

SERMON preached by the Rev. Fred W. Anderson at Central Association Fall Meeting in First Congregational Church UCC, Brimfield, MA on 10/19/08

Restorative Justice: Back to the Future!

Micah 6:6-8
Romans 12:9-21
Luke 19:1-10

I received in an e-mail the other day, a list of lessons learned by a 5-year-old, which included:

- Never try to baptize a cat!
- Never give a tomato to your 2-year-old brother to hold!
- Never pick up your cat with one hand and a dust-buster with the other!

Here's my point: in many ways our American system of “retributive justice” flies in the face of our best understanding of full & complete & effective justice.

All three of our scripture lessons this afternoon speak about a mode of justice that focuses NOT on **punishment** or **retribution**, but on **reparation, restoration** and **reconciliation!**

Our familiar gospel lesson tells us of that wonderful encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus. We applaud short Zacchaeus for his determination and ingenuity in striving to see Jesus when he entered Jericho. But let's not forget that Zachaeus was “*a chief tax collector and he was rich.*” (Lk 19:2)

This means that, in today's society, Zacchaeus was similar to a Wall Street CEO! His means of acquiring his great wealth was very questionable! But here's what's important! When Zacchaeus encountered Jesus, his life changed...remarkably!! And Zacchaeus wanted to make amends for any & all injustices he had created or caused. So totally transformed Zacchaeus said:

“Look, half of my possessions I will give to the poor; AND, if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four-times as much.” (Lk 19:8)

And what did Jesus say? “*Today salvation has come to this house.*”^(v.9)

You see, we're talking restoration here! We're talking healing and reconciliation! We're talking restitution...plus!!! We're NOT talking revenge. We're NOT talking retribution! We're NOT even talking punishment! These things are secondary and far less important to restoring, rebuilding, reconciling and healing the injury, the crime, and the harm that has happened!

When Micah said: “*And what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*” (Micah 6:8) Micah wasn't talking about simply “talking” about justice, he was talking about doing it!!

So, let's take a closer look at this challenging biblical vision of **restorative justice**. There's basically three principles that form the foundation of rj: **First** is the principle that authentic justice requires that it focus on the harm that has been done to people and to communities. **Secondly**, restorative justice emphasis offender accountability and responsibility. **Thirdly**, those most directly involved and effected by a crime should have the *opportunity* to participate fully in the response and restorative process, if they so desire.

This is one very significant place where the retributive justice, that we know *throughout our nation*, and the restorative justice, that we find promoted *throughout our scriptures*, **differ**. With *retributive justice*...victims' suffering is often ignored. With *restorative justice*...victims' suffering is acknowledged and lamented!

With *retributive justice*...blame fixing is central. With *restorative justice*...problem-solving is central.

With *retributive justice*...the focus is on the past. With *restorative justice*...the focus is on the future.

With *retributive justice*...differences are emphasized. With *restorative justice*...commonalities are searched out!

You see, restorative justice is basically a vision, or a theory, of justice that emphasizes repairing the harm caused, or revealed, by abhorrent or criminal behavior. And it is best accomplished through cooperative processes that include all “stakeholders.”

Restorative justice...focuses on the harm that has been done to people and communities; and it emphasis offender accountability and responsibility.

Professor Howard Zehr writes that “*restorative justice REQUIRES, at minimum, that we address victims' harms and needs, that we hold offenders accountable to put right those harms, and that we involve victims, offenders, and communities in the process.*”

This is why **Peacemaking Circles** are such an vital component to the process and practice of restorative justice! Later on this afternoon some of you may wish to actually participate within and experience a simulated Peacemaking Circle.

The Peacemaking Circle, very simply, emphasizes **the same values** that are found when a family gathers around the table for the sharing of a meal. Peacemaking Circles affirm the equal importance of every participant. Peacemaking Circles foster open dialogue and deep listening. Peacemaking Circles embrace the value & importance of relationships!

In my mind it is very clear that the vision and practice of restorative justice is a truly valuable gift that our faith tradition has to offer the world. And this is especially true in cases of first-time offenders who are youth or young adults.

Last May, two 19-yr-old young adults were arraigned for vandalism and malicious destruction of property of over \$250 to the Narragansett Regional High School, and to six churches in Gardner, as well as to the Congregational Church of Phillipston. Both teen-agers collaborated in spray-painting anti-Christian messages on the properties they targeted!

Some of you sitting here this afternoon know a lot more about this gut-wrenching case than do I. But I do know this: after phone conversations I had with Dist. Atty. MacLoughlin's office, with Defense Atty. Peter Sargent, with the Rev. Dan Meiner, with Fr. Andre Dargis, and with the Rev. Stephanie Flynn, this is a case that could have been much more satisfyingly handled through the community-including process of **restorative justice**.

Back in 1985, Steven Spielberg produced a movie starring Michael J. Fox as a teenager entitled "*Back To the Future*." The film was tremendously successful. It's storyline, as many of you may remember, was built on the premise of time travel being used to bridge the generation gap.

The notion of going backward, as a strategy for moving forward, paradoxically makes perfect sense!! I don't mean to sound like a "bible-thumper" but I now realize that, when it comes to promoting peace, fostering understanding, nurturing healing, mending brokenness, and really "doing justice", it's clear that our faith, our unifying, healing traditions, and our Judeo-Christian scriptures have a lot to teach us!

Did you know that today, Oct. 19th, 2008, 1 in 9 African American men between the ages of 20 and 34 is locked up?? Did you know that in 1970, our prisons held fewer than 200,000 people?? Today, that number exceeds 1.5 million! And when we add in local jails, the total comes to 2.3 million!! That's almost 1 out of every 100 American adults.

(*"Mother Jones"*, July/August, 2008, p.45)

Sisters and brothers, we're NOT presently doing "justice" to justice in our communities!

We need to go back to the faith traditions that can lead us into a future that resembles the way that our God wishes and wills for us to live with one another! We need to move beyond our infatuation with retributive justice, to the ancient and challenging vision of restorative justice!

So, let's stop attempting to “baptize a cat!” And let's start working to embrace and foster the way of restoration “baptized” by the One who makes us one.; the One who is the Way, the Truth and the Life!

Once again, let us hear these challenging words of the Apostle Paul to the church in Rome: “*Let love be genuine: hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good.... And do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*” (Romans 12:9 &21)

LET US PRAY:

Lord, as individuals, as churches, as an Association, make us **instruments** of your peace.
Amen.