

The Justice League and the Mercy Squad

Matthew 5:13-16, Isaiah 58:1-9a

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Some might think, to borrow from F. Scott Fitzgerald, that in the pulpit there are no second acts. But not so. Last week I preached on the lectionary text that included Micah 6:8: What does God want? God wants us to do justice, to focus on love, and to obey him humbly. I ended the sermon with a bit of a harangue on eight justice issues on Block Island, and more than one person told me “Now we need a part two.” One wise soul told me that such a sermon could bring a person down, that it might need to be balanced by talking about what steps we can take to address such justice issues and what people are already doing. Point well taken.

So in this week’s lectionary readings we have the pair of texts you heard earlier. Isaiah 58 is a glorious riff on the same themes as Micah 6. What kind of fast does God really want? Does God want us to deprive ourselves or to see us make a show of humility? Is it really *religion* God wants? No, the fast God wants is to loose the bonds of injustice, to break the yoke of slavery. The fast God wants is for us to share our food with the hungry and to bring the homeless into our homes. In other words, God wants us to do justice and mercy—and those things are done in both great ways and small. That chapter goes on (beyond the point where we stopped reading) to say that *if* you stop slavery and slander and gossip, *if* you feed the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your community will be renewed. Your light will rise in the darkness. Your ancient ruins will be rebuilt. Those acts that we do will lead to God’s blessing and they will be a *part* of God’s blessing on his people. God’s light upon us and the light that shines from us are indivisible.

And then we have the familiar gospel text from the Sermon on the Mount: “You are salt of the earth... You are the light of the world... Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” We are the people God has called to be distinctive and to permeate the earth with our influence—as salt permeates food and light permeates the dark. Jesus does not say “You are the revolutionaries. You are to take over the world.” He says that we are salt and light. I think that is of a piece with his parables when he says that the kingdom of God is like a woman kneading yeast into a very large lump of dough. The kingdom is like a seed that grows secretly underground and then emerges, or like the mustard seed which is so small but grows into a shrub that can support birds. The kingdom of God comes *in our lives*, and our lives matter. We can make a difference, not only by talking about Jesus but also by living Jesus-lives, by answering our own prayer that the kingdom come by doing God’s will.

Doing justice is not something that we do all at once. Loving mercy does not describe a conversion as much as a way of life. I was getting ready this week for the Block Island Poetry Project on March 31, when we will have a weekend retreat on Poetry and Faith. I was listening online to a podcast by one of the Christian poets coming next month, Scott Cairns from Missouri, reading some poems by another poet who is coming, Claire Bateman from South Carolina. This one line in her poem jumped out: “I was raised Baptist, but I’m an Incrementalist now.” It has a special meaning in the poem, but I think she is saying what it sounds like: I used to think that everything would change by conversion, by all-at-once personal change, but now I see that God works bit by bit and that’s the way things change. That’s the way salt and light and yeast work:

incrementally. The kingdom of God is not a revolution that is televised like the one we have been watching in Egypt the past two weeks. It's more like that old hymn I grew up singing as a missionary favorite although some people now say it's liberal: "The darkness shall turn to dawning, the dawning to noonday bright, and God's great kingdom shall come on earth, the kingdom of love and light."

Of course it is God who brings the kingdom, and that is why we beg him our prayers, "Thy kingdom come." It is God, as the hymn says, who "shall turn their hearts to the right," who shall "shatter the spear and sword." But God is already in the process of doing that by means of our lives—our lives as individuals in the world and our life together as the church in the world. We are the justice-bringers. We are the mercy-givers. We are the bearers of the kingdom, the messengers and agents of the new regime in this old world.

When I was a kid one of the many comic books I used to read was the one called *The Justice League of America*. They started that series in 1960, kind of like the Pro Bowl of the National Football League, where you could get all the superhero superstars together for one adventure. If you look around this room, it's pretty obvious we are not superheroes. But we are, in a sense, the Justice League. We are the ones God has charged to do justice, to work together to establish justice in this world. That's what God said through Isaiah and Micah and Amos, and that has not changed. Sometimes justice means protecting a child from a bully and sometimes justice means the Civil Rights Act; but it all happens bit by bit, step by step.

If we the church are the Justice League, what about mercy? What about love? I thought about what would be the equivalent moniker for a group of mercy-doers, and I decided we could be called the Mercy Squad. I guess I thought of that because it sounds a like "emergency squad"—and we can be on call spreading God's mercy and faithful love wherever there is need. I learned in my research that there is actually a hip hop group that goes by the name "No Mercy Squad." Ironically, that may well be the impression that some unchurched people have of Christians: judgmental, homophobic, no mercy. But the truth is just the opposite. True followers of Jesus are the agents of his mercy in the world, loving as Jesus loved, reaching out to the needy, the outcast, and the sinners.

Some of you are already engaged in that. You work with Helping Hands to provide food—especially during the winter. You donate to the Mary D Fund and to our Deacons' Fund. Some of you have worked to develop affordable housing or donated land for that purpose—which both helps those who need housing and those who need construction jobs. Some of you are sympathetic listeners and agents of mercy not requiring any formal structure. We are planning to offer training for lay ministry and listening skills this summer in a program called the Stephen Ministry which all the churches will do together.

The Ecumenical Ministries has worked to address the substandard housing for summer workers and to reach out to internationals. Some of you have worked with our intern to reach out to summer teenagers and some of you have worked to reach out to children through Vacation Bible School. Some of you are working to make the Block Island School a place where justice and mercy are values. Some of you are serving on the Mental Health Task Force to address the needs of the mentally ill and their families by organizing and changing systems. Some of you have been active in the Town Council on a wide range of issues. Some of you are working on beach access—both in terms of justice for all citizens and in terms of developing the waterfront as a source of jobs. Some of you have worked hard to develop new jobs on the island only to be stymied by regulations that were no doubt meant to protect someone somewhere but wind up hurting people, and some of you are thinking about how to get around that or change the rules.

The Spring Street Gallery is another example of creating jobs for artists by transforming our barn into a gallery and studio space.

At the Men's Breakfast yesterday, we were talking about the issue of creating jobs on the island and someone reported that one of our guys would like to come back to the island but would need to find caregivers. As we talked, a light bulb seemed to go on right over that table. Hey, you know what we need to do? We need to provide training for caregivers and some organized way of making their services available, because we have people who need to hire caregivers and we have people who need jobs in the winter. Let's work on it!

All of these things are ways of being salt and light. Salt and light doesn't have to do just with working in church programs—although we need some of that, too. Salt and light means living by kingdom of God values in the real world. Kim Gaffett had a column in the *Block Island Times* about the need for people to be involved in Town boards and committees. Those are opportunities for Christians to serve the Lord by letting their light shine, by letting others see their good works and giving credit to their God.

But if we do good things out in the world—if we act like members of the Justice League and the Mercy Squad—do we do this as citizens or as Christians? Some people think of their Christian life as what they do in church or in their prayer times, and the other stuff as their civic life.

Let's get this straight. It is *not* true that we are citizens of two kingdoms as Luther said—the kingdom of this world (BI, RI, USA) which is material and the kingdom of God which is spiritual. Our *primary* identity is as citizens of heaven, as part of the kingdom of God. *That* kingdom is beginning to unfold *within* the kingdoms of this earth, and as it does so they are being transformed. The kingdoms of this world are becoming the kingdom of our God and of his Messiah.

When I serve in a role you might designate as “civic”—on a town committee, for example—I am still serving as a *Christian* who sees *everything* in the light of kingdom values, looking for God's justice and redemptive possibilities. I do not take off my Christian hat and put on my secular hat. That is *not* what the Baptist tradition of religious liberty or the American tradition of separation of church and state means. That First Amendment protection which Baptists fought for means that the government can *never* ask me to take off my Christian hat in order to be a part of the community or to serve the nation—and that I cannot require any *other* citizen to take of *his* religious hat, whether he is Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, or none of the above. We are *all* allowed to keep our religious identities and still serve America and Block Island.

So we do not *conflate* the state with the kingdom of God. Nevertheless when I serve my country or my community I do so as a *Christian*. If I am drafted to serve in the army, I have to ask myself if I can serve in the army *as a Christian*. Some Christians say no. Most say yes. But *never* can we think to ourselves, “Well, the demands of the secular state have nothing to do with Jesus.” *Everything* has to do with Jesus—with his life in me, with his kingdom, and with his demands for justice, righteousness, and love.

In the same way, if I am asked to serve on the Historical Commission or the Recreation Board or the Economic Development Board, I am not free to take off my Christian identity and serve as if I were a secular person. I cannot say yes to the offer to serve the community unless I see how I can serve *as a Christian*. That does not mean using my service to the Town as a pretext for proselytizing. But it means that I must look at history or buildings or jobs or sports through the lens of the kingdom of God. It means that everything I do for my community is done

out of a desire for justice and mercy and the living out of God's desire to create genuine human community.

If we are followers of Jesus—if we are among those who are called and saved—we do not have the option of having one set of *spiritual* values and a different set of *political* values. Every value in our lives is subject to Christ. You are one person, not multiple personalities, and if Christ is in your life then he is in your life as you serve on a committee, as you coach, as you vote, as you care for the needy—as much as Christ is in your life when you come to church and pray. This is how we are salt: not in the salt shaker, but out there in the great scrambled egg of Block Island. This is how we are light: not under a basket or in a corner but shining out for everyone to see, chasing the darkness away.

When we come to this table we come as members of the Messiah's body, as part of the people over which he reigns. When Jesus took the cup, he said it was the cup of the new covenant. What he meant was that through the cross he would renew and reconstitute the people of God, opening it up beyond Israel to all who would come to the Messiah in faith. When God created his people originally through Abraham, he said that they were to be a blessing to all nations, and a light to the Gentiles. Jesus reminds us at this table that we are his people, brought into the covenant not just for our own salvation but to be a blessing to the world. You are not just people who have seen the light. You are, Jesus said, the light of the world. May it be so.