

THE STAIN OF INJUSTICE

A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Isaiah 1:1, 1-20
James 1:22-27

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This morning I begin my message with the help of Shakespeare. Now I know that William Shakespeare is considered to be one of the truly great writers of the English Language, but personally I find many of his plays very dark and depressing. I know that he produced works of comedy and history, but it seems that his tragic works have left the deepest impression over the centuries. So when I think of Shakespeare what comes to my mind are plays such as Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth, Julius Caesar, and of course, Romeo and Juliet. If you know these great works, you also know they are all tragic; they all reflect to different extents the worst of humanity like our tendency to seek power at all costs – to plot, to deceive, and to murder for our own self-interests. Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth played by Judy Dench is a poignant example of the tragedy of such human depravity... (video clip of Lady Macbeth)

This well-known scene reflects Lady Macbeth's descent into insanity as she obsesses over washing away the stain of murder from her hands. For me, the scene also calls to mind someone else who famously washed his hands before a crowd of people shouting out that Jesus be crucified. It was Pilate who while he washed his hands said, "I am innocent of this man's blood..." (Matthew 27:24) Both examples demonstrate that a guilty conscience seeks clean hands. Throughout the centuries, this connection between dirty hands and a dirty heart can be found in many different cultures. This correlation between cleanliness and godliness that some of us may have heard from the mouth of a mother or grandmother while growing up is actually a reference to dirt that is deeper than the outer dirt and germs that cause us to wash our hands with soap and water and to carry around hand sanitizer.

Throughout the Bible, we often see the symbolic usage of water to remove spiritual dirt. Of course, for us Christians, it is through the sacrament of baptism that we experience the cleansing remedy that allows us to be right with God. Our Old Testament lesson today focuses on the need to clean away some very troubling spiritual dirt. God has specifically chosen the prophet Isaiah to warn the people of Judah of impending disaster if they do not attend to the dirt in their lives by returning to God.

We are told that Isaiah was first called by God to be a prophet "in the year that King Uzziah died." (Isaiah 1:1). Uzziah had been a strong king who enjoyed military success, but that success led to pride and the usurping of authority that belonged only to the priests. His violation resulted in the divine curse of leprosy – a disease that made him ritually unclean for the rest of his life (2 Chronicles 26). Subsequent kings who reigned during the time of Isaiah weren't much better. Jotham served adequately, and yet he failed to remove the places of pagan worship (2 Kings 15:35). Ahaz went so far as to "cast images for the Baals," and apparently sacrificed his own son by fire in a pagan ritual outside the walls of Jerusalem, a practice that was especially repugnant to God (2 Kings 16:1-4). Hezekiah reigned faithfully for 29 years, providing a positive chapter in the royal lineage. But Hezekiah was followed by his son, Manasseh, who reversed many of his father's policies and led Judah farther away from God. (2 Chronicles 29:1-33:9)

The personal sins of the kings of Judah is definitely a recurring theme throughout the Old Testament. But here in Isaiah we see something else, something that is even more disturbing to God – that something is the sin of the nation itself. Isaiah, speaking for God, issues an indictment equating the nation of Judah and the city of Jerusalem with “Sodom” and “Gomorrah,” those ancient cities that even today symbolize wickedness. While the sins of those cities are often equated with sexual depravity and being inhospitable to the stranger, the emphasis here is a bit different. Isaiah emphasizes that it is injustice, particularly toward those most vulnerable in society, that is so upsetting to God.

Yes, the people of Judah continued to worship, and they regularly offered sacrifices to atone for their sin, but God is not interested in ritualistic worship that is devoid of acts of justice. All the sacrifices, the bringing of offerings and the observance of the “festivals” and other “solemn assemblies” had become a “burden” to God who desired that worship be translated into action (Isaiah 1:10-14). And then comes the shocking judgment, the awful imagery that because the “hands” of the people are “full of blood” (vs. 15) their prayers for salvation will not be answered.

Like a Lady Macbeth walking around with hands still figuratively dripping with the evidence of murder, God declares that Judah’s hands are stained by blood because of its injustice toward the poor. God insists on a thorough washing of such evil behavior from the nation of Judah. This washing cannot be accomplished through ritualistic acts of cleansing, but only through an active scrubbing of the political and social system. The people must “learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, and plead for the widow” (vs. 17)

In biblical times, orphans and widows were the two groups most vulnerable in Israelite society; they were easily exploited, abused and neglected sometimes with the justification that they deserved their lot in life, that it was God’s judgement upon them. And yet, throughout Scripture, the lack of care for widows and orphans by society was regularly criticized by the prophets and judged by God. At this time of Isaiah’s pronouncement of judgement, Judah was in danger of being oppressed herself by outside powers, and the reason for this is directly related to her failure to protect those entrusted to her care. God had caught them “red-handed” in their systemic injustice and oppression, and God commands the people to “wash” themselves “clean” by ceasing to do the “evil” that was staining them.

Of course, I imagine there were compassionate and faithful individuals in Judah who did whatever they could to care for the poor and vulnerable. But this challenge from Isaiah is directed not to individuals, but to the society in which they lived and paid taxes. According to Isaiah, cleanliness in God’s sight is directly related to our active attention to the people who are important to God. Picking up the language of the court of law, God called the people to “argue it out” with him, to make their defense if they wanted. However, God knew the truth, and their sins would be cleansed – turned from a blood-red stain to the white of “snow” and “wool” if, and only if, they were “willing and obedient” to God’s call to societal justice (vs. 18-19). In other words, it doesn’t matter what else they say or do, because if they continue in their rebellious, oppressive ways, God’s response will be severe judgment.

Most of the time when we talk about sin in the church, we are referring to individual sin. You and I confess our personal sin and we seek forgiveness in the name of Jesus Christ, the One who “came to seek out and to save the lost.” (Luke 19:10) But no matter how faithful we try to be as individuals, we are also part of a larger society. And so Isaiah reminds us that we are held accountable for the sins of the society in which we live. Is that disturbing to you? It’s certainly disturbing to me!

As people of faith we must always be looking at the systems, policies and laws in our society that marginalize the poor and vulnerable in our day and age. We must recognize injustice for what it is, and be willing to invest our time and effort in working for justice. If some of you are thinking today that my sermon is political; I understand why you might think that. But what it's really about is God's justice, and us joining God in working for that justice. If you and I take seriously God's words from the prophet Isaiah, then the stain of injustice marks each one of us whenever we hear about a group of innocent people being victimized and we fail to do something about it.

Whether we like it or not, the prophet Isaiah along with most every prophet of the Old Testament, challenges each one of us to consider the orphans and widows of our day. What are the issues of justice that our city, our nation and our world are failing to address? There is economic oppression and corporate greed; there is inadequate and affordable housing in many places; there is a lack of health care and thousands of people in third-world countries dying daily from curable diseases and infections; there is widespread hunger and homelessness. There is a refugee crisis, children sold into slavery every day, women forced into sex trafficking, and places where genocide still happens.

Isaiah's finger of judgment is uncomfortably pointed at the faithful of today. Of course, we don't like that finger pointed at us. But unfortunately, injustice is still very much a reality in our day and age, and that means the prophetic challenge to clean up the stain of injustice is still appropriately directed to us. As individuals, we may certainly see various issues of justice a bit differently from one another and we may respond differently, but let us not convince ourselves that justice is unimportant because we do so at the peril of God's judgment.

The apostle James (1:27) puts it this way, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for the orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." May the revealing of the Kingdom of God, a kingdom characterized by love and justice, be accomplished through you and me to the glory of God! Amen.