
Sermon
The Ministry of All Believers

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First Reading: Matthew 14:12-21 (NRSV)

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.' Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat.' They replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.' And he said, 'Bring them here to me.' Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Second Reading: Tucker, Cynthia Grant. *Prophetic Sisterhood – Liberal Women Ministers of the Frontier, 1880-1930*. Beacon Press, Boston MA, 1990. Page 186.

Rowena Morse, who only started to preach on a regular basis in 1906, also challenged the view that preachers should talk just about hell and heaven and not get involved with picket lines or government policy. Both the Old and New Testament writers, she said, had provided a much broader guide for prophetic ministry when they taught that God wanted the faithful to show their devotion not by fasting and ritual but by seeking justice, relieving the oppressed, and befriending the helpless. These prophets had taught that collective needs must be put before individual interests; certainly, Jesus' purpose was not merely "to cure a few sick Jews" or "to make a tub of wine eke out the cheer of a wedding" but to relieve the world's miseries by achieving a universal good. In the present day, Morse told her people, the "priests" with their sacred forms were still guarding the old order jealously, but the visionaries were placing religion in the service of humanity. The lines had been drawn, and now they must stand with those who were willing to look beyond their own salvation to that of the broader community.

Sermon

A few weeks ago I made reference to a statement by Glenn Beck about social justice. He said, and this is a quote, "Look for the words "social justice" or "economic justice" on your church Web site. If you find it, run as fast as you can. Social justice and economic justice, they are code words." He went on to explain that they are code words for communism and Nazism. I mention this again because I want to forewarn

you that this morning I intend to talk about social and economic justice and I want to give you the opportunity to “run as fast as you can.”

Social and economic justice are on my agenda because I want to talk about ministry. You may wonder what ministry has to do with social and economic justice. There are those who see no connection. For many people religion in general and ministry in particular are about indoctrinating people into believing and thinking in a particular way. To me that’s neither religion nor ministry – that’s indoctrinating and controlling people to believe and think in a particular way. But it’s a popular misconception and cause for many to shy away from religion and ministry. I must admit, however, that there are many people who would reduce religion to the indoctrination and control of others. The recent news about the Catholic Church’s history of covering up and condoning child abuse is a good example.

For some people religion and ministry are abstractions. They go to church on Sunday morning – perhaps they go Wednesday evening as well – but the rest of the week they go about their business as if nothing had ever happened. They may talk about it, about how they agree with what is said and taught in the church and they may insist that others rigorously abide by the teachings of the church, but if you look past their words, past the façade of their lives, and examine the deeds of their lives you will not find any evidence of their church going. Talking the talk is important. Speaking out about one’s beliefs is important, but when all is said and done it doesn’t really mean anything unless it is matched with deeds. It doesn’t really mean anything unless the time a person spends in church leads to substantive changes in how a person behaves. Different religions have different expectations about what that substantive change should look like. I will leave other religious traditions to speak for themselves. But with respect to our own I think the answer can be heard in the message preached by Rowena Morse. She was a part of the Iowa Sisterhood, that remarkable group of women who broke the gender barrier in the late nineteenth century and became our first ordained women ministers. She taught her congregations that

. . . collective needs must be put before individual interests;

and that the purpose of Jesus’ ministry

. . . was not merely “to cure a few sick Jews” or “to make a tub of wine eke out the cheer of a wedding” but to relieve the world’s miseries by achieving a universal good.

She told her congregations that

. . . the “priests” with their sacred forms were still guarding the old order jealously, but the visionaries were placing religion in the service of humanity. The lines had been drawn, and now they must stand with those who were willing to look beyond their own salvation to that of the broader community.

That was and is a radical message. It says religion is not just a private concern. It says religion is a call to action. We are not supposed to just save ourselves or change ourselves or do something to others independent of what happens to us. Our task is to change ourselves and the world together, an idea summed up in these words of Lila Watson, an Australian Aboriginal woman from Queensland:

If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.

That notion of salvation has led me to believe that Unitarianism has been making a fundamental mistake for many years. The mistake is exemplified in how people have been encouraged to develop an “Elevator Speech”, the fifteen second explanation of what it means to be a Unitarian. I’ve seldom heard a good one. People tend to stutter and stammer – myself included. I think the reason is because instead of explaining what Unitarianism is we should be saying how it has changed our lives. We should be saying how it has taught us that our liberation – our salvation – is bound up with the world.

I believe that the day we begin to realize that our liberation – another word for salvation – is bound up with the world, that is the day to recognize that ours is a religion that calls all people to ministry. I have spoken in the past about the priesthood and prophethood of all believers. The priesthood of all believers says there are no priests, that we have a universal laity. Each person has the ability to commune with the divine with the intercession of a special priestly class. It is why I am a minister, not a priest. And the prophethood of all believers says each of us is responsible to stand up against injustice, to speak the truth before power. I would add to the priesthood and prophethood of all believers a third foundational principle – the ministry of all believers.

The ministry of all believers says religion is bound up and inseparable from the world. It says religion is not an ivory tower occupation. It is not a Sunday morning occupation, not even a Wednesday night affair. And in particular, it says ministry is not limited to what a minister does up here. I am an ordained minister. As such I have been given specific responsibilities and duties that are connected with our tradition of a learned ministry rooted in specific educational requirements. But it would be a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of ministry to think it is only what ministers do on Sunday mornings because ministry is not about what a person does, it is about how and why one does it.

Ministry can be leading worship. But ministry can also be preparing and serving a meal for those who are hungry and in financial need. It can be caring for the sick by visiting people in the hospital or at home. It can be raising or giving money to support relief workers helping people after an earthquake or other natural disaster. But listen to what I said. I did not say ministry was all those things – I said ministry could be those things. I have seen people lead worship, feed the hungry and visit in hospitals who – to my way of thinking – were not engaged in ministry because I believe they were motivated by the desire for a photo opportunity or to exploit a situation for personal

benefit. If the only reason – or the primary reason – you do something is to make money or obtain personal gain then it's not ministry. As Lila Watson said,

If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.

Ministry is not specific actions, it is action bound inseparably to motivation. It is related to the old concept of professionalism. It's not the same, but there are similarities. The modern and contemporary notion of a profession is inextricably linked to the idea that the professional has the right – the absolute right – to make a lot of money for what he or she does. It's all about money. But the traditional notion of a profession is the principle that the professional puts the interests of one's client before his own. The later idea is now seen as quaint and old fashioned and is derided as naïve – perhaps socialist or communistic. The former is why the legal and medical professions are now properly called the legal and medical industries. The same is true of much that passes for religious ministry. The proof can be seen in the televangelists who broadcast 24/7.

Religion – if it is to be something more than a private enterprise or a façade for those who would seek to indoctrinate and control other people – must be that which calls its followers to a ministry of all believers. It must be that which demands people live their lives differently. It must be that which demands people live their lives with a concern not just for themselves, but for those around them. I do not mean that one must abandon all concern for the self. I think that is foolish. I believe there needs to be an element of realpolitik philosophy that is thoroughly pragmatic. But one must recognize the impact that one's actions have on those around them. Like it or not we are bound together in this world. We can be bound together in self-destruction, or bound together in liberation. I believe the ministry of all believers calls for us to be bound together in liberation. I believe the ministry of all believers is about making our everyday lives a ministry. It doesn't matter if we dig ditches or sell mortgage loans. A ministry of all believers requires the laborer to give an honest day's work. A ministry of all believers requires the merchant to give an honest measure. A ministry of all believers requires the banker to lend fairly and not to charge usurious interest. A ministry of all believers requires the CEO of a mining company to be more concerned with the safety of the miners than the profits of his company. And when you are driving home today a ministry of all believers requires restraint and not road rage. A ministry of all believers requires the doctor to be concerned with the needs of the patient and not just making money. It absolutely requires the doctor to not be concerned with the politics of his patient. And a ministry of all believers requires that we be concerned about how the deeds of our lives impact on the larger issues of social and economic justice; it calls for us to recognize that we are all, each and every person in the world, part of the interdependent web of existence. We may wish to think we are in this alone and that an unbridled selfishness is how to behave, but in the long run that will only cut us off from one another and leave us stranded and alone. Glenn Beck's vision of a world in which he equates social and economic justice with Nazism and communism is

a world like that of King Midas – a world that would leave one rich, but cut off from human relationships, a world in which one is ultimately impoverished amidst riches.

Ministry is about relationships, about building and creating relationships that nurture the human spirit and bring people together in a world where there is justice for all, not just for a few because justice for anyone requires justice for everyone. That's why ministry is an everyday business. It is not something limited to Sunday morning or Wednesday evening. It is the everyday work of life. It is what we have when we leave here not with the idea that religion is finished for the week and we don't have to worry about it until next Sunday, but when we leave here with the words of Marge Piercy ringing in our ears.

I want to be with people who submerge in the task, who go into the fields to harvest and work in a row and pass the bags along, who stand in the line and haul in their places, who are not parlor generals and field deserters but move in a common rhythm when the food must come in or the fire be put out. The work of the word is common as mud. Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust. But the thing worth doing well done has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident. Greek amphoras for wine or oil, Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums but you know they were made to be used. The pitcher cries for water to carry and a person for work that is real.

That is the spirit of ministry to which each and every person is called.

Amen.