

*“Dream of a Church: Christ’s Representatives”*

As we discussed during the last two Sundays, our Lenten Worship Celebrations are inspired by the prophet, Amos, whose message is that **God calls us to let ‘justice roll down like waters.’** Further, we have acknowledged, **Justice is central to the Christian Life.** During his Public Ministry, Jesus was part of that Prophetic approach, as was demonstrated, by his clashes with the Legalists – the Pharisees, the Teachers of the Law, and the Priests. The Prophetic Tradition and, especially, Jesus revealed the Love of God is for everyone – for all are God’s Children. **The Prophetic Approach further revealed the Divine Parent calls all the Children of God to work for Justice for everyone!** Today’s “Roll Down Justice” focus is about the Body of Christ – the Church – us followers of Jesus and how we are Christ’s Representatives to those in need of Justice and to those, who are the unjust – the powerful oppressors.

To aid us in this examination of our call to be Christ’s Representatives, it is helpful for us to reconnect with how Jesus functioned during his Public Ministry. There is a Jewish story that gives us a look at our responsibilities as Christ’s Representatives. The “Jewish story goes: I went up to Heaven in a dream and stood at the Gates of Paradise in order to observe the procedure of the Heavenly Tribunal. I watched as a learned Rabbi approached and wished to enter. ‘Day and night,’ he said, ‘I studied the Holy Torah.’

‘Wait,’ said the Angel. ‘We will investigate whether your study was for its own sake or whether it was a matter of profession and for the sake of honors.’

A Righteous Person [a Zaddik] next approached. ‘I fasted much,’ he said, ‘I underwent many ritual cleansings; I studied the Zohar the mystical commentary on the Torah day and night.’

‘Wait,’ said the Angel, ‘until we have completed our investigation to learn whether your motives were pure.’

Then a tavern-keeper drew near. ‘I kept an open door and fed without charge every poor man who came into my inn,’ he said.

The Heavenly Portals were opened to him.” (Rabbi Aaron Leib of Primishlan, as quoted in Abraham Karp, *The Jewish Way of Life and Thought*, New York: KTAV Publishing Inc., 1981, p. 177)

It wasn’t a lifetime of studying the Torah and the Zohar that opened the heavenly gates. It was an open door that fed the poor. The tavern-keeper exemplified the way of Jesus – the Prophetic Approach. This Prophetic Approach is the way God wants us, God’s Children, to demonstrate unconditional Agape love for those who are suffering through poverty, rejection, oppression, and injustice. That was specifically shown, in our Reading from the Gospel of Matthew, when Jesus shared his parable of the Final Judgment. It is easy for us to think like the Pharisees and, unfortunately, the public understanding of Christianity, which believes Christ’s Church is legalistic, so many, who think of themselves as Christians are very judgmental. Most persons hearing or reading that parable focus on its judging aspects but, Jesus’ purpose for telling the parable was to force his followers to recognize they destroy themselves by thinking only about what they want and how they can benefit themselves, even at the expense of the suffering of the less powerful. Christ was calling them and us to be like him – to manifest God’s Agape – Suffering and Self-Giving Love for all people, especially the powerless, the outcasts, the rejected, the poor, the weak, and all, who are oppressed.

In this parable, Jesus framed the story, so his followers would clearly recognize Christ and our Divine Parent associate how we treat those, who are suffering, as the way, we act toward God and the Son of God. Jesus made this point very clear when he said to those he praised in **verses 35 and 36, “I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me a drink; I was a stranger and you received me in your homes, naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me.”** Do we act toward those, who are in need, in those same ways? With regard to God’s View of Justice, when people

are suffering and no one is helping them to have their true needs met, that is when justice is lacking and the person, who refuse to help those, who are in need, is acting unjustly.

Many times in our lives, we are each either the suffering person or the helping representative of God's Agape Love or the self-centered and selfish person, whose inaction on the behalf of the suffering, has functioned as an enemy of the Divine Parent's Love and an enabler of the continuing oppression of those in need. Sometimes, we don't have a choice about whether or not we will suffer, especially, if someone is intentionally oppressing us because of their prejudice against us – against something about our identity. However, when we are not the person experiencing suffering, you and I do have the choice to either be Christ's Representative – Manifest God's Agape Love or to reject that calling and selfishly think and act only for one's own benefit.

Jesus made that choice very personal for his followers because he so closely identified himself with those suffering. In the parable, in answer to those, who had helped the needy and then asked, how they helped the Son of Man – the King, Jesus said in **verse 40**, ***“The King will reply, ‘I tell you, whenever you did this for one of the least important of these followers of mine, you did it for me!’”***

Now, I anticipate there are many well off and powerful people, who refuse to acknowledge that they are aiding the continuing oppression of others or are part of the cause of those sufferings, merely because they only help themselves. What are we doing for the least of these followers of Jesus? Are we expressing our care in tangible ways which can change lives? “A hungry man was walking down the street in a village of medieval Turkey. He had only a piece of bread in his hand. He came to a restaurant where some meatballs were being grilled. The cooking meat was so near and the smell so delicious the man held his piece of bread over the meat to capture some of the smell. As he started to eat the bread, the angry restaurant owner seized him and took him away to see a judge.

The owner protested, ‘This man was stealing the smell of my meat without asking permission. I want you to make him pay me for it.’ The judge thought for a moment, then held up his purse in front of the owner and shook it. ‘What are you doing that for?’ asked the restaurant owner? The judge replied, ‘I am paying you. The sound of money is fair payment for the smell of food.’”

After telling that story, Wiley Stephens concluded, “The challenge when we are dealing with the least and the last is to make sure that what we are sharing with them is real. We must make sure that our care is expressed in ways that are tangible and begins to change lives.” (Wiley Stephens, Heaven's Audit of One's Soul)

As we consider our call, we each have a decision to make – a choice to either be part of God's Justice by seeing Christ in everyone and responding to the suffering or need of others with loving action or to think only of ourselves and pass by others in need on the other side of the road as Jesus shared in another of his parables – the Parable of the Good Samaritan. We are here because we have chosen to put our faith in God's Agape Love – in Jesus Christ. We have heard the call to let justice roll down like water, in part, by being Christ's Representatives to the poor, the weak, the oppressed, and the powerless. So, a good way to put our commitment to Justice and our call to be Christ Representatives into action is to see Jesus Christ in one another. Next, when you see someone in need, tell her or him, “I see the Christ in you.” Further, be of real support to the person, who is suffering. Share food, clothing, housing, and/or loving presence with the hurting one. You can join in the fellowship outing of working in the CCA Pantry or another organization's helping work. Make sure you let Jennifer Clay know about your interest and when you might be available. We will not be doing it next Saturday. Finally, see Christ even in those, who seek to belittle you – those, who act as your enemy. Respond to their hate and selfishness by inviting them to join you in sharing God's Agape Love with those, who are in need. Turn to someone near you, and say this to them, “I see the Christ in you.” “I see the Christ in you.” Let Justice Roll by being Christ's Representative. Amen.