

“Starting at the Ends: Justice-Makers”
Isaiah 40:27-31
Mark 1:1, 40-45
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Why are we here? What does it mean to be Christian, let alone a member of a church? These are important questions any time, but they’re especially pertinent at certain junctures in a congregation’s life – such as the call of a new pastor. The vision that we set together now will shape the course of this congregation for some time to come. Today we’re in the third week of our four-week series exploring our direction.

Just to refresh your memory: in our first week we suggested that American churches have often gotten caught up in market-driven forces better suited to corporations. Many churches have become driven more to please the customer than wonder what Christ wants; judged success more by our numbers than the fruits of the spirit; and treated our members more like consumers, or worse, volunteer cogs in the institutional wheel than the noble ambassadors of Christ that we’re baptized to be. In recent years, Christian leaders across the theological spectrum have been calling the church to question those priorities – and to focus instead on being “missional” churches. What does missional mean? Essentially it means that we’re dedicated to glorifying God and following Christ in every aspect of our daily lives. And everything we do here – everything we do together supports each other in that effort.

To put legs under that vision, our Long Range Planning Council has pointed us back to the historic Great Ends of the Church. These 100-year-old “missional objectives” point us to three key goals, as individual Christians and as a body of believers: First, to be messengers of the good news, which we talked about last week. Second, to be justice-makers, which we’ll cover today. And third, to be community-builders, offering shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship for the

children of God. You can find these sermons posted on our web site and in print in the church office the week after they're preached. I also hope you'll join us to discuss today's sermon following worship. Now, listen to the word of God as it comes to us in the gospel according to Mark, chapter 1:1, 40-45.

God's outreach to those in need

And a leper came to him, and begging him, he asked to be made clean. And Jesus, moved with pity – or, as other manuscripts say, anger – reached out and made him clean. Maybe both manuscript variants are right: it's easy to imagine Jesus moved with pity for the leper; lepers were the untouchables, complete outcasts and shunned as moral failures who deserved their fate. But it's also easy to see Jesus moved with anger – not at the leper but the religious authorities who have cast this poor man into the streets, literally untouchable, with no hope for restitution. This is the man Jesus chooses to touch, even when touching a leper results in one's own religious uncleanness. This is the man that Jesus is moved with pity, or with anger, or perhaps with both, to save.

We're not surprised at Jesus' response, nor should we be ... but then, the religious leaders then shouldn't have been shocked either. If one read the Hebrew scriptures at all, one would know God's compassion for the people most in need, and God's anger at indifference and judgmentalism.

- In the Torah we read, "If your brother becomes poor, and cannot maintain himself ... you shall maintain him. ... You shall not lend him your money at interest, nor give him your food for your own profit" (Leviticus 25:35).
- In the writings we read: "The Lord raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them ... inherit a place of honor" (I Samuel 1:8).
- And in the prophets especially we read: "Thus says the Lord: ... I will not revoke the punishment, because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals – they who trample the head of the poor into the

dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way; ... and in the house of their God they drink wine bought with [taxes] they imposed” (Amos 2:6-8); or “When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the Lord will answer them, I the God of Israel will not forsake them” (Isaiah 41:17); or, in our passage today: “God gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless” (Isaiah 40:29).

You get the idea. God is constantly looking out – and reaching out – to those in need. And God wants us to do the same.

God’s desire for us to do justice

Jesus certainly got the idea. In his first public words, recorded by the gospel of Luke, he opens his ministry this way: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18); and in one of his first public acts, recorded by the gospel of Mark, he finds himself reaching out to heal -- to touch – the poorest outcast of them all. And it’s in the gospel of Matthew that Jesus says to those who fed the hungry and clothed the naked, “Well done, good and faithful servant; whenever you did so to the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you did so to me” (Matthew 25:40). Jesus certainly got the idea, and so did his earliest followers. Have you ever read the book of James? “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not doing anything with it? ... If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?” (James 2:14-16). I could go on and on, because Scripture is *filled* with passages like this. Someone has counted 2,100 times when poverty is mentioned in the Bible. But I know I don’t need to convince you, because I know you “get it” too.

Aspiring to greater compassion: what we’re already doing

One of the keenest ways we can inspire people to works of compassion is by being messengers of compassion ourselves, and this congregation does this in spades. If you haven't seen the 2005 Mission Ministries Directory, I commend it to you; you will find copies in the office. In it you will find page after page after page of work that our congregation supports, through the Board of Deacons, Presbyterian Women, and the Mission Committee of the Session. Our support in Lake County such as Lake County Haven, helping homeless women and children find permanent living; our support in Chicago for things like Casa Central neighborhood house, including a nursing home for the Hispanic elderly; our work in the nation and the world, including our relationship with the only Christian hospital in Gaza. I could go on and on with this as well, and the work is just breathtaking.

And that's just what we're officially doing as a congregation. Even though this church as an institution will never get "credit" for it, nor do I think we should care to, if we added up all the giving that's done in our non-church giving, we would be frankly astonished. I only know a miniscule number of stories, but I already know this much: that many of you serve on boards of directors of some of the finest charitable organizations around Chicago: Big Brothers-Big Sisters; the Chicago Community Trust; McCormick Theological Seminary; Protestants for the Common Good; and I'm sure there are a thousand more. And I know that many of you have given a great deal of money to the worthiest of causes: for the poor, for the homeless, for battered women, for educational institutions, for hospitals, for immigrants, for victims of AIDS in this country and around the world. I read the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* now and then, and I'm not surprised to find name after name after name in this church giving to the worthiest of causes. And I know that many, many more of you – young and old, people of financial means and people who only have their time to give – many of you roll up your sleeves, on the annual youth Work Trip, or working Rummage, or tutoring a child in North Chicago who can't read. It is breathtaking, and I am prouder than I can begin to say. And vastly

more importantly, God is thrilled, I'm absolutely sure of it, because we show compassion in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Aspiring to greater compassion: what more we can do.

Does that mean we can pat ourselves on the back and go home? Of course not, and I can't imagine anybody here would want to do that. In fact, from conversations that I've had with some of you around the edges, no one is ready to rest on our laurels as long as there are still hungry children in our country, or old people choosing between food and medication, or vast inequalities between rich and poor, which we see every day if we only have eyes. As Christians, we *can't* avert our eyes from poverty – our faith won't let us – and so the only way we can enjoy the abundant blessings that we have is to keep reaching out in compassion in better and more creative ways as long as we have breath ... or better said, as long as Christ's Spirit breaths in us.

So what more can we do? I don't have answers – I'm not an economist; I'm not an architect of grand plans. But I am intrigued by what may be possible as expressions of faith in the day-to-day work of our lives. For example:

- What if we tried to trace the thread of the corporate practices and political policies in which we share? Whether we're the CEO or Director of a company, or on the staff, or simply an investor, we can press ourselves beyond the questions of the bottom line. Two weeks ago, Kathleen Parker had a superb piece on Wal-Mart, the whipping boy of the liberals and the darling of market conservatives. She raised profoundly helpful questions of cause and effect, of obvious benefits and hidden costs. Or how about our tax code? Tax cuts for many of us in this room have clearly spurred the economy to growth; the Dow is nearly back to 11,000. Yet with the cost of the war and the Katrina clean-up, there are also significant concerns about the poorest of the poor in our own nation. There are no simple answers here.

But there are essential questions, questions ultimately not of politics, but of *faith*.

- Or what if the end to poverty became a bi-partisan cause? Wilder things are possible. Who ever thought that President Bush would invite Bono of all people to preach the sermon at last week's National Prayer Breakfast? And preach he did; this is how he wound up his sermon: "These goals – clean water for all; school for every child; medicine for the afflicted, an end to extreme and senseless poverty – these are not just any goals; they are the Millennium Development goals, which this country supports. And they are more than that. They are the Beatitudes for a globalised world."
- Or what if we, who are so privileged, took it on ourselves to examine the moral strengths and weaknesses of capitalism? For the last few years I have been joined by my friend Elmer Johnson – former President of the Aspen Institute and a force behind Metropolis 2020 – we have joined together in a study group that's addressed itself to this issue. I'm the only clergy in the bunch; the rest of them are business-types and lawyers. We've read the likes of Tom Friedman, Daniel Bell, Jeffrey Sachs, Hernando de Soto, and a host of others in between. We've discussed tough issues like executive compensation, and microfinancing, and the ethical requirements of boards of directors, and our Christian responsibility to those left behind by globalization, and how simply to be a moral player in our professions. As I said before, I'm no economist. But I'm utterly convinced that the *way* we do capitalism is a profoundly Christian issue, and I dream of an institute right in our midst that could take a hard look at this issue.

I know these are huge ideas; I know these are intractable issues. But if we don't take a crack at them – committed Christians, in an affluent area, with intellectual and corporate resources – if we don't take a crack at them, who will?

One final – and I hope, encouraging -- word. I am convinced that abundance isn't a zero-sum game. God has provided more than food enough for every child to be fed, and then some. "The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof," is how the Scripture puts it. And God has provided more than enough love for every human being to be cared for, and then some. And God has provided more than enough faith for us to take what we have and offer it up to him, and still have more than enough left over.

"If you choose," the leper said to Jesus, "you can make me clean." If we choose, God is saying to us, "then you can make my beloved children whole." We know how Jesus answered. How, then, shall we? Amen.