

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
Fifth Sunday of Lent
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The Two Standards: Which Value System?

Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8

Jim Wallis is the editor of Sojourners magazine,
a biblically-based, Christian publication focused on issues of poverty
and how Christians are called to address those issues,
a magazine I have subscribed to for most of my ministry.

Wallis has recently been one of the targets of a personal smear campaign
by talk-radio and Fox News celebrity Glenn Beck,
who told his listeners that they should leave churches
that use the words "social justice,"
which, says Beck, are code words for communism and Nazism.
Now, that's a really interesting and revealing charge for Glenn Beck to make.

Let me suggest a few things we do at GPC
that would fall under the category of social justice:

(1) The Bread of Life Food Pantry is a grass roots, hands on way
of "redistributing" our abundance,
also known in kindergarten parlance as - "sharing!"

Giving to, or volunteering for the Food Pantry
is a way of recognizing the social and economic inequalities
that exist in our own neighborhood,
and as people of conscience,
it is a way of doing what we can to respond.

Perhaps it's a drop in the bucket compared to the magnitude of world poverty,
but it is an act of social justice that is within our reach.

(2) As a part of our partnership with Calvert, Elfinwild, and Parkwood churches,
we are now exploring the possibility of opening a dental clinic
that would serve the Etna, Millvale, Sharpsburg, and Lawrenceville
communities.

A dental clinic provides care for people's teeth and gums
when they cannot afford to pay current dental market prices,
which are inflated due to injustices in our health care system.

This is a ministry that addresses an issue of social inequality -
that is, it is a social justice ministry.

It doesn't get at the roots of the problem,
but it is a ministry of compassion to those who suffer
because they cannot afford to see a dentist.

The same could be said for ministries in which we participate

with Hosanna Industries, Habitat for Humanity, Heifer International,
Off the Floor Pittsburgh, most of our Youth Mission Trips....and I could list others.

I'm not sure what Glenn Beck thinks your options may be
because you're going to have a hard time finding a gospel-preaching church
that doesn't care about social justice...even if they don't use that term.

As Jim Wallis points out

"The Catholic Church, the Black Churches, the Mainline Protestant churches,
and more and more Evangelical and Pentecostal churches
including Hispanic and Asian-American congregations
all consider social justice central to biblical faith
[and for good reason].

Glenn Beck is telling all those Christians to leave their churches.

Of course, Christians may disagree about what social justice means
in our current political context -- and that conversation is an important one --
but the Bible is clear: from the Mosaic law of Jubilee,
to the Hebrew prophets, to Jesus Christ,
social justice is an integral part of God's plan for humanity."ⁱ

In this war of vitriolic words that has become the public context of our world
it is sometimes hard to sort out what really matters,
and what really resonates with our values.

Well, aside from urging you not to listen to the likes of Glenn Beck -
or talk radio on left side of the argument
like Alan Colmes who is just as bad on the left -
when you listen to this stuff you are just participating in
the further dumbing down of America.

The primary reason I highlight this particular conflict of words and underlying values
is that today we are moving to consider the Ignatian way of
discerning our values,
through an exercises he calls "The Two Standards."

We also have an interesting story from the Gospel of John
in which Jesus speaks about the poor (words that are often misapplied)
and in which Judas speaks words that are deceiving;
he says something he doesn't really mean
because he has a hidden agenda.

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Self-examination is at the heart of the Season of Lent,

and Ignatius invites us to go deep within ourselves and ask,
“What are my values?”
“What standards do I uphold?”
“Are the values I profess with my lips the same I demonstrate by my life?”

Ignatius’ offers an exercise he calls “The Two Standards”
by which he is referring to the standards or banners or flags
under and around which an army rallies as it goes into battle.

Ignatius presents our situation in apocalyptic terms -
like in the Book of Revelation.

In these terms, Jesus is the light of the world,
doing battle against Lucifer, the prince of darkness.
He invites us to imagine Jesus calling people to his standard,
and to picture what he would look like as our leader,
versus what Satan looks like as he also calls us to serve with him,
against God and Christ.

Ignatius describes Lucifer as sitting proudly upon a throne of smoke and fire,
exalted for all the world to see and admire his strength.

Jesus, however, stands in a low place, and humbly invites others to follow.

According to ancient church tradition,
Lucifer is the fallen archangel, who led a rebellion against God
and was hurled from heaven because he refused to honor and adore
a God-made-man.

So Ignatius considers Lucifer to be the one who is opposed not only to God,
but opposed to everything that makes us truly and completely human.

But here’s the catch, and the reason for careful discernment:
the good guys don’t always wear white hats, and the bad guys black hats.
In fact, the name Lucifer means “bearer of light”
and the Enemy can use some very alluring means to call us away
from God in Christ.

So, the matter of clarifying our values is a very subtle matter
of unraveling the Enemy’s deceptions in our hearts.

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In the Two Standard’s exercise,
Ignatius has us ask God for the grace of being able to recognize
the deceits of the Enemy,
and for the grace of knowing Christ, our true guide,
and so to recognize the way to true and abundant life.

The battle strategies of these two leaders are these:
Satan directs his agents “first, to tempt people to covet riches...

in order than they may more easily come to the vain honor of the world,
and then to swollen pride.

In this way the first step is riches, the second honor, the third pride,
and from these three steps the enemy leads them
to all the other vices.”

Christ, on the other side of the battle,
charges his agents “to seek to help everyone by attracting them,
first, the highest spiritual poverty -
and if God would be served and wishes to choose them,
even to actual poverty;
second to desire insults and contempt because from these two things
humility follows
So there will be three steps: first, poverty as opposed to riches;
second, insults and contempt as opposed to worldly honor;
third, humility as opposed to pride;
so that from these three steps they might lead them
to all the other virtues.”

“Ignatius, the practical genius,
is sharing what he knows about how commitments unravel,
and how they mature.
[Greed], honors, and pride pave the typical road to ruin,
while poverty, rejection, and humility lead to perseverance and abundant [life].”ⁱⁱ

Would you have placed Greed as the first step of moral decline?
Perhaps you would have said Sex?
But the Bible - in both Old and New Testament -
has considerably more to say about the dangers of wealth
than about the dangers of sex.

Ignatius directs us to pray for spiritual poverty,
and if God should so call us - to actual poverty.
Now for most, particularly those of us with families to support,
it is unlikely that God is calling us to lives of actual poverty, or pennilessness.
But to live in spiritual poverty means that we have detached our souls
from the alluring power of material things;
so that it is of no consequence to us whether we possess them
or do not possess them.
We could give away any of our possessions and be content,
relying only on God for our sense of well-being.

So, the question for us to ask is, “What are my riches? What is my wealth?”

And whatever you consider your “riches”

beware of coming to think of these as your “accomplishment”
and your “just rewards” for your own intelligence and hard work.
Once you think your blessings in life come as a result of your own excellence,
then you are wide open to be puffed up by the honors and recognition of others,
and to put yourself on a platform of pride,
and pride is a narrow and precarious platform.

But you have chosen to follow Christ -
you have committed yourself, repeatedly and even again today,
to follow the path of life.

And as followers of Christ we begin with the affirmation
so well stated in Ignatius’s principle and foundation:
*everything in creation is given to us as a gift from God,
so that we can know God more easily and make a return of love more readily.*

The gifts are not the point of our focus, but the Giver.
If we keep our eyes and hearts fixed on the Giver of every good and perfect gift,
then we will be free to hear and to follow Christ’s teaching.

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Judas Iscariot was deceived, as we are also too readily deceived.
He knew how to speak the language of holiness and faith,
but his true motivation was Greed.
And being one entrusted with the “common purse” of the disciples
he apparently felt himself entitled to certain benefits.
Imagine the pride and superiority one must feel
to think it’s okay to steal from one’s neighbors,
and even one’s brothers and sisters in the faith.
Judas found a way of rationalizing his uses of the disciples’ common money
for his own gain - his dismay over the gift of perfume that Mary gave to Jesus
shows only that he was more attached to riches than to Christ.

The autobiography of Paul we have read today
gives us another example of a life puffed up with pride.
It also reminds us that honor and recognition can even come apart from riches.
Perhaps your wealth is a position of power or status or reputation that you hold,
in which you are esteemed by others.
Paul speaks of all the reasons he could boast and feel prideful.
Yet he learned to *regard [all that status and recognition] as loss
because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.
For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things,
and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.*

In the end, gaining Christ means gaining humility -

the humility of the one who was willing to give himself over to rejection,
and even to death, for his love God and God's world.

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As we go into this last week of Lent, approaching Palm Sunday and Holy Week,
I invite you to this meditation on the Two Standards.

Are you living according to the values you profess in Christ,
or is your life governed by your attachments to material things?

Are you content to live with Christ's affirmation,
or do you depend greatly on the praise and esteem of others?

What pulls at your heart, what tugs at your desire - like the purse of Judas Iscariot -
stealing your attention, your devotion, your love away from Christ?

Beware of the Enemy who prowls around your defenses looking for your weak points,
the chinks in your armor, the crack in your fortress.

And as we honestly examine our own lives, humbly acknowledging our weakness,
we will be more ready to receive the merciful presence of Christ
as he comes to us in these 40 desert days.

ⁱ SoJo Mail 3.11.10

ⁱⁱ Dean Brackley, *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times: New Perspectives on the Transformational Wisdom of Ignatius of Loyola* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2004) p. 81