

The Already, Not Yet Church: The Promotion of Social Righteousness
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In Lin Manuel Miranda's epic Broadway production, Hamilton,
the character of Thomas Jefferson declares
during a cabinet meeting in New York,
"Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness
We fought for these ideals, we shouldn't settle for less
These are wise words, enterprising men quote 'em
Don't act surprised, you guys, 'cause I wrote 'em..."

Those of you who are Hamilton fans,
now have an earworm for the rest of the day
—you're welcome.

Of course, Lin Manuel
is referring to Jefferson's authorship
of our country's Declaration of Independence
—which states,
"We hold these truths to be self-evident,
that all men are created equal,
that they are endowed by their Creator
with certain unalienable rights,
that among these are
Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."

Don't worry, this as political
as we're getting this morning...
Jefferson's words
though concerning our nation's governance
turn out to be a really dog-gone, good
theological statement.¹

Our nation was woven together,
holding fast to certainties,
our forefathers felt were obvious:
that all men (surely now, we can agree that it means all people)
are created equal;

¹ Rev. Lindsay Hatch, http://pbyofnewcovenant.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Connections_2020_September-October.pdf

that all people have worth and importance;
and that all people are endowed
—all people are given—
absolute privileges
—rights that cannot be taken away or dismissed
—and those rights are given and bestowed
by the God, the Creator.

So, politically speaking,
our nation was founded on the claim
that the God hold fast to,
meant for all people to have equal opportunity for
life itself,
freedom,
and means to thrive.

These words are penned
into the political fabric of our lives.
Which means those truths are part
of our corporate lives,
our common lives;
the life that we share together.

Which has a lot to do
with our fifth Great End of the Church,
The Promotion of Social Righteousness.

Righteousness is such a churchy word.
A churchy word that often gets a bad rap.
But righteousness is about *being spot on*
*in everything as God would have you be spot on.*²
The King James Bible translates Psalm 23,
“He leads me in paths of righteousness.”

Righteousness is about staying faithful to God’s intention
for everyone to be taken care of,
for everyone to be welcomed,
for everyone to flourish.

² Crazy Talk: A Not-So-Stuffey Dictionary of Theological Terms, ed. Rolf A. Jacobson (Augsburg Books, Minneapolis, MN 2008)

This Great End of the church
deals with our shared, national life.
It is about the promotion of *social* righteousness.
Which means our cultural, religious, and political life...

“Politics is the way
that people living in groups
make decisions.
Politics is about making agreements between people
so that they can live together
in groups such as tribes, cities, or countries.³
So, when it comes down to it,
politics is all about relationships.⁴

How we treat each other,
how we make decisions
what actions we take
for the benefit or detriment of each other.
Politics is about relationships.

And if there is one thing
that gets focus again and again in Scripture,
it is relationships.
In the Old Testament,
God’s people get in trouble
when they are forgetting the poor,
the orphan and the widow.
When they are neglecting *social* relationships
in their community;
when they are ignoring the pursuit of social righteousness
they suffer as a whole.

“In Scripture we learn that God
is particularly committed
to those who are caught in poverty
because they are denied the **fullness** of life.
God’s intention for humankind

³ <https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics>

⁴ J. Barrett Lee, <https://hoppinghadrianswall.com/2013/05/05/the-great-ends-of-the-church-the-promotion-of-social-righteousness/>

is that justice be planted
among the people of the earth
and take root and flourish,
so that people everywhere
might know life in all its fullness.”⁵

Life. Liberty. The pursuit of happiness.
Life. Freedom. The pursuit of life’s fullness.
The promotion of social righteousness.

In the New Testament is full of guidance
about social relationships
Jesus didn’t say,
Blessed is the promotion of social righteousness,
but he did say things like,
“What you have done
for the *least* of your brothers and sisters,
you have done for me.”

He did say things like,
“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

He did say things like,
“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim
release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Jesus didn’t come up
with the fifth great end of the church,
the promotion of social righteousness
...but then again, maybe he did.

The promotion of social righteousness

⁵ Timothy Hart-Anderson, *Plain Talk from Jesus on Poverty and Wealth*. Proclaiming the Great Ends of the Church, ed, Joseph D. Small (Geneva Press, Louisville, KY 2010) pg. 116

is about the encouraging and the supporting
of our corporate lives *together*:
aiming toward the justice and righteousness
that God intends for all creation.
It is faithfully following the path
of righteousness that God lays out before us.

The prophet Amos tells us that,
“[t]he quality of our relationships
is the measure of the quality of our religion.”⁶

I loathe, I spurn your festivals,
I am not appeased by your solemn assemblies.
If you offer Me burnt offerings—or your meal offerings—
I will not accept them;
I will pay no heed
To your gifts of fatlings.
Spare Me the sound of your hymns,
And let Me not hear the music of your lutes.
But let justice well up like water,
Righteousness like an unfailing stream.
(Amos 5:21-24, The New Jerusalem Bible)

The worship God longs to hear
is the promotion of social righteousness.

The truth is,
as Whit said last week,
we are truth tellers and
proclaimers of the good news.

And the truth is we can't follow Jesus
and not promote social righteousness.

We can't ignore our social relationships.
We can't ignore those who are not like “us.”
We can't ignore the ‘isms’
that impoverish our relationships
like racism, sexism, classism, ageism, heterosexism.
We can't ignore actions
that devalue another's livelihood

⁶ J. Barrett Lee, <https://hoppinghadrianswall.com/2013/05/05/the-great-ends-of-the-church-the-promotion-of-social-righteousness/>

like war, violence, and greed.

Here's a hard truth we didn't talk about last week.

promoting social righteousness,

speaking the truth of God's preference for the poor,

believing that all people

are precious and of immense importance

... well doing that often

runs against political and religious authorities.

And sometimes it does not end well.

In 2001, NPR ran this story on its show, *This American Life*:

It all began at Christmas two years ago, when my daughter was four years old. And it was the first time that she'd ever asked about what this holiday meant. And so, I explained to her that this was celebrating the birth of Jesus. And she wanted to know more. So, we went out and bought a kids' bible and read it at night. She loved him. She wanted to know everything about Jesus.

So, we read a lot about his birth and his teaching. And she would ask constantly what **that phrase** was. And we would repeat to her, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." And we would talk about those old words and what that all meant.

And then one day we were driving past a big church and out front was an enormous crucifix.

She said, who's that?

And I guess I'd never really told **that** part of the story. So, I had to sort of, say yeah, that's Jesus. I forgot to tell you the ending. Well, you know, he ran afoul of the Roman government. His message was so radical and unnerving to the prevailing authorities at the time that they killed him. They concluded that he would have to die. That message was too troublesome.

It was about a month later, after that Christmas, it was mid-January, and her preschool celebrates the same holidays as the local schools. So,

Martin Luther King Day was off. I knocked off work that day and I decided we would play, and I'd take her out to lunch.

We were sitting in there, and right on the table where we happened to plop down, was the newspaper on the front page, was a huge drawing by a ten-year-old kid from the local school of Martin Luther King, Jr.

She said, who's that?

Well, that's Martin Luther King, Jr. And he's why you're not in school today. Today is his birthday, and we celebrate his life.
She said, so who was he?

I said, he was a preacher.
And she looks up at me and goes, for Jesus?

And I said, yeah, actually he was. But there was another thing that he was really famous for. Which is that he had a message.
And you're trying to say this to a four-year-old. She doesn't know the story so you're just very careful about how you phrase everything.

So, I said, well, yeah, he was a preacher, and he had a message.
She said, what was his message?

I said, well, he said that you should treat everybody the same no matter what they look like.
She thought about that for a minute. And she said, well that's what Jesus said.

And I said, yeah, I guess it is. You know, I never thought of it that way, but yeah. And it is sort of like "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

And she thought for a minute and looked up at me and said, did they kill him, too?⁷

Today is the 5th Sunday of Lent.

⁷ Taken from a blog, <https://hoppinghadrianswall.com/2013/05/05/the-great-ends-of-the-church-the-promotion-of-social-righteousness/> originally aired on NPR's This American Life, 2001

