

Justice or Just Us?

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time, February 4, 1996. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 58:1-10; Psalm 112:1-9; 1 Corinthians 2:1-12; Matthew 5:13-20.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Most of us have long since given up the idea that God gets angry. But God does get angry. God especially gets angry when his people become preoccupied with ourselves and ignore the community around us. God said to his people long ago, "Your private fasting and your prayers aren't worth anything unless you're also hungry for justice".

"Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hid yourself from your own kin."

The title of my sermon comes from a book by Os Guinness entitled, The American Hour. Os Guinness is a British intellectual. He received his doctorate from Oxford University in England. He's also an evangelical Christian. He's concerned about rampant individualism among professing Christians. Evangelical Christians, he writes, are increasingly concerned about "just us" - just us evangelical Christians. They're not concerned about justice, but "just us".

Evangelical Christians aren't alone. Main line churches are even worse. An article in the Dallas Morning News claims that evangelical Christians give \$.79 out of every one hundred dollars for ministry to the poor and victims of injustice. Mainline churches like ours contribute half that much - about \$.40 out of every hundred dollars for ministry to the homeless, the hungry,

the poor. The trend to reduce programs for the homeless poor is found not only in government but in the church.

Guinness is concerned about hyper-individualism among Christians. Hyper-individualism expresses itself, for example, in the movement toward freedom of individual choice with respect to what schools our children go to. Hyper-individualism expresses itself in the move toward environmental deregulation: every individual should have the right to do what we want with our land and water and air. Individualism expresses itself in Dr. Kevorkian's campaign to make suicide an individual right. Individualism expresses itself in the freedom of individual women to choose whether or not to have an abortion.

Individualism also expresses itself in religious beliefs. In Robert Bellah's book, Habits of the Heart, there's an interview with a young adult named "Sheila." When asked about religion, Sheila says, "I consider myself religious, but I don't know when I've been to church. My religion is just my own little voice. I guess you could call my religion 'Sheilaism.'" That's extreme religious individualism.

My guess is that most of us, including myself, are pretty much committed to individualism. "Individualism lies at the very core of American culture." We believe in the dignity of the individual. We believe that anything that violates our right to think for ourselves, judge for ourselves, make our own decisions, live our lives as we see fit, is not only morally wrong, it is sacrilegious.

Individualism is a part of protestant Christianity. Our Book of Order affirms that, "... we consider the rights of private judgment, in all matters that respect religion, as universal and unalienable." One reason some new members give for joining the Presbyterian Church is that we have so much freedom to believe and act the way we want to. We don't have to believe in predestination if we don't want to. We don't have to believe in a literal Adam and Eve if we don't want to. We don't have to go to church if we don't want to. If we don't want we don't have to contribute time or money or talents to help carry out the mission of the church. We don't like to be told that we have a duty to encourage others to be active in the work and worship of the church.

But individualism comes at a high price. When individual personal happiness becomes the chief end in life - divorce rates skyrocket, suicide becomes epidemic, poverty and homelessness increase, injustice abounds, violence becomes epidemic.

Communities that harness hyper-individualism seem to have less divorce, less crime, less homelessness, less hunger. Look at the Amish. Everybody looks the same. Nearly everybody has the same last name. Individualism is suppressed. Freedom of thought is curtailed. But crime is rare. Divorce is rare. Violence is rare. Homelessness is rare. And although there are poor Amish you don't see extremes between the rich and poor. The Amish have a vision of the welfare of their community.

God want us to have a vision for the welfare of our nation. God doesn't want to destroy our individualism. God does want to

channel it. God wants us to be hungry for justice - not "just us" but justice. I read last week that the U.S. Census Bureau says that there's more people in poverty now than at any time in the last thirty years and that 40 percent of the poor are children. The Bible, both the old and new Testaments, make it clear that societies sharply divided between rich and poor are not in accord with the will of God. God is concerned about justice. The Lord sways, "Religious rituals are worthless apart from a genuine conversion of your hearts which expresses itself in the public arena."

Remember what John Winthrop said before the puritans step on the shores of New England in 1630? He was concerned to build a nation that was like a city set upon a hill. He wasn't simply interested in his own individual pursuit of happiness. He wanted to serve God by building a nation that exhibited God's justice. He said, "We must delight in each other, make others conditions our own, rejoyce together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our community as members of the same body."

John Winthrop was concerned about justice - not "just us" but justice for the whole community. Winthrop's idea of freedom was not the freedom to do whatever we feel like doing. True freedom, he said, is a freedom to do what's good, what's just and what's honest.

Jesus says to us, "You are the salt of the earth." We are to be like salt in society. Salt preserves meat and keeps it from rotting. Christians are called by Christ to become involved

in our communities to help prevent putrifaction. And Jesus didn't come to abolish what the Old Testament prophets said about our responsibility to work for justice and minister to the poor and homeless. Our righteousness must exceed that of the pharisees. We must be concerned for more than the salvation of our own individual souls. We must be concerned, as well, for the salvation of our community and nation and world.

What many people in American fear the most is that if we give up our private dream we may end up being a failure. What we fail to see is that what in the long run is best for ourselves is what's best for all of us. We have an obligation to society as Christians and as citizens. Christians in the biblical tradition are unreservedly committed not only to our own interests and ideals but also the common vision of the common good.

Dedication of Food Baskets

Let us prayer: Lord God Almighty, you have in freedom and in peace: Give to the pe
forbearance, that we may use our liberty i
Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the

Prayer of Lede

O Lord, our creator, by your holy prophets you taught your ancient people to seek the welfare of the towns in which they lived. We commend our neighbor to your care, that it may be kept free from hunger, homelessness and poverty. Give us strength of purpose and concern for others, that, by your grace, we may create here a community of justice and peace where you will may be done; Through your son Jesus Christ our Lord Amen