

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for Reformation Sunday, October 31, 2010
Lessons: Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4 and Luke 19:1-10

SO A RUNNER MAY READ IT

Like the prophet Habakkuk, we are living in a time when the human spirit cries out for justice but finds itself speaking to a deaf ear. The very rich and powerful have tampered with the law so that it favors their interests by allowing the vast majority of earth's people to be exploited. In this recession, some employers are doing what they can for their employees and agonizing over layoffs, but in other companies, the bosses know they can take advantage of their employees because jobs are so scarce that people are unlikely to resist. The standard reply to a complaint of unfairness has become, "Well, at least they have jobs." The Nobel Prize winning economist Amartya Sen compares this situation to that of a woman in a repressive society who tells her husband she would like more respect within the household and more say in the choices the family makes. Her husband replies that if she would rather not be married, she may leave. If she thinks she would be better off without what she has, she may make the choice to live with no family. So, her fair and reasonable request for respect and adult status in the household is rebuffed. Such is the way of tyrannies great or small: unfairness is established as the way life is. Take it or leave it.

In the way of the world, life is all about advantage. Those who have so much advantage they have come to consider it entitlement resent any protest from those people they have advantage over, as though cries for justice and fairness violated their rights as the more important people. "So, "the prophet laments to God, "the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous – therefore judgment comes forth perverted." It's all about having advantage and taking further advantage. Such is the way of the world.

Habakkuk's burning question, however, is not merely, "Where are justice and human decency in such a time?" but, "God, where are you while such unfair advantage is being taken of people who have no recourse?" What most disturbs the prophet is the silence of God, and so he sets himself to watch and wait for God's answer. He will stand at his watchpost, stationed upon society's rampart, waiting for God's reply to his complaint.

As followers of Jesus Christ and as his church, we are charged with resisting the logic of advantage that tells people to be glad for whatever they are given by those in charge because it too could be taken away. Ours is not a faith that puts the stamp of God's approval

upon the systems of advantage and disadvantage that keep life in this world unfair: rich and pleasurable for some, bitter and disappointing for many more. What troubles us these days is that disappointment with life has spread to young people we expected to enjoy their advantages and prosper. What good is a college education if the career paths are blocked? Why prepare for opportunity that is closed? The wiser among us realize that cutting off the new generation of young adults threatens the whole society and its future, but in hard times many simply cling to whatever they have and drive away newcomers, like old lions protecting the kill. But why did we have to wait until now to see the folly in keeping so many young people disadvantaged? It parallels the history of our awareness of the drug problem. As long as the death-dealing drugs stayed confined to the nation's ghettos, few with voice in our society complained or even took notice. Only when the drugs found their way out into the suburbs did they suddenly become a problem.

If we can learn that leveraging advantage to use and abuse the vulnerable who dare not protest is wrong, is evil, in any time, then maybe this Great Recession will have some good results, despite the bitterness of it. If, however, we wish only to recover and get back to business as usual, then from God's perspective nothing will have been gained.

Life is responsive to other life. Please think about that statement. Human life is responsive to God and to other people and, yes, to the needs of earth's other creatures, too. Evil is lack of empathy, refusal to enter into and feel the pain of others; radical evil goes even further and delights in the sufferings of others, enjoying what advantage enables it to inflict upon them. Prejudice is our way of justifying our lack of empathy with whole groups of people we deem disgusting but whose disadvantage benefits us. The work of prejudice is to rationalize evil. As radical evil goes beyond lack of empathy to aggressive cruelty, so radical life goes beyond being responsive and becomes aggressively redemptive. Jesus embodies radical life, bringing to humanity the redemptive work of God's life-giving Spirit. That work we call *grace*, and as Martin Luther reminded us, our lives are justified by grace alone.

I am somewhat alive. Jesus was radically alive. For him, living was done in God's presence and in harmony with God's Spirit. Advantage meant nothing to him, and so his life and teaching expressed God's passion for the disadvantaged in our world. Jesus had nothing he needed to defend: no sense of superior morality, no merit by which to feel entitled to favor or reward, and no need to keep others out so he could feel special. That's the irony of Jesus. He who truly was special desired only to include the rest of us in his special relationship with God. So, he tried to explain to his critics that his desire and purpose for coming among them was to seek and rescue the lost. That's what redemption is: restoring the lost.

God tells the prophet Habakkuk that the promise will be kept. Keep watch, for it will come. Encourage the people. Make the message plain. Write it in such big letters that a runner could read it without having to stop.

I have pondered with mixed feelings that command to write the message large for people running by. It sounds like the invention of the billboard. We live in a time of billboards, sound bites, and slogans when brief quotations are torn out of context to deceive. Advertising bombards us to the extent that I find I notice very little of it. The message gets lost in the noise.

On the other hand, all around us people are running through life. This single hour on a Sunday morning may be for some the largest block of time they can take in a whole week to think about something other than the demands made upon them by work and family responsibilities. Thinking about it, I realized that a one-hour worship service is a large printing of the message for people running by. It's barely a pit stop in the race of life.

Thinking further still, I factored in the reality that the number of people running by close enough to read even the large-print version of our message of hope and salvation has shrunk to a minority. But God's mandate to Habakkuk is not, "Keep it simple, stupid," but rather, make it plain and don't keep it to yourself. As Christ's church, we face the challenge of representing his redemptive love in a society where Christianity no longer enjoys the advantage of cultural establishment as "the religion" of the land. The disadvantaged, discouraged, depressed, and embittered are not coming to us. Neither are the advantaged who, like Zacchaeus, may be trapped in their own success. Notice how quickly the wealthy tax collector responds when Jesus offers him the opportunity he had thought was gone forever to be, again, a Jew in covenant with God and his people. For the sake of wealth and security, Zacchaeus had isolated himself and thoroughly alienated himself from his community. How could he possibly go back? Who would let him, a man everybody loved to hate? Jesus invited him back and took the heat for it. Healing and forgiving poor sinners was okay with much of the crowd, but forgiving a rich sinner who collaborated with the hated Romans and used their power to cheat his own people was not okay. But Jesus came to restore the lost to God and to the community.

We are stewards of the grace of God. The church lives to be redemptive. We are sent to call people to follow Jesus in trusting God and seeking reconciliation, justice, kindness, and peace, rather than seeking their own advantage. How can we represent Jesus Christ fairly to people running by? How can we offer real grace and not just slogans? We truly need a vision for our future as a church that will require fresh thinking and more visible caring. But the promise stands, and it will come true. God will not give up but will continue to work in the ways of redemptive love until that love wins. Amen.