
Sermon
Love or Justice?

The Rev. Jack D. Bryant
Hope Unitarian Church
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First Reading: Shakespeare. *The Merchant of Venice*.

The quality of mercy is not strained.
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown.
His scepter shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings.
But mercy is above this sceptered sway;
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings;
It is an attribute of God himself;
And earthly power doth then show like God's
When mercy seasons justice.

Second Reading: Pat Robertson.

"And you know, Kristi, something happened a long time ago in Haiti, and people might not want to talk about it.

"They were under the heel of the French, uh, you know Napoleon the 3rd and whatever, and they got together and swore a pact to the Devil.

"They said, 'We will serve you if you'll get us free from the French.'

"True story.

"And so the Devil said, 'Okay, it's a deal.'

"And, uh, they kicked the French out, you know, with Haitians revolted and got themselves free.

"But ever since they have been cursed by, by one thing after another, desperately poor.

"That island of Hispaniola is one island. It's cut down the middle. On the one side is Haiti on the other side is the Dominican Republic.

"Dominican Republic is, is prosperous, healthy, full of resorts, etcetera.

"Haiti is in desperate poverty.

“Same island.

“They need to have and we need to pray for them a great turning to God and out of this tragedy I’m optimistic something good may come. But right now we’re helping the suffering people and the suffering is unimaginable.”

Third Reading: Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Cheap grace means grace sold on the market like a cheapjack’s wares. The sacraments, the forgiveness of sin, and the consolations of religion are thrown away at cut-rate prices. Grace is represented as the Church’s inexhaustible treasury, from which she showers blessings with generous hands, without asking questions or fixing limits. Grace without price; grace without cost! And the essence of grace, we suppose, is that the account has been paid in advance; and, because it has been paid, everything can be had for nothing. Since the cost was infinite, the possibilities of using and spending it are infinite. What would grace be, if it were not cheap?

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In such a Church the world finds a cheap covering for its sins; no contrition is required, still less any real desire to be delivered from sin.

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Cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner. Grace alone does everything, they say, and so everything can remain as it was before.

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Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, (it is) baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

Sermon

It’s easy to take potshots at Pat Robertson. He has a history of saying things that invite ridicule. I find his remarks about Haiti so disconnected from reality that I just want to shake my head and turn away. But what he said is grounds for a serious discussion. Especially in light of the fact that at the same time he was talking about the earthquake as some kind of divine judgment on the people of Haiti for making a pact with the devil, he was also asking people to contribute money to help with relief efforts. (Before any of us condemn him for his remarks we should remember that with his television show he will raise more money for the relief of Haiti than all the Unitarian Universalists in this country.) Mr. Robertson seemed confused about choosing between the desire on the one hand to seize the moment and turn it into an opportunity for judging people or seeking to express love for the earthquake’s victims by raising money for their relief. But he is not the only person who has that problem. There are also those who – confronted with difficult situations are – in my opinion – overly eager to turn towards love and forgiveness.

That is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer is talking about when he speaks of cheap grace. It comes in the insistence that one should automatically forgive the wrongdoer. As

Bonhoeffer said, it “is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance.” Forgive the murderer, forgive the robber, forgive the person who negligently runs into your car and wrecks it, forgive your child who, while running through the house, carelessly knocks a glass off a table and breaks it. Whether it is something of consequence or not, I believe the underlying principle is the same. Bonhoeffer’s cheap grace is the mirror image of Pat Robertson’s desire to rush to judgment. And both the rush to judgment and the rush to forgive suggest – to my mind – arrogance.

I do not believe that the Haitian people made a pact with the devil. If the devil was involved with the history of Haiti it was in the guise of slavery. Mr. Robertson seems to be suggesting that God supports slavery and the devil is against it. If that’s the case, I’m on the side of the devil. But I don’t believe that. I do believe those who practiced slavery have – metaphorically speaking – the devil in them. And – again speaking metaphorically – those who oppose slavery – and here I mean the slaves of Haiti who successfully revolted against their slave masters – were surely standing on the side of God. And the only pact with the devil I can see subsequent to the Haitian revolution was between the Devil and the French who demanded reparations from the Haitian people for their freedom – reparations they were not able to finish paying until about 1940 and which contributed to economically crippling that country.

But setting aside theological nonsense it is appropriate to consider the problem of balancing love and justice. South Africa is a good example. That country’s system of apartheid stood for almost fifty years as official policy. Unofficially it was the way of that country far longer. Men and women of color were virtual slaves. They lived under the whip. Ironically, the great literary lament against apartheid and racial injustice – Alan Paton’s novel, “Cry the Beloved Country” – was published in 1948, the year that apartheid became official policy.

“Cry the Beloved Country” was not a direct attack on apartheid. It was a story that confronted the terrible choice between love and justice. You will recall that in the book a young man, a poor young black man, murders a rich young white man and irony of ironies, the young white victim is a champion for the rights of South Africa’s black population. It is a stupid, thoughtless, empty crime and after the event the killer is horrified by what he has done and consumed with remorse. The fathers of the two young men meet. Both recognize the need for justice. One demands it. The other prays and hopes that love will produce mercy. The demands of justice are unwavering. The young black man is put to death. When it is done the two fathers come together, both men now victims, both men having lost their children and in the deep pain of their loss they discover that love has created a bond between them. The white father – a wealthy member of the establishment – cares not what his white friends may think for the only friend he wants in the whole world is the father of the man who murdered his son – the only man in the world who can understand his loss; and the same is true for the black father.

Something similar played out years later in real life. It’s the story told in the current movie “Invictus” starring Morgan Freeman and Matt Damon. It’s the story of what Nelson Mandela did when after twenty-seven years in prison he was released and elected President of South Africa. But the country was still divided by race. Justice for Mandela would have been to demand punishment and restitution for his unjust

imprisonment. I can't imagine anyone would have blamed him for such a choice. But that was not what he did. Instead, Mandela made a strategic decision to openly endorse and support South Africa's national Rugby team, the Springboks. The Springboks had been a long standing symbol to South Africa's black population of apartheid and racism. In a story that seems impossible to be true, there is a story book ending. The second rate Springboks win the 1995 World Cup and the people of South Africa – white and black – find themselves united. It sounds totally contrived, the fictional invention of a Hollywood screenwriter given to writing implausible fictions. But it's true. It's true. Nelson Mandela chose love. And by choosing love he created a basis for justice. In that same year – 1995 – the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions are established in South Africa – the Commissions that served as a vehicle for finding justice for all the citizens of the Beloved Country of South Africa.

It's a great story. It's a remarkable story. And 9,999 times out of 10,000 it is too good to be true. Sometimes justice is – at best – all one gets. In Haiti for the last two weeks that has been the only choice. Love may be the motivation, but rescue workers have had to decide who can be rescued, who should get medical supplies, food and water that is in short supply and which planes should be allowed to land and take off. There has not been enough of anything. The shortages have meant that some people died who would have lived if there had been enough. In such situations justice as the basis for decisions that mean life and death is the most one can hope.

The harsh reality of the world and the difficult choices it compels is seen in these words by David Brooks, speaking of the many failed efforts to help Haiti in the past – the failed efforts that left Haiti and its people vulnerable.

[W]e don't know how to use aid to reduce poverty. Over the past few decades, the world has spent trillions of dollars to generate growth in the developing world. The countries that have not received much aid, like China, have seen tremendous growth and tremendous poverty reductions. The countries that have received aid, like Haiti, have not.

In the recent anthology "What Works in Development?," a group of economists try to sort out what we've learned. The picture is grim. There are no policy levers that consistently correlate to increased growth. There is nearly zero correlation between how a developing economy does one decade and how it does the next. There is no consistently proven way to reduce corruption. Even improving governing institutions doesn't seem to produce the expected results.

I believe David Brooks is right. We don't know how to fix countries like Haiti. We don't know how to break the endless cycle of poverty just as we don't seem to know how to break the pattern of gang violence in our own city or the abuse and violence that happens in too many individual homes. It would be nice if love and good intentions would cure all the problems of the world. It would be nice if, in the spirit of love, all we had to do was turn the other cheek or go the extra mile. But that doesn't always work. On the other hand, justice alone doesn't always help. Haiti has been a country awash in corruption and bloodshed to the point that its possible for me to understand how one might think the devil was involved. One has only to think back to François 'Papa Doc'

Duvalier who ruled Haiti for many years and held onto power through the Tonton Macoute, his machete wielding paramilitary that roamed the country murdering anyone who so much as murmured a word against him. In the face of such evil it is easy to think of the need for justice swift and certain. It is easy to believe we just need to send in the Marines to swing the avenging sword of justice. We've done that. It doesn't seem to have helped. So what should we do?

I remember being in this room some thirty years ago when Joseph Fletcher, the well known ethicist and author of *Situation Ethics* was here to present a series of lectures. He was asked that same question about aid to another country facing a similar catastrophe, a country with its own sad history of poverty and corruption. What was the ethical response? He said we should give, but not give until it hurts. It was, I think, his way of recognizing the demands of love, but also its limitations. I would say give, but do so with the realization that love and generosity alone – as desperately as they are needed this morning – will not solve Haiti's problems. Nor will the need for justice. It will take some combination of the two, not one or the other. And the same is true of most of the challenges we face in life. Putting more police officers on the streets of Tulsa will not – by itself – solve our gang problem; nor will just loving our neighbors. It is not love or justice that we need, but love and justice. As Shakespeare said, "The quality of mercy is not strained. . . . And earthly power doth then show like God's when mercy seasons justice." Solving Haiti's deep seated problems will not be cheap. Platitudes about love will be as ineffective as blaming natural disasters on the devil. What's needed is the hard work of justice tempered with love and a love that recognizes the needs of justice.

Amen.