

Luke 10:25-37; RIC Sunday; January 28, 2024

Additional texts: Amos 5:21-24; Romans 8:31-39

Amos and Romans texts from The Inclusive Bible: The First Egalitarian Translation,
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Rich Weingartner

Grace to you and peace from God our parent, Jesus our Savior, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Welcome to RIC (Reconciling in Christ) Sunday. As noted in your bulletin - this is a Sunday where we, and hundreds of other RIC congregations across the nation celebrate, remember, and rededicate themselves to the commitments they made when they became RIC. Those commitments are outlined in our welcome statement on the front of your bulletin. More information about RIC, a little history, and the reason we keep focusing on RIC will be in your February newsletter. On a personal note, this congregation and our RIC status and journey, have been a true blessing for me. To be able to fully be myself in the presence of God and this community is such a freeing feeling. To be able to lead worship with other members of the LGBTQIA+ community is amazing - something I would have never even thought would be possible 10-20 years ago. Yes, we've come a long way, but as always, there is still a journey ahead of us.

ReconcilingWorks, the organization that manages the RIC program, always provides resources to guide congregations in their planning of their RIC service. This year's theme is "Roll Down Justice". What a fitting theme for our congregation here at Faith.

Over my time here, I have only seen our love of justice grow. All types of justice - social justice, refugee justice, justice for the hungry, justice for the LGBTQIA+ community, justice for our BIPOC siblings. As we continue on our transformation journey to prepare to complete our ministry site profile and begin to seek out candidates for a pastor, it is important to know who we are, and in our conversations so far, our justice work is always front and center.

So what is justice? According to Merriam Webster's dictionary: "the maintenance or administration of what is just especially by the impartial adjustment of conflicting claims or the assignment of merited rewards or punishments" or "the quality of being just, impartial, or fair." Yawn. While dictionary definitions are accurate, they are often boring. Which is why I love the theme for this Sunday, "Roll Down Justice". It has action! "Roll Down". Which started me thinking more about Justice as not just a noun or a concept or something to strive for; but instead viewing justice as a verb - an action - something to do and get engaged in. Now it is starting to sound exciting!

The theme of justice. Our readings walk us through the What? The How? And the Why? First, in the old testament reading from Amos, we hear what we should be doing. We hear that God doesn't just want our solemn assemblies, burnt offerings and sacrifice, and general noise making. No, God asks us to "let justice flow like a river, and righteousness flow like an unfailing stream." (Amos 5:24) God wants justice to flow in

God's creation - never ending - never ceasing. God is asking us to constantly work for and do justice.

This is reiterated in the Psalm today when it says "The works of your hands are faithfulness and justice" (Psalm 111:7). Now this is saying that the works of God's hands are faithfulness and justice - but who does the work of God's hands? As the ELCA slogan tells us: "God's Work. Our Hands." It is us who are called to carry out the work of faithfulness and justice.

Now we get to the "How?" part. How can we do this? A little later I'll focus more on this, but for now I want to focus on the aspect of the question "How can we do this? What if we get it wrong? What if we mess up? What if we get push back? What if we upset people?" In today's new testament reading from Romans, we receive reassurance that no matter what happens, God is on our side, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" and "What will separate us from the love of Christ? Trouble? Calamity? Persecution? Hunger? Nakedness? Danger? Violence?" This is the good news of Jesus Christ and God - no matter what - God will not leave us, God's love and forgiveness are given to us already and nothing can take that away. As it says in the final part of today's reading from Romans: "For I am certain that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, neither heights nor depths—nor anything else in all creation—will be able to separate us from the love of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus, our Savior."

This is How we can do justice. We are freed from sin by the love and action of Jesus Christ, so we can focus on doing work and following the example of Christ, without worrying if something we do will take the love of God away from us or that we might not “earn” our way into the glorious kin-dom. All that is already done for us.

So now that we know what we should do, “let justice flow like a river,” and how we are freed from sin and worry about earning God’s love and forgiveness, we can look at the “Why?” Why should we care? Why should we do something? Won’t other people do it? Why should I even try, it probably won’t make a difference anyway. As the Bible reminds us over and over, the law or commandments we are told to follow are, as noted in today’s Gospel reading from Luke, “You must love the Great Spirit from deep within, with the strength of your arms, the thoughts of your mind, and the courage of your heart, and you must love your fellow human beings in the same way you love yourselves.” Or as we typically hear it, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself.” (Luke 10:27, NRSVUE) The “Why” is because it is God’s commandment, and in my personal opinion, simply the right thing to do.

To further emphasize the Why - a few other passages come to mind. First from James 2:14-16, from the First Nations translation: “What good is it, my sacred family members, if a man says “I have faith,” but has no deeds to show for it? Can that kind of “faith” set

him free and make him whole? If a family member or any human being has no clothes to wear or no food to eat, and you say, "Go in peace, stay warm, and eat well," but fail to give what is needed, what good have you done?", Here is the last verse again as we commonly hear it from the NRSVUE, "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." Yes, we aren't saved by our works, but are saved by faith through grace. However, how valuable is that faith if we don't actively live it in our lives.

Turning to 1 John 3:16-17, again from the First Nations translation, "The Chosen One laid down his life for us. This is how we know what love is. In the same way, we should lay our lives down for each other. If someone who has many possessions sees another in need and shows no pity, how can Creator's love remain in that person?" If we truly want to feel the life giving love of our Creator, then we must do justice in the world to have it roll down among all God's creation.

Yes, we at Faith Lutheran, certainly do Justice, it is a constant river of work flowing through our community of faith. From the micro pantries (don't forget the Culver's fundraiser tomorrow evening!), to the refugee house - and all the help we give those living there, to climate justice with advocacy, solar panels, and rain gardens, to participating in Pride events, and holding racial justice protests/rallies on our sidewalk, we certainly do a lot of justice work. Reading our annual report is a great reminder of how much we do as a community. This is a good look at who we are.

However, we aren't just called to do justice work together as a community. We are also called to do justice work in our daily lives outside our community of faith. This is clearly shown in our Gospel reading today, the story of the Good Samaritan. This story is familiar to many but shared today from a different translation, which I love, because it lets me be part of the story in a new way by helping me think about what it means. The way this translation is written, helped me remember that the first two people that passed by were Holy people, people that you would think would do the right thing because they were part of, and leaders of, a community of faith, but no - they are the ones that passed by the injured man. It was a complete outsider, an "other", a person who "was not a Tribal Member but a mixed blood despised by the tribal people" that stopped to help. This person, who based on society would have every right to ignore the injured man, made justice happen. Not just in some superficial way, but became committed to justice for this one person. As it says in verse 35, "The next day," the man left with instructions to the keeper of the lodging house to continue to care for them. Yes "The next day". This "other", the "outsider", set aside whatever plans they had and spent the night with the injured man taking care of him.

This parable is told to answer the question, "Who are my fellow human beings?" or as also translated, "Who is my neighbor?" This again is a question the transition team, along with the congregation, will be looking at as we work through this transition process. As we look toward where Faith Lutheran will be heading in the coming years, we are reminded of who are are called to be, by also reflecting on the question Jesus

asked at the end of the parable, “Which one of these three acted as a fellow human being to the man who was attacked by the thieves?’ The scrollkeeper answered, ‘The one who had pity on him.’ ‘Go,’ Creator Sets Free (Jesus) said, ‘and walk in the same way.’”

Yes, we are commanded to “Go and walk in the same way,” and as shown in the parable, this is in our everyday lives in addition to the work we do as a community with Christ. It is sometimes harder to do justice work in our own lives instead of with a group. However, it is vitally important to do so, and the work comes in many ways. Do you defend people when they aren’t able to? Do you correct people when they are incorrect and thus causing damage to people? Do you write and call your legislative representatives to let them know how you feel on issues - whether or not you know they’ll agree with you? Do you vote for people who prioritize justice in their work and laws they introduce and vote for? Do you actively promote these people to encourage others to join you in your justice work?

There are many ways to work on justice in your own lives, and I personally think a good place to start with any of it, is education. The more you know about the oppressed communities and their history, the better you are able to understand their point of view and know ways to advocate for them without having to constantly be told by them what they need. We work to provide some education here at Faith, but doing your own learning is also important. Read books by authors of a diverse background. If you are

on social media and you don't have any friends or organizations you follow that keep you learning something or challenging your thoughts, I encourage you to find some people or organizations to follow. I am on Facebook a lot, probably more than I should be, and I have a lot of friends and groups that I see posts from, most I just quickly scroll by, but there are a few friends and groups that I will always take the time to read or listen to their post - since I know it will give me information that I'm not hearing elsewhere, and often learn something new.

Just as in the story of the Good Samaritan, he didn't need to be told, "Hey - there is this person hurting, they need help, go and bandage their wounds, then take them to the local inn and care for them overnight and make sure they are cared for after that." No, he knew what to do on his own, it was ingrained into his personality - and that is our hope and prayer here as a community of Christ, in that we will continue to learn, both from society and from the word of God, so that justice becomes fully part of who we each individually and as a community are. This way we will be able to "lift every voice and sing till earth and heaven ring, ring with the harmonies of liberty," so that Justice may continue to "flow like a river, and righteousness flow like an unfailing stream." Amen.