peace and compassion. In other words, ways that we are called to a more Christ-like life.

You are invited to take a deeper, perhaps even life-altering Lenten journey with this guide. Contemplate social justice issues in the light of scripture. Expand your knowledge but most of all, expand your heart. Apply new knowledge, biblical truths, and gospel values to your own life. As Easter arrives, we should be prepared with new knowledge about issues, a deeper understanding of biblical truths and gospel values that will make our hearts ready for lasting changes in our lives.

About the NC Council of Churches

Since its inception more than 75 years ago, the North Carolina Council of Churches has used Christian values to promote unity and to work toward a better tomorrow. This is reflected through the Council’s motto: “Strength in Unity, Peace through Justice.”

Today, the Council consists of eighteen member denominations, with more than 6,200 congregations and about 1.5 million congregants across North Carolina. The Council enables those denominations, congregations, and people of faith to impact the state on issues of health and wellness, climate change, immigration policy, farmworker rights, legislation, and much more.

Over the past two years, the Council has also focused on a theme connecting each of these issues, food, helping people of faith learn about this most basic necessity for survival, how it relates to our beliefs, and how those two intersect.

To learn more about the Council and its work, visit www.ncchurches.org.

We pray that this study enriches the Lenten season as we all await the resurrection of Christ in whom there is peace and justice for all. Amen.

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Written, edited and designed by the staff of the North Carolina Council of Churches.

First Sunday in Lent: The Abundance of *Enough*

Scripture: Exodus 16:4-8; 13-18 (NRSV)

Then the LORD said to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.” So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, “In the evening you shall know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD, because [the LORD] has heard your complaining against the LORD. For what are we, that you complain against us?” And Moses said, “When the LORD gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the LORD has heard the complaining that you utter against [the LORD] — what are we? Your complaining is not against us but against the LORD.”

In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, “It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat. This is what the LORD has commanded: ‘Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents.’” The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less. But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed.

Social Justice Reflection

Every one of us eats. Indeed, all living things are dependent on food, which makes it an incredibly valuable resource. So how we get it, who gets enough of it and the choices we make around it become critical social-justice issues. Our relationship with what we eat is as simple — and as complex — as that.

For people of faith, food is a part of who we are spiritually as well as physically. It is the stuff of fellowship and outreach, miracles and rituals, an extension of welcome and a reminder of the Creator’s generosity. Food connects our lives with people we know and those we will never meet, from our neighbor with diabetes to the farmworkers who plant, tend and harvest, to the mother in a destabilized nation who lives with the daily fear that her children will starve to death before her eyes.

All of these issues are being addressed by faith-based and secular organizations. At a spiritual and practical level, our appreciation of that work and the need for it is strengthened when we connect it to such critical issues as personal health, farmworkers and immigration, care of creation,

racial reconciliation, economic justice and peace. Food impacts and links them all.

For instance, imagine a world where everyone had enough. Some folks would still have more than others, but even our sisters and brothers with the absolute least would be able to live without chronic deprivation. Applied to food, as in the story of manna and quail from Exodus, it still might not be a perfect world, but it would likely be a healthier and more peaceful one.

Instead, right now:

- Globally, 27% of all children suffer irreversible physical damage due to malnutrition, and it is an underlying cause of death for 2.6 million children each year.
- Let me say that again. According to Save the Children, more than a quarter of all the children in the world suffer permanent physical harm from lack of nutritious food.
- In the U.S., three in five teachers report having children in their classroom who regularly come to school hungry.
- In North Carolina, almost half of all farmworker households may not have enough food to eat.

And the issue transcends hunger. How our meat is raised has serious implications for the planet in terms of methane-gas production as well as fossil fuel and water use. The choices we make as individuals about what and how much we eat impact our personal health. And the accessibility to nutritious options through urban farmers markets or community gardens can make lifelong, life-lengthening changes for people in areas with otherwise limited choices, but only if those markets and gardens are readily available.

Those of us whose sacred text includes stories of bread in the wilderness and a multitude fed with leftovers must extend the miraculous power of food to everyday life in a complicated world. God gives us an abundance and the ability to begin global change through our personal and local choices. By working together, we move forward to a place where we recognize the transcendent, miraculous power of what is on our plate.

Closing Prayer

Loving God, Creator of all, help us to respect your generosity and to understand that your abundance calls us to care for ourselves, for each other, and for our planet. May we accept the challenge to take no more than we need and to give what we can so that all will have enough. Amen.

Link

www.ncchurches.org/food-curriculum

Second Sunday in Lent: Caring for Creation – A Lenten “Carbon Fast”

Scripture: Psalm 103: 8-14 (NAB)

Merciful and gracious is the Lord, slow to anger, abounding in kindness.

God does not always rebuke, nurses no lasting anger, has not dealt with us as our sins merit, nor requited us as our deeds deserve.

As the heavens tower over the earth, so God's love towers over the faithful.

As far as the east is from the west, so far have our sins been removed from us,

As [parents have] compassion on [their] children, so the Lord has compassion on the faithful.

For [God] knows how we are formed, remembers that we are dust.

Social Justice Reflection

Lent is a time of self-evaluation, repentance, and renewal. Typical spiritual practices include prayer, almsgiving, and fasting with the purpose of preparing the believer for the celebration of Jesus' victory over sin and death.

In our consumer-oriented, market-driven society, it is very difficult to grasp that we can and must do more, especially as stewards of God's creation, as followers of Jesus' gospel promise that he had come that all might have life and have it more abundantly.

This year, during the second week of Lent, we can demonstrate discipline in our lives, as Christ demonstrated discipline in resisting the temptations presented in the wilderness, by “fasting from carbon,” that is, to reduce the amount of carbon dioxide we put into the atmosphere.

Why should we consider doing this? There are at least four reasons:

1. The carbon dioxide we are putting into the environment, in the form of greenhouse gases, is changing the climate of God's creation. Scientists are no longer debating the basic facts of climate change.
2. The sources of these greenhouse gases are largely produced by human beings and the society we have created. The largest component of greenhouse gases is carbon dioxide which comes from the burning of fossil fuels, especially from the generation of electricity and from the modes of transportation that we use.
3. Unless we reduce our emissions of greenhouse gases, the impact of these increases in greenhouse gases will be devastating for our planet, for its people—especially the poor and vulnerable—and for the plants and animals that have lived here for millions of years. Time is critical.

4. God created this earth, declared it to be good, and expects us to care for creation and to maintain its goodness for future generations.

It's not as hard as you might think to “fast from carbon,” although we cannot give up carbon entirely as it is so intertwined with our existence. But we can use this Lenten season to reflect on the amount of carbon dioxide we each generate and to commit to reducing that amount.

And then, let us observe a holy Lent
By self-examination and penitence,
By prayer and fasting,
by works of love,
and by reading and meditating on the Word of God.

Closing Prayer

God of all, grant us humility that we may remember that we are formed by you—dust to dust, ashes to ashes. Help us to hear and understand the call to be good neighbors, to act with love and care for all that you call sacred.

God of all, grant us the ability to trust in your promises, the compassion to love and restore creation for future generations, and the insight to reject “false gospels” that encourage consumption patterns that are destructive to the web of life.

God of all, we give thanks for your trust in us as we strive to bear the fruit of justice for your creation. Give us the courage to cultivate our individual and congregational commitment to renewing your creation through our study, prayer and actions.

God of all, we confess our complicity in failing to be good stewards of your creation. We ask your forgiveness as we seek to walk gently on your earth, looking for ways to replenish what we have taken away, to heal what we have damaged.

God of all, you give us a vision of creation transformed. Grant us the will to let go of those behaviors that would keep us from imagining such a renewal. Give us the desire to work with others who understand that faith in you demands working for healing for your creation.

Amen.

Link

www.ncipl.org

Third Sunday in Lent: Who Is Our Neighbor?

Scripture: Luke 10:25-37 (NRSV)

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus... [And] wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Social Justice Reflection

In Church, when we talk about immigration, the first question isn't whether immigrants contribute more than they take or how to secure the border. The first question is: "Who is my neighbor?" Are immigrants our neighbors? How do we as Christians treat people who don't have the "right" status? How do we treat those whom society rejects and treats as invisible?

This is a major question throughout the Bible. In fact, many familiar passages involve the stories of migrants and other people who are marginalized, including the stories of:

- Abraham
- Isaac
- Jacob
- Joseph
- Israel (in Egypt)
- Exodus (Moses, Joshua)
- Ruth
- David
- Jeremiah
- Esther
- Ezra
- Nehemiah
- Jesus
- Paul

In his book "God's Companions," Sam Wells (former Dean of Duke Chapel), reminds us that "strangers" represent not a threat to the Church, but a gift:

I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me (Matt. 25:35-6).

These six acts of mercy embody God's call to his people to worship him, be his friends, and eat with him. For they begin with food and drink; they constitute the hand of

friendship extended across the bounds of shame, impurity, fear and need; and they are revealed to be encounters with Christ, and thus appropriately described as worship...

But an ethic that lapses into responsibility for or duty to the stranger is inadequate. It misses the crucial dimension, that the stranger is a gift to the Church... not a burden to it. As all the scriptural examples demonstrate, the stranger represents the hand of God, becoming present in the Church to rescue, restore and remind. The stranger is not the harbinger of scarcity but the sacrament of abundance – not the drainer of resources but the bringer of gifts. Caring for the stranger, sharing food, and offering friendship, are not matters of altruism: they are done in the simple trust that this person has something precious that will sustain or build up the life of the community, even if that gift is slow to be revealed or hard to receive.

Samaritans didn't have the right status in Israel. They were considered "half-breeds," people whose religious and social practices were suspect. "Good Jews" didn't talk with them or eat with them. "Good Jews" passed by the other side of the street when they saw a Samaritan coming.

In this story, Jesus – as he often does – turns conventional wisdom on its head. The point of the story is not that we who have status should show hospitality to those who don't. Rather, we need the stranger, the Samaritan, to show us what real hospitality is all about.

We find this throughout Jesus' life. In the Gospels, discipleship is about becoming like those who don't have status:

- If you want to learn how to give generously, become like a poor widow who gives her last two pennies;
- If you want to learn how to pray, become like a widow arguing her case before the authorities;
- If you want to learn how to be the greatest in the Kingdom, welcome little children (who also had no status);
- If you want to learn how to become first, make yourself last;
- If you want to learn how to become a disciple, take up your cross every day.

We are called to welcome the unwelcomed, to offer hospitality to those without status, and to break bread with strangers, for in doing so we welcome Jesus and become the Church together (Matt. 25, Luke 24).

Closing Prayer

We thank You, God, for coming to us as a neighbor, a stranger, an immigrant, binding our wounds and carrying us to safety, so that we might love you with all our heart, soul, and mind, and welcome the stranger, loving our neighbor as ourselves. Amen.

(Prayer adapted from "Short Preface," www.laughingbird.net/lectiontexts/cp10.html)

Fourth Sunday in Lent: Nourishing God's Children, Body and Soul

Scripture: Matthew 7:9-10 (NRSV)

“Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake?”

Social Justice Reflection

Obesity attracts a lot of media attention, contributes to a multitude of chronic and life-threatening diseases, and demands an excessive amount of money to treat. Yet, rates of overweight and obesity continue to climb in our state and across the nation. Almost two-thirds of North Carolina adults are too heavy, and we rank 5th worst in childhood obesity.

Can we do more collectively to fix the problem – for example, enacting stricter nutrition standards in schools or increasing the accessibility of fresh fruits and vegetables in low-income areas – or does sole responsibility rest with the individual or parent? This question has proven divisive; some support legislation that aims to improve access and education around health while others see a restriction on individual rights, even labeling us a “nanny state.”

The debate between the common good and individual rights is one that public health professionals know all too well. Thankfully, the common good was deemed more important to North Carolina on January 2, 2010, when the smoke-free restaurants and bars law was implemented in our state. Now public health advocates are waging a fight to reduce overweight and obesity in children – a different battle in the same war.

The North Carolina Alliance for Health, a statewide health advocacy coalition, is calling for statewide policies that require all foods and beverages available in schools meet national nutrition guidelines. They are also calling for reduced exposure to marketing and advertising of unhealthy foods in schools.

In Matthew 7:9-10, Jesus talks about God's care for us by using the example of how parents care for their children. He asks his disciples, “Is there any among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake?” While such nutritional choices would seem to be no-brainers, today's parents face more complicated questions. First, not all parents are well-informed about what foods are most nutritious for themselves, much less for their children. And even some of those who know lack the time or money to prepare healthy, well-balanced meals at home.

Thankfully, there are simple steps a congregation can take to protect the health of all God's children, regardless of age. Congregations can begin by taking a pledge to prioritize the health of their members and then implement healthy church policies, like serving water as a beverage option at all meetings and events or providing healthy snacks to children and youth.

Clergy could also address health as a faith issue during worship services and serve as positive role models by eating healthily, being physically active, and not using tobacco products. Next, congregations can participate in other activities designed to create a culture of wellness, such as planting a community garden; forming an official health ministry or parish nursing program; or advocating for local, state and national policies that make the healthy choice, the easy choice.

In Matthew 7, Jesus is comparing God's love for us to our love for our own children. In other words, just as we want the best for our children, God wants the very best for us. So, let us work to reverse the trend toward overweight and obesity by promoting healthy, active lifestyles.

Closing Prayer

Gracious God, thank you for nourishing our bodies and souls through the abundance of your love. Help us to care for and feed others in the same compassionate spirit. For the earth is yours and the fullness thereof, and in your presence, there is no lack. Amen.

Link

www.healthandwholeness.org

Fifth Sunday in Lent: Let the Oppressed Go Free

Scripture: Deuteronomy 24:14-15 (NRSV)

You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns. You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset, because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them; otherwise they might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt.

Ezekiel 22:29 (NRSV)

The people of the land have practiced extortion and committed robbery; they have oppressed the poor and needy, and have extorted from the alien without redress.

Isaiah 58:6-9 (NRSV)

Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and [the LORD] will say, Here I am.

Social Justice Reflection

In this season of Lent, we are challenged once again to hear the voice of the Lord calling us to repentance and holy living. This calling reverberates from our individual lives to the life of our community. From cover to cover, the Bible is clear that how we treat the vulnerable among us is an indicator of our relationship with God.

For many of us in the United States, the oppression of “poor and needy laborers” happens behind the scenes, out of sight and out of mind. It happens every time an unethical employer cheats on the paychecks, knowing that he can get away with it. It happens every time workers are denied their human dignity on the job, whether they are refused the chance to use the bathroom or get help for an injury.

Today, farmworkers remain one of the most vulnerable populations in society. Eighty five percent of our fruits and vegetables are picked by hand, yet nationally, farmworkers’ average annual income is \$11,000; for a family it is approximately \$16,000. Farmworkers on the East Coast earn about 35% less than the national average. In addition, farmworkers are paid nearly 50% less per week than other wage and salary workers. The percent of farmworker families living in poverty is nearly double that of other working families in the US. Most farmworkers are exempt from minimum wage laws,

and all are exempt from overtime provisions, despite long workdays during peak harvest.

Despite pervasive poverty, less than one percent of farmworkers collect general assistance welfare nationwide. Only 10% of farmworkers report having health insurance through an employer health plan. Fewer than four out of 10 workers interviewed said that they would receive unemployment benefits if out of work. Finally, nearly five out of 10 farmworker households in North Carolina reported not being able to afford enough food to feed their families.

Going back to the legal institution of slavery, there is a deeply ingrained societal norm that farmworkers should be treated differently than other workers and don’t deserve better conditions. This is reflected today in the belief that if people just work hard enough, they will be able to get better jobs. It can also be seen in attitudes by some growers, policymakers, and others who believe that the status quo is acceptable.

What does it say about our society – and our relationship with God – that those who pick our food don’t have enough to eat themselves? In Deuteronomy, God commanded that protections be put in place for those who were vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. These protections applied both to native Israelites and also to foreigners working the land. In the prophetic texts from Isaiah and Ezekiel, it’s clear that the people did not listen to God’s command, and they are subject to judgment because of their disobedience.

How can we respond to the injustices of our time? Isaiah makes it clear that acts of religious piety by themselves are not enough; we are called to break the bonds of injustice, to share our bread, to let the oppressed go free. Only then will the light of the people of God shine for all to see. As we turn and repent this Lenten season, let us join the movement for justice for farmworkers and all those who stand at the margins. As César Chávez said: “What do we want the church to do? We ask for its presence with us, as Christ among us. We ask the church to sacrifice with the people for social change, for justice, and for love of brother and sister. We don’t ask for words, we ask for deeds. We don’t ask for paternalism. We ask for servanthood.”

Closing Prayer

Bless the hands of the people of the earth,
The hands that plant the seed,
The hands that bind the harvest,
The hands that carry the burden of life.
Soften the hands of the oppressor and
Strengthen the hands of the oppressed.
Bless the hands of the workers,
Bless the hands of those in power above them
That the measure they deal will be tempered
With justice and compassion. Amen.

(Prayer adapted from: <http://nfwm.org/education-center/worship-resources/prayers>)

Palm Sunday: The Price of Faithfulness

Scripture: Matthew 21:1-11 (NRSV)

And when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find an ass tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If any one says anything to you, you shall say, ‘The Lord has need of them,’ and he will send them immediately.” This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying, “Tell the daughter of Zion, Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on an ass, and on a colt, the foal of an ass.”

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the ass and the colt, and put their garments on them, and he sat thereon. Most of the crowd spread their garments on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. And the crowds that went before him and that followed him shouted, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!” And when he entered Jerusalem, all the city was stirred, saying, “Who is this?” And the crowds said, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee.”

Social Justice Reflection:

I am not the first person to note that the fervent cheers of the crowd on Palm Sunday – “Hosanna to the son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” and the affirmation that “This is the prophet Jesus” – turned by Good Friday to jeers of “Let him be crucified.”

What happened in those few days? It seems to me that there are two options. Either the crowds who cheered on Sunday had changed their minds and were the same ones jeering on Friday. Or it was a different crowd whose jeering outweighed the cheers of Palm Sunday. The biblical text notes that the religious leaders “persuaded” people to call for Jesus’ death, but even that doesn’t settle the question of whether it was the same people or different ones.

Isn’t that how it is today? People take one position and then their “authorities” – religious leaders, TV personalities, politicians – tell them to take another, and so they turn their backs on what they know to be right. Immediately after the Sandy Hook massacre, you couldn’t turn on the TV without hearing people calling for new restrictions on the availability of guns of mass destruction. These people included those who had been ardent gun advocates and friends of the NRA. Then, after their authority figures had “persuaded” them, they were saying that the problem was the mental health system or the prevalence of violence on TV and in video games, but surely, surely, not because of how easy it is to get your hands on an assault weapon.

But surely, surely, they knew in their hearts that a crucial part of the problem was the weapons themselves, semi-automatics capable of firing up to 60 rounds per minute. Why does any civilian (i.e., not military and not law enforcement) need to fire one bullet per second?

The other option is also visible today. People who support issues of prophetic social justice voice their values and beliefs, but then they get drowned out by those who are able to yell louder, those who have more powerful megaphones or PA systems, those not concerned about consistency or honesty. I remember attending a rally on the grounds of the state Capitol, a rally supporting access to health care. And, across the street were noisy protesters, wanting government out of the healthcare business. But you could tell by looking at them that most of them were already of Medicare age or really close to it, and you didn’t see any of them burning their Medicare cards.

So, what’s a prophetic person of faith to do in these days? First, we must remain faithful. God is still calling us to advocate on behalf of vulnerable people even if that doesn’t seem to be a popular position. Second, we must be as vocal as we can be within the bounds of what we think appropriate. That level of appropriateness may be different for different folks, but we must not be silent just because it seems like we are being drowned out. And, third, we must remember that it is most important for us to be faithful to Jesus, and that faithfulness does not always mean victory, at least in the short term.

Jesus, after all, got crucified.

Closing Prayer:

God of vulnerable people, God of us all – Give us the wisdom to know what is right. Give us the courage to do it. Give us the strength to do it even when we feel outnumbered. And remind us that you are forever with us, not only in the short term, for you are the one who brought resurrection out of crucifixion. Amen.

Easter Sunday: Blessed Are the Peacemakers

Scripture: Matthew 5:9-12 (NRSV)

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Social Justice Reflection:

Jesus was a peacemaking, blessed child of God, but he also was an “other.” Reviled and persecuted, the paperless son of displaced immigrant parents. The prophetic iconoclast. That guy who hung out with *those* people, the type most modern leaders would not associate with, except for a photo opportunity at a Thanksgiving Day soup kitchen. Let us remember on this day when we celebrate his resurrection, that Jesus was crucified because he was an outsider whose way of doing things scared and angered the powers-that-be.

We have become a nation that loves to “other” people. We point out their differences as reasons they cannot be trusted, as evidence that they take too much from the rest of us or threaten our well-being. We have lengthy, bitter debates about allegiance and legitimacy, and we reject those who do not meet our standards. We know who belongs, and the others need to clear out and leave us alone with our worldly possessions, our rules, and our way of doing things.

There is of course, a problem with that, especially for those of us who consider ourselves followers of Christ. A bunch of problems, actually, starting with those others being exactly the kind of people Jesus calls us to treat with love and respect, the people he shaped his ministry around, and the kind of person he was. Read his Sermon on the Mount and figure out a way to reject our sisters and brothers who have less than or need more than we happen to in this moment.

Beyond specific needs, Jesus expected us to live together and to learn from each other. He called us into community, to be in relationship with one another, and from those relationships, we would live in peace. Because Jesus knew it is a lot harder to be in conflict with people if you really know and value them.

Sister Evelyn Mattern, a saint of the North Carolina Council of Churches, was the kind of peacemaker who would put herself in harm’s way for her sisters and brothers, because she believed everyone matters. In her book, “Blessed Are You: The Beatitudes and Our Survival,” she wrote:

The Jewish rabbis stressed right relationships as the basis for peace. As Pope Paul VI said, ‘If you want peace, work for justice.’...Jesus went about not merely loving good, but also doing good. If no one makes the effort to right relationships, they will not be right. They do not spring whole and entire out of the head of the dreamer. God is ultimately the peacemaker and indeed is peace itself, but to be like God we must make peace in God’s name. We have to take the initiative to untangle the knots in the personal and communal webs we inhabit.

Evelyn knew that peace isn’t just noble and global. It begins with how we treat each other on a daily, neighborly, standing-in-the-check-out-line-behind-the-lady-with-47-coupons basis. It is work. By practicing patience, tolerance and generosity in our unglamorous, carpool driving, working-through-lunch-again lives, we loosen those knots and open ourselves to other people and to living in a community where small acts of kindness – those baby steps toward peace – become ordinary rather than extraordinary.

Clearly, children of God might not always get along, but by blessing the others in the Beatitudes, Jesus reminds us that the community needs every single one of us. And if we choose to live in relationships of respect and welcome, we inherently reject the harsh edge of blame that would cut us apart from one another. Instead, we bind closer together.

Closing Prayer:

Creator God, help us to value and love one another. Help us to remember that peace begins with respect and that even when we don’t agree, every one of us is still your beloved child. May we be worthy of your precious son’s sacrifice made out of his commitment to be savior of us all. Amen.