

September 20, 2020

Matthew 20:1-16

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said: There can be no peace without justice.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower said: Peace and justice are two sides of the same coin.

For quite a while now in progressive church circles we have heard the call for a “just peace”. This is a recognition that peace is more than an absence of violence. But, what is just? Or, maybe better asked, what does “just” look like?

Just is, simply stated, that which is fair and equitable for everyone, for all creation. Under the umbrella of Just Peace our denomination, and our church, finds hunger, homelessness, racism, violence against women, economic inequalities, violence against our environment to be things that are not “fair and equitable”. We believe that if we want to know true peace, then we must address these issues and make the necessary systemic changes to make the world just.

We should not think that our generation is just now discovering this problem. These inequalities have been oppressing the world from the beginning. God’s call to Moses, a call to free people from slavery, is a call for systemic change. All of the Hebrew prophets were calling for systemic change. Jesus’s whole ministry of bringing people into a healing relationship with God was a call for systemic change.

Jesus challenged his society around issues of who is clean or unclean, acceptable or unacceptable; the role of women; a call for radical non-violence. He even challenged the economic situation of the day, as in the parable, The Laborers in the Vineyard. Those who only worked the last hour got paid a full day’s wage, meaning all work must pay a person a sustainable wage. Jesus’s vision of God’s reign in the world turned accepted societal norms on their head. Jesus called for systemic change.

Systemic change is a tall order, because the inequalities of our society and world are so great and those with power are more than reluctant to give it up. This does not mean, however, that it is futile to challenge the status quo. When Jesus told his disciples how hard it would be for the rich to enter God’s reign, he then calmed their troubled spirits by assuring them it would not be their efforts alone that would create change. They must act in trust, trusting that all things are possible for God.

Trusting in God, each generation at Amicable Church has tried to live into a community of love and faithfulness with the desire to help the world become all God intended creation to be. In my time as pastor we have spoken and acted out our opposition to violence of all kinds –against women, people of color, the LGBTQIA community, and creation. We have tried to raise awareness of and meet the needs of the marginalized, cast out, and forgotten. We have spoken up about economic insecurity, which creates hunger, homelessness, and poor health.

Still, despite trusting in God and offering our best efforts, it seems nothing changes. Division, violence, hateful words and deeds still take center stage; inequality and lack of fairness still persist; people and all creation still suffer and die. All this, in the midst of physical-distancing and a pandemic, makes us question whether the systemic change required for a just peace is even possible.

Has our ministry been a failure? My answer to this question is a resounding “NO!”

Jesus said, “if you think you can pull it off yourself” you are mistaken, but you have “every chance in the world if you trust God.” This is because, as another translation puts it: “In God all things are possible.”

I will not deny we are not even close to a just peace, to a world that is fair and equitable, but in looking back at my years as pastor of Amicable Church, there are changes worth noting. They are the little things, the public gestures of who we are and what we believe that are changing hearts and minds.

In 1999 we tentatively, yet boldly and publicly, placed homeless figures on our lawn, reminiscent of St. Francis's first creche. We helped the public better understand which side of the tracks Jesus was born on. This touched more than Tiverton. Still today Amicable Church is known by many in our state as the church with the homeless figures. Still today, 20 years later, people stop to take pictures. The figures are that meaningful.

We place a 4' by 8' rainbow banner high and very visual on our building. Amicable's affirmation of gays and lesbians, at that time, was very clear. Then came our rainbow doors. Not only do people stop to take a photo, they stop in and say thank you for the message of support. Many who are new and now active here at

Amicable first came because of the doors. They did not know there were Christians who would be supportive of their beliefs and wanted to raise their children in a welcoming environment.

We have long spoken out against war. Our Sunday School children, years ago, created a small peace garden, near the entrance to our sanctuary. A touch of beauty as we come and go for worship.

Our latest addition is a Peace Pole, which states in several languages, including paw print, May Peace Prevail On Earth. It is a stated desire most people can share. What we at Amicable know, though, is no peace can prevail without justice.

I personally have gone through many changes in my life, often made possible by the loving patience of another person. It has been the church of Jesus Christ, especially Amicable Church

and the United Church of Christ, that has opened my eyes to many of these justice issues. And more than opening my eyes, the good news of Jesus Christ, experience in and through Amicable Church, has challenged and changed my thinking, helping me to better understand this world's inequalities. We are far from perfect, but the ministries of our church are helping to break the chains of oppression many in our society are caught up in.

There are two things I want to encourage you to do going forward. Share the openness, welcome, and love of our faith community by telling people about our church and our mission. Invite them to attend virtual worship and hear for themselves the gospel, the good news.

The second is: don't despair. Don't think you can or have to challenge and change the system alone. Trust in God. Even if it feels inconsequential and not system changing:

- Speak up when a family member or a friend disparages another person because of their race, ethnicity, sexual preference, or gender identity.
- Take time to learn about systemic racism, gender issues, environmental issues.
- Be kind to those you disagree with.
- Refrain from using violence, especially in the words and tone you use.
- Buy less, re-use more. The environment will thank you.
- Share God's love, all the time and everywhere.

These are small acts, but you would be surprised by their ripple effect.

And, trusting in God, you should not be surprised by how God uses us to make just peace real in our world.

May God's Spirit fill you with courage and peace that you might live into God's vision of a just peace world. Amen.