

# “Not only with our lips, but in our lives”: The Church and Social Justice

June 24, 2014 -- The Nativity of John the Baptist

*Almighty God, Father of all mercies...  
give us such an awareness of your mercies,  
that with truly thankful hearts we may show forth your praise,  
not only with our lips, but in our lives,  
by giving up our selves to your service,  
and by walking before you in holiness and righteousness all our days...*

--Excerpt from “The General Thanksgiving,” *The Book of Common Prayer*

*We hope in this brief reflection to express to the Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts why faithful Christians engage in the struggle for economic, environmental and social justice. We hope to inspire broad participation in the quest for God’s shalom (peace and justice). Please tell us how we can support you in that effort.*

-- *Social Justice Commission*

- As Christians, we share Jesus’ vision of a world filled with justice, mercy, and peace. Our deepest desire is to join God’s mission to restore all people and all creation to unity with God and each other in Christ. In his first sermon, Jesus proclaimed the healing and liberation that his presence was unleashing in the world.

In his last sermon, Jesus declared, “You will be my witnesses” (Acts 1:8).

- Our efforts to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives and liberation to the oppressed spring from our longing to be faithful disciples of the crucified and risen Christ and to bear witness to his liberating love.

*“The only reason  
we dare to imagine  
a different world  
[is] because God is  
before us; God is  
already there.”*

--Sallie McFague

Like the earliest Christians, we seek to be Jesus’ ongoing presence in the world. We share his longing for the reign of God.

- Our commitment to social justice is renewed at every baptism, when we pledge in the baptismal covenant to “persevere in resisting evil,” to “proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ,” to “seek and serve Christ in all persons,” and to “strive for justice and peace among all people.” Doing justice is not just an option for Christians, but an essential aspect of Christian discipleship.

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

(Luke 4:18)

*I don't preach a social gospel; I preach the Gospel, period. The gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is concerned for the whole person. When people were hungry, Jesus didn't say, "Now is that political or social?" He said, "I feed you." Because the good news to a hungry person is bread.*

*-- Archbishop Desmond Tutu*

- Jesus proclaimed that the kingdom of God was near, and called for repentance – a change of course, a change of heart. Because God's kingdom is not from this world (John 18:36), our ultimate commitment is not to the empires of this world, but rather to the realm of mercy and justice that God yearns to bring into being and for which Jesus asked us to pray ("Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven").

- Fired by God's vision of *shalom* (justice and peace), Christians have a long heritage of engagement in the justice issues of their time, from poverty and slavery to war, racial inequality, sexism, and pollution. Christians have been leaders in the fight for civil rights, in the anti-apartheid movement, the movements for women's rights and labor rights, the movement for gay and lesbian rights, and the climate justice movement.

- As 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans, we live in a highly individualistic culture that values consumerism at the expense of sustainability,

and the immediate present at the expense of long-term solutions. The gap between rich and poor has never been greater. Now more than ever the pressing issues that we face – from economic inequality, gun violence, militarism, and persistent racism to resource depletion, species extinction, and climate disruption – require united, collective action. Now more than ever the world needs an effective Christian social witness and a renewal of the prophetic call to "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24).

- Because political engagement often arouses strong feelings and the possibility of conflict, we urge our churches to become sanctuaries for careful listening and for candid, respectful speech. We are called to "speak the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15).

The Church can be a sign to the world of unity in the midst of difference. Although Christians share a commitment to justice, we may disagree regarding the best way to implement it and may hold quite different political views. Nevertheless, we seek to explore the common values that we share and to create a space in which to

*"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect."*

*(Romans 12:2)*

understand our differences. We know that all of us are equally welcome at God's Table and equally beloved by God.

*"In the End, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends."*

*-- The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*

- We confess the temptation to dodge divisive topics among ourselves. Fears of being impolite, unpopular, or of "rocking the boat" may prevent us from naming essential truths. We also confess the temptation to avoid confronting systemic evils from which we benefit or which may seem too powerful to confront and overcome.

- Like the first Christians, we pray for boldness. “When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:31).
- In our struggle to build a better future, we recognize that the wisest and most faithful prophetic actions spring from daily prayerful surrender to God. We hope to proclaim the Gospel boldly but without self-righteousness. Humbly, we seek God’s ongoing guidance. “Send out your light and your truth, that they may lead me” (Psalm 43:3).
- We rejoice that we do not have to earn our salvation, for that battle has already been won for us. Serving God depends not on success but on faithfulness. “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life” (Ephesians 2:8-9).
- Because social inequality is not only woven into our social institutions but also embedded in our own individual psyches, we take responsibility for continuing to free ourselves – and we ask God’s help in freeing us – from unconscious patterns of thought that promote racism, bigotry, and other forms of bias. Without being fully aware of it, we may be benefiting from power and privilege that exclude other people or that exploit and diminish God’s creation. In the midst of a changing society, we need to keep re-examining what our baptismal covenant is challenging us to do. We seek the willingness to listen to the Spirit who leads us into all truth (John 14:26).
- There is no such thing as “staying out of politics.” Everything we do or refrain from doing has political impact. Withdrawing from civic and political engagement may serve to perpetuate an unjust *status quo*. Remaining silent or staying “neutral” can mean colluding with oppression.
- For both theological and constitutional reasons, the Church as an institution should never promote or campaign for a specific political party, party platform, or candidate. However, voting is a non-partisan issue, and churches and clergy can and should encourage church-members to register to vote, to cast their votes, and to be active participants in local and national civic life and public affairs. In their preaching and teaching, clergy should enunciate clear Gospel principles and values according to which political candidates and public policies can be evaluated. Churches and clergy may also advocate for specific public policies and take positions on ballot questions.

*After marching alongside  
Rev. Martin Luther King  
at the voting rights  
march in Selma,  
Alabama, in 1965, Rabbi  
Abraham Joshua  
Heschel said, “I felt my  
legs were praying.”*

- Jesus revealed to us that when we feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, and clothe the naked, we do these things to him (Matthew 25:31-46). Developing compassionate social policies is essential to creating a just society in which every individual can flourish. To carry out God's mission, it is important to enlarge the scope of our efforts, so that in addition to offering charity and service, we also engage in public advocacy and the struggle for justice.
- At certain times our conscience may call us to participate in acts of non-violent civil disobedience to protest laws, policies, and social systems that lead to injustice or oppression. Such actions can be a form of prayer when they are undertaken in a spirit of love.
- Participating in God's movement to create a world that is just, sustainable, and peaceful not only conveys blessings to those we serve, it also gives our lives purpose and joy. As Robert Raines (former director of Kirkridge Retreat & Study Center) once said, "The Gospel is just so much wind until we raise our lives against it like a sail."

*Organized political activity is also a natural extension of ministries many churches are already engaged in. It is the difference between collecting cans of soup for a food bank, or promoting public policy expanding access to food stamps, WIC, school lunches and other feeding programs. It is the difference between giving spare change to the homeless, or promoting public policy creating more affordable housing and job training. It is the difference between caroling at the nursing home at Christmas, and promoting public policy ensuring increased Medicaid funding and better pay for nursing home workers. It is the difference between soliciting walkathon donations for breast cancer, heart disease or kidney disease, and advocating for better access to health care.*

*-- The Rev. Leslie K. Sterling, "The Intersection of Church and State"*

## Social Justice Commission

**The Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas**

*--Missioner for Creation Care*

**Lee Cheek**

*--Grace Church in the Southern Berkshires*

**The Rev. Lisa Green** (Co-Chair)

*--St. John's, Sutton*

**The Rev. Dr. Harvey Hill** (Co-Chair)

*--St. David's, Agawam*

**The Rev. Deacon Beatrice Kayigwa**

*--Good Shepherd, Clinton*

**The Rev. Dr. Richard Simpson**

*--Canon to the Ordinary*

**The Rev. Peter Swarr**

*--St. Mark's, East Longmeadow*

**Margaret Sweeney**

*--St. James', Greenfield*

**John Zeugner**

*--St. Luke's, Worcester*

### For further study, we suggest:

Harold T. Lewis, Christian Social Witness (The New Church's Teaching Series, Volume 10), Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2001

The Rev. Leslie K. Sterling, "The Intersection of Church and State," MECA (the newsletter of the Massachusetts Episcopal Clergy Association), Fall 2012

[[http://www.mecaclergy.org/newsletters/meca\\_newsletter\\_Fall2012.pdf](http://www.mecaclergy.org/newsletters/meca_newsletter_Fall2012.pdf)]

This short article addresses such common concerns as: "*Churches should stay out of politics.*"

*Churches can't get involved in elections because of the separation of church and state.*

*Churches should lose their tax-exempt status if they take political positions."*

Jim Wallis, The (Un)Common Good: How the Gospel Brings Hope to a World Divided, Ada, MI: Brazos Press, Baker Publishing Group, 2014

Walter Wink, The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium, New York/London: (A Galilee Book), Doubleday, 1998