

## Social Righteousness and the Ridiculous Proposition of the Church

Sept. 29, 2013

Caldwell Presbyterian Church

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Texts: Isaiah 40:31, Luke 6:20-26

As some of you know, I drive a very old car, 24 years this fall. Next year, in the eyes of the Department of Motor Vehicles, it will be officially considered an antique. It's got a lot of broken parts. But it passed inspection last week and it cranks every morning. I have no complaints. In fact, driving around in 1990 technology provides an interesting perspective.

We've been doing the same thing, in a sense, in the last month here at Caldwell. We've been looking at what are known as the Six "Great Ends" of the church. These statements are part of our national denomination's constitution and, like my car, they too are old. Much older in fact, about 150 years old. I can't speak for you, but, again, as with my old car, I've enjoyed "driving around" in these old purpose statements, so to speak. It seems as if just about everything in the world and the church has changed since they were written. But they still can guide and shape us and our ministries.

Today we come to the Great End that charges us, the church, with the "Promotion of Social Righteousness." As with the other Great Ends, the first thing we have to do is decipher what for many of us sounds like dusty, convoluted language.

We know that the word social connotes anything that has to do with our life together. This Great End does not speak to "individual" righteousness. It's clear. It deals with our common life. As for the second word, righteousness, we might have to think a little harder about it. Somehow in these post-modern times, the idea of being righteous has gained a negative taint. We can safely lay some of the blame for that at the door of the church at large, which too often has preached a strict morality that often goes unmatched by its actions. As a result, a church that strives to be "righteous" is likely to be perceived by many, especially younger people, as hypocritical and judgmental.

But when we peel all of that back, we get closer to the true sense of the word. "Righteous" in this sense is to be focused on those things that God wants, that God deems right and just, the way God wants the world to be.

As with all of the Great Ends of the church, the charge to promote social righteousness immediately differentiates the church from any other organization on earth. Sure, the church has some things in common with other organizations: Churches offer social fellowship and opportunities for service, a bit like the Rotary Club. Churches also teach people of all ages, as with colleges and public schools. Many churches operate or participate in youth sports leagues, like the Little League or Pop Warner football, or things like adult softball. Some churches take on social injustices or stand for what they think is right, just as with the ACLU or the NRA.

But none of that quite captures the essence and the uniqueness of the church in society, the place where, above all, God's vision of the world is to be upheld. And, when we get right down to it, that vision of the world is simply, utterly ridiculous.

One day a great multitude gathered to hear what God in Christ had to say. He looked out at the crowd and at his disciples and said the strangest things:

'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

'Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

'Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

'Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.

Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

That wasn't all he said:

'But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.'

'Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.

'Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

'Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.'

See what I mean? Ridiculous, isn't it?

And that is what we, as the church, are supposed to promote? That is what social righteousness looks like? We live in a world where the market will provide consumers with almost anything they want, from light beer that keeps you in shape to cars that park themselves. Whatever stuff we want, the world will provide if we have the money to buy it.

But we are supposed to stick with a message like the one Jesus shared? In a world that glorifies the rich and famous and too often kicks the poor and homeless to the curb, we are supposed to say that popular culture has it all wrong. We are supposed to sell the idea not only that the first won't be first at all, but will actually be last in God's kingdom?

That's not the only ridiculous thing about the church. Nowhere else in the world are you invited to come, sought after to come ... only to get handed a plate and expected to put money in it, voluntarily. It's crazy isn't it?

We, the church, ask you to make a promise to God, a pledge of your hard-earned money. Not just your pocket change or what few dollars, if any, are left over at the end of the month but your first fruits. The church asks us to give before we go out to eat or take a vacation, or even pay the electricity bill. All for a God that we can't tangibly prove. All as part of a mystery we cannot fully solve. It's just nuts.

And what do you get in return? What's in it for you? Not membership in a club with a pool or a golf course. Not even a magazine subscription. Not even a t-shirt. Nothing at all, in fact, at least nothing the world would value.

But the church doesn't stop there. The church also asks for your time, yes, *your* time, your valuable time. And the church wants your effort, too. It wants you to bring your talents, your skills and give them for free, willingly, even joyfully, for the promotion of social righteousness. What kind of business model is this, anyway?

Now all of that is true for just about any church. But you people ... you people are different. Heck, that's an understatement. You come here joyfully, at least as far as I can tell. You genuinely welcome others, you make them feel at home, you tell them you're glad they are here and that you hope they come back!

You care for each other – and not just on Sundays. You show up at each other's houses with food when someone is in crisis. Or you show up with just a listening ear ... without even having to be asked. You teach other people's children. You think all people are actually created equal in God's eyes and are equally deserving of God's love, our love.

It's almost as if you just don't pay attention as the rest of the world divides itself up into safe little tribes grouped by race or gender or sexual orientation or religious background or class.

Another thing you people do is read the Bible and you see that the promotion of social righteousness, among other specific purposes of this strange organization, is actually to care, really care for those who are poor.

When we turn to God's word in scripture, it's clear throughout that God has a particular love and compassion for those who are in need. In the person of Jesus Christ, our Lord read from the book of Isaiah. This Old Testament prophet brought words of both correction and compassion to God's people when they were suffering in exile. In his first sermon or public statement, Jesus read from Isaiah and announced that God had anointed him to bring good news to the poor.

Now there are a range of ways to be impoverished – spiritually, physically, poor in spirit, poor in relationships and poor in opportunity. But in Luke's gospel, Jesus is referring to the truly poor, like homeless people or the underemployed or the immigrant or any people who are cast to the margins, if not forgotten entirely, by all the world's other organizations and institutions. But the church's call to promote social righteousness means the church steps in when others don't.

I guess that's why you people seem perfectly fine with other people using our church's buildings 24 hours a day, seven days a week. I guess it's why you come here at the crack of dawn on Sundays and cook breakfast for three dozen homeless women, you teach immigrants English, you teach poor kids at Merry Oaks Elementary, you grow food in our garden for other people, you build homes for others and you travel to Guatemala to bear witness there.

I guess that's why some of you radicals went to Raleigh to bear witness to God's vision for society. Some went even more than once. Some of you even got arrested! What an embarrassment. What an outrage.

My bet is that some of you might not even be offended by what Jesus said on the plain that day, that business about the how the poor are blessed and theirs is the kingdom of God, how the hungry are blessed and will be filled, how those who weep one day will laugh and how some people might actually be content not with an earthly reward but a reward in heaven.

Rev. Dr. Timothy Hart-Andersen, a cousin of our member Dave Bradley, pastors an urban church like this one. Here is what he said about all of this in a sermon on today's passage from Luke:

Jesus is not against the rich; he is simply saying that God has a particular interest in the poor. Nonetheless, his words are hard for many of us to hear: "Woe to you who are rich," Jesus says. By the standards of the three billion people in the world who live on less than \$2.50 a day, that includes all of us. "Woe to you who are full now," he says. From the perspective of the more than twenty-five thousand children in the world under the age of five who will die today from hunger and preventable disease, that includes all of us.

If we hoped our religion could remain a fundamentally private matter we were mistaken. If it makes us squirm to be brought face to face with our material abundance, then so be it. The gospel is not meant to justify our standard of living. It was and is meant to be heard by the poor as good news; the rest of us have the stewardship challenge of using our resources for the sake of reign of God. That will mean living as simply and as generously as we can.<sup>1</sup>

You folks actually seem to be somewhat OK with that kind of thinking. But I may be the craziest one in this room. I can't speak for any of our elders. But I think that you can – and will try – to do more to promote social righteousness. This week you receive a packet of information in the mail. It contains information about our ministry, how Caldwell spends its budget and two pledge forms – one for your time and talent and one for your money. We ask that you take time to review the information, think and pray hard about what you have and make that promise I mentioned earlier, a pledge to helping build the Kingdom of God.

I am nutty enough to think that you will take it seriously. That you will think hard about what you can do to bring God's vision to life, with your money and with your skills and gifts. Yes, I actually believe that you understand that the promotion of social righteousness and all the other Great Ends of the church and all of the aspirations of our Caldwell Mission Statement are too important not to take seriously. I believe you will take a hard look at your life and your use of money and count your blessings and give thanks for this church and do everything you can to find a way to do more for God in return for God's unshakeable love and unwavering grace.

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<sup>1</sup> As quoted in [Proclaiming the Great Ends of the Church](#), Joseph Small, editor

But then the prophet Isaiah was considered crazy, too, as was Christ himself. So I suppose we are in good company, you and me. When all looked lost for God's people almost three thousand years ago, he wrote these words:

Have you not known? Have you not heard?  
The LORD is the everlasting God,  
the Creator of the ends of the earth.  
The Lord does not faint or grow weary;  
with an understanding that is unsearchable.  
The Lord gives power to the faint,  
and strengthens the powerless.  
Even youths will faint and be weary,  
and the young will fall exhausted;  
but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,  
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,  
they shall run and not be weary,  
they shall walk and not faint. (Isaiah 40:28-31)

So we believe in the church and all its ridiculous ways. And so we wait. And so we hope. And so we are renewed for the promotion of social righteousness and the building of the Kingdom. Thanks be to God. Amen.