

This has been “the” most difficult sermon I have written, although, I admit, I haven’t given that many. The sermon relates to Bob’s and my experience in Chiapas where we were asked to grapple with a number of Social Justice issues. It is very difficult to express social justice without it impinging on politics. So I have consulted a number of folks including Catholic theologians at Marian where I work, a UCC conference pastor and other pastors and lay leaders from within the UCC, to help me process this as best I could. Through my research, I have grown as a person. You see, the Bible shares one story after another calling us to be in relationship with God and in a caring, ethical relationship of community with people in our world. The Bible is all about giving us lessons on Social Justice. Depending on your definition of politics, the Bible is a political book when we come to understand that it is “demonstrating,” “explaining,” “making policies” on how to live in socially just ways in relationship with others.

So, I have decided to approach today’s sermon by putting the context in relation to what the Prophet Isaiah was warning his people about in his time thus, the Old Testament; and what Jesus was saying about the very same issue in his time, the New Testament. He even is quoting Isaiah, so I ask you to listen for that. But, then I am going to put out there the same issue concerning Social Justice that they were speaking of, only in our time. What I have learned is that this same story put into modern day context may be no more comforting for us to grapple with today, than when the Pharisees heard it from Jesus 2000 years ago or the people of Isaiah’s time 400 plus years prior to that.

(Isaiah 5:1-7; Matthew 21:33-44)

The Riches of Solidarity Versus the Poverty of Privilege.

You and I might see ourselves as very fortunate people. Our nation is the number one power in the world, very seldom, if ever, do we NOT have food to eat or clothing to wear. We have roofs over our heads, and most of our families own more than one car. Yet, if we were to be approached, most likely it would be easy for us to list all of the things that we wish we could have, the things we would like more of, and there would be complaints about the things we do not have. “Boy, to win that lottery would be awfully nice!” ---In other words, most of us are not as satisfied with what we have as we could be. Thus, we are products of our money-oriented, consumerist society. We are caught up in a society of privilege.

Bob’s and my trip to San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico was a life altering experience that forced us to look at who we are and whose we are. It forced us to grapple with being a person of privilege. It forced us to grapple with who we are called to be when we claim to be Christians.

While in Chiapas, our group would debrief at the end of each day of intense “mental work” where everyday we were given first-hand experiences in understanding the Indigenous people’s dire need; how

these miserable situations had come to be, not to say escalate; and how we viewed ourselves –(us who call ourselves Christians), in response to our new insights. And, each evening the group would return to the big question: “How do we take this back to our folks at home?” Although Bob and I will do our best, the situations are so overwhelming and complex it is impossible to fully share our experiences because they were beyond words and continue to have impact on present experiences we now face after our return home. Having been to Chiapas, we can no longer see with the same perspective or “eyes” we once did.

The Wisconsin Conference UCC has been in partnership with the Catholic Diocese in San Cristobal for more than 15 years. Presently, the compound, with its intentions monitored from this site, is known as INESIN. Although INESIN no longer has as much visible Christian presence as it once did, it remains a Christian-based ecumenical program where the Catholics, a few European protestant churches, and UCCers have encouraged other churches to join them in becoming active participants in helping the Indigenous poor Mayan people of Chiapas. Their intention is to help the Indigenous use their cultural ways in a manner that will sustain themselves; thus, be more economically competitive in our present day world. I was proud to be a Wisconsin UCCer when they mentioned how thankful they were for our support—as they have had considerable struggles with other denominations claiming to want to help, when in actuality, the churches want to impose their religious practices and doctrines on the Indigenous rather than respecting these people for their own religious ways. For clarification, for the most part, the Indigenous are Christians through Catholic influence beginning in the 1400s, but still use and keep much of their Mayan traditions as part of their beliefs and practices. Thus, the Mayan and Christian beliefs are meshed together to become their one belief. (This is very similar to what has happened in our own country with the Southwest Native Americans.)

The first major issue to consider is that the Mayan people, who have lived in this area for thousands of years, have become displaced, very similarly to the displacement of the Israelites thousands of years ago. The wealthy folks of their country have forced the poor off of the fertile lands and into the foothills and mountains of Chiapas. These Indigenous people have raised corn (maize) throughout their culture’s existence. That is their life-blood, their sustenance. I was in disbelief when I saw corn being grown on mountain sides at steep 45° angles ----, but it is the only land these people still have.. . . Because of the limited land, there has been feuding—perhaps we would feud too when it comes to survival and putting food on our family’s plates. Survival is something few of us have had to contend with on a daily basis!

Well,... it becomes more complicated. In the 1990’s the Mexican military (a segment of the Mexican people who would be considered higher middle to upper class) made some deliberate decisions.

They basically saw the feuding situations of the various Indigenous clans as “Let them kill themselves off—it is not our loss!” Thus, in 1997, a community of people in Acteal met to worship in their church. They were meeting to fast and pray for the peace that was so badly needed. And,as they were seeking and praying to find guidance for all of the various clans to live together and hold each others’ differences and needs with respect, another group surrounded the area and massacred the 43 church goers just outside the church doors as they were fleeing to find safety. Almost all of the massacred were women and children. Two of the women were pregnant where they cut off their bellies and decapitated the fetuses. Bob and I sat in that same small decrepit shack called their church--- as one of their family members sat with us as we relived his experience through his life story. It would be impossible to ever walk away from that experience and not be deeply moved. We were!

--- It becomes more complicated. There are Mexican military sites all over Chiapas. And, . . . remember the military want to see the Indigenous kill each other off . . . So when the military from a base no more than three miles away, were warned of the impending massacre at Acteal, and afterward heard of the massacre, they deliberately chose not to interfere. To exacerbate the situation, the people responsible for massacring the people have yet to be sought out 10 years later, or in any way made to deal with consequences for their actions.

It gets more complicated. Here is where everyone in my group struggled most to claim we were Americans . . . and Christian at that! We attended a session where we began to see the Mexican perspective of the United States of America. It is NOT good. NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement that the U.S. thought would be such a good thing to implement between the countries has basically given the U.S. more power and control and imposed starvation on all of the Central American countries. Chiapas has been one of the areas hit the hardest. I’ll try to explain what has happened, . . . Our major corn growers, Monsanto, Cargill, DeKalb, to name a few, have been experimenting with genetically-altered corn production. The Food and Drug Administration has not proven it to be fit for human consumption in our country so these companies are selling the genetically-altered corn to Central America including Mexico for their human consumption. Because of our funding for federal agricultural subsidies that farmers can participate in including the big corn growing companies, they are able to sell the altered corn at a very inexpensive price to these countries and still make a considerable profit. As a result they are undercutting the cost that the Indigenous of these countries must sell their corn to make any profit. So, the Indigenous people are having trouble selling their corn, thus, not being able to make a living.

We all have heard of the illegal immigration of Mexicans as a hot item in the news lately. As much as I have heard issues pertaining to immigration concerns on a regular basis, . . . now, I look at the situation quite differently. People from these countries are starving, and now we are tightening our grip on letting them find the only hope for survival that they have, . . . working in America. For many people who cross U.S. borders, their only hope for survival is working in America. They love being Mexican as much as we love being American. What lengths would we take to stay alive and support our families? They see us as not caring in the least about them as long as WE can be number one in the world and live in our prestigious homes, and have our prestigious cars and clothes. They see us as people who do not care!

Bob and I were walking the Open Air Market one day and noticed a long line of people. We commented to our leader. His response “They are waiting for their checks from their loved ones in America. It means food on the table for another couple of weeks for them!” Over 10 Billion dollars a year are being sent back to spouses and family members in Mexico so their families can survive.

So, where do our perceptions lie in this situation? In other words, when we hear the words “Remember who you are, and whose you are.” do we see Christ in the eyes of a Mexican Immigrant farm worker desperately trying to make enough money to keep his family, back home and so very far away--- from the grips of starvation? Do we feel bad for these people who so desperately are trying to survive that they will illegally do their best to get into the United States?” Do we see why there might be so many drug cartels in Central America when people are starving and they see illegal drug peddling as a means for putting food on the table? Do we see Christ in their eyes enough that we care deeply and are moved to want to help them make a difference in their lives? ---- Do we see Christ in the eyes of the poor Indigenous Mayan people I speak of?...(Or for that matter, Iraqis, Israelis, African Americans, Native Americans, Katrina survivors-- the list goes on)-----or do we see them as having their own problems and if they are killed off, there’s more for the rest of us? Or, perhaps our response might be, “I don’t know them, so why should I care.” There are many excuses we folks have --- Do we see Christ in their eyes? ---- ----Do we consider ourselves “proud” knowing that our privilege is at the expense of others’ hopes and desires of ever having a decent roof over their heads or plenty of food on their tables?- ----Can someone see Christ in your eyes or in mine?

The Zapatistas Bees, a group of leaders formed by the Indigenous People of Chiapas, have learned a few extremely important lessons from the unrest they have experienced in their country. It is what God is asking of each of us. One of their leaders (the gentleman I mentioned whose family was massacred at Acteal), posed some important insights for our group to grapple with. He likened it to the tiny insect

called the bee (of which they use the metaphor as their namesake)..He likened it to the tiny bee because they need the rest of the bees in their community to work together to survive. The Zapatistas have come to understand that the richness of life is in solidarity---in working together for a common cause, in living and surviving within community-- it isn't about "What's in it for me?" as much as "What is in the best interest of the community and how can I give of myself to that purpose?"

Many of the Chiapinstat individuals who presented the lessons to our group voiced how they see the U.S. as doomed. I believe the Zapatista leader and a couple other presenters used a word meaning something similar to "clueless." U.S. citizens are "clueless" to what is hitting them right between the eyes because of their own greed and sense of privilege. The Indigenous see the "richness" of living in solidarity, in community --- and they see us, as clueless as we live in the "poverty" of privilege.

Paco, our young, handsome Spanish teacher, made the comment, "People from Mexico welcome Americans and see all of you as important "beings" in our world. However, U.S. citizens,---they don't see us as important in the least!"—and he went on to explain some of his life experiences that have taught him this! As he shared his story, the stab in my heart was deep. I certainly questioned my past perceptions.

Let's reconsider today's scriptures. Jesus was proving his ability to use the Old Testament Scriptures of Isaiah to convey the message in a new way; thus, an attempt to help the Jewish Leaders understand the Social Injustice they were imparting on others. What Social Injustice? Those who had plenty wanted more at the expense of others. Who were they? The Pharisees and other church leaders --- individuals who prided themselves in scripture and being the "most" deserving of God's favor. The leaders wanted to "do away with Jesus" rather than admit their reluctance to give up their privilege and control of which Jesus was asking them to submit. Jesus responded to this issue with his parable, earlier found in Isaiah, by asking them what they believed to be fair. They fell for Jesus' word trap for he helped them realize that they had become the greedy farmhands with an unwarranted sense of privilege. He wanted them to grapple with their desire to be more deserving than others. Jesus responded by saying that the stone the builders rejected (in our case, the Indigenous) will become the most important of all. As he says, I quote, "And so I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce the proper fruits."

--- Wow! I don't know about you, but it is very unsettling for me to know that the kingdom of God could be taken away from me because I am a person of privilege, who too often has chosen to look the other way. I, for the most part, rejected these people prior to my experience in Chiapas. I now question, "Have I done enough? These are God's people, too!"

The Mayan Indigenous Bees, a simple living folk who are barely making it in this world, and whom too many U.S. citizens discredit. . . . have it more together than we do! Their goals are to produce the life-giving, God-loving fruits of their labors Jesus spoke of. They know who they are and whose they are. Their lives revolve around the benefit of living in community, for making the world a better place. They are keepers, the caretakers of God's land: caring keepers of God's vineyard. And, they have learned to set their personal goals in life to achieve that means. ---Who are we? Whose are we?

Let us pray.

Creator, teacher, spirit guide—help us to learn this very challenging lesson and live what we are called to be as we have learned from Jesus' words in today's scripture. You are calling us to grapple with our sense of privilege. Are we truly the faith walking people you want us to be . . .? Are we choosing the right paths on our life-journey? Guide us! Help us to remain mindful of who we are and whose we are. Help us to see Christ in others, just as we pray that others can see Christ in our eyes and actions. We pray that You see the Christ in us, O God, as we bless those whose lives are in our church's prayer corner this week. We pray in community asking for Your healing in their bodies and minds. Bless those who are shut-in and in nursing homes. And bless, with Your Almighty protection, all soldiers everywhere. . . . We ask that you help us walk the path you intended as we think about and honor the words Jesus has taught us to pray. . . . Our Father. . .