

“Breaking Down the Barriers”
A Sermon by Paulo Gustavo França
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
17 October 2004
Text: Luke 18:1-8

“Grant me justice against my opponent”
- Luke 18:3c

Prayer

Ever-present God
We come here this morning to be intentionally and alertly
And receptively in your presence.
We come seeking your will to our lives
And we gather here to give you thanks for your Holy Word,
Which is a lamp to our feet
And a light for our path.
Startle us this morning with your truth,
And in this holy moment of worship,
Speak the word you have for us today
So we may love you more perfectly
And praise you worthily.
In Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

It is said that the mark of a good teacher is the ability to express complex and elaborate concepts in a way that people like you and I can understand. I am sure if I asked you to name one of those teachers whose gift of teaching has made a difference in your life you would not hesitate to come up with their names. For good teachers also have the power to leave an indelible mark in the lives of those they teach. Good teachers not only enlighten us, they also model our lives and therefore they are not forgotten.

Jesus was certainly one of those uniquely gifted teachers. He spent most of the time of his earthly ministry teaching. And in order to put in human dialect what is essentially divine, Jesus spoke through parables to help his followers understand the nature of the mission he was entrusting them with. As you know, **PARABLES** are stories of imagined events that in the end speak of profound moral and spiritual matters. Obviously, Jesus was speaking to men and women who lived in first century Palestine, so his parables are filled with imagery that his audience could readily understand and relate to. For Christians in the twenty-first century some of those stories about shepherds and lost sheep, about worthless slaves and widows, sound rather picturesque and, at the same time, far removed from our reality. Still Jesus’ teachings do help us to grasp the meaning of the Good News and of our calling.

Through these teachings, we know that the Gospel is about transformation, change, and conversion. We know that these teachings change human hearts, our attitudes, our perspectives, our behavior and, inevitably, they change human customs, conventions, and traditions. And there is no doubt that the most dramatic transformation that Jesus' teachings inspire is the lowering of the barriers that separate people, barriers that define people as insiders and outsiders, acceptable and unacceptable, neighbors and strangers. The Gospel calls us to make a difference in the world. As followers of Christ, we are called to work constantly and tirelessly in the world to reconcile and bring people together into life-giving and peaceful relationships with God and with one another.

Sometimes we struggle with this concept of personal and collective transformation that brings down the barriers that separate and divide people. This kind of ideal love that Jesus spoke about is undisputedly inspiring, but we do not know how to apply it to our daily lives and, sometimes, we doubt its practicality and feasibility altogether.

A good example of what I am saying happened last Sunday at the 11 o'clock service during the children's message. Our Director of Children and Family Ministries, Heather Godsey, was speaking to the children about God's love for the whole world while she held up the spherical map of the Earth – the globe. She told the children that Christ taught us to love everyone. All of a sudden, a small hand went up asking permission to say something. And much to my surprise, this young fellow asked Heather, "**Are we supposed to love Osama Bin Laden too?**" At that point, I was glad that it was Heather and not I who had to answer that question on the spur of the moment. But Heather did a superb job by saying that as Christians we are indeed called to love our enemies. That is a challenging and revolutionary idea that, sometimes, even the best teachers among us find difficult to translate into a simpler or more palatable message.

Miroslav Volf, a Croatian who is a theologian at Yale, has written a book entitled, ***Exclusion and Embrace***, which discusses the concept of the "OTHER" in human history. He states that everyone, every nation, every race, needs an "OTHER" in order to know and be itself. Everyone needs an outsider in order to feel like that he or she is an insider. In the preface, Volf recalls the days in 1993 when Serbian fighters invaded his native Croatia and were putting Croatians into concentration camps, murdering people, looting homes, burning churches, and raping Croatian women. Volf was delivering a lecture on reconciliation, and at the end someone stood up and asked, "Yes, all that is well and good, but can you embrace a Serbian fighter?" Volf, who served in the Croatian army, thought for a moment and answered, "No, I cannot. But as a follower of Jesus Christ, I should be able to." The result of this awareness was the book ***Exclusion and Embrace***, in which Volf maintains that the cross of Jesus Christ erases all definitions of "OTHERNESS" that divide humanity.

The belief in Jesus' world-changing teaching, which helps humanity overcome the barriers that separate people, has inspired the most recent General

Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to take an action that has received a lot of attention both in the secular and Jewish press. This action has been perceived by many of our Jewish neighbors as hurtful, damaging to the inter-religious dialogue, and, to some, as a “declared economic warfare on Israel.” The 216th General Assembly authorized the exploration of a plan for staged, selected divestment of church funds from multinational corporations whose business in Israel is found to be directly or indirectly causing harm or suffering to innocent Palestinians and Israelis. I believe it is important to say that no divestments have been carried out so far. The Assembly asked our denomination’s permanent committee that develops socially responsible investment guidelines – the Mission Responsibility Through Investment Committee - to look into companies investing in Israel and to bring recommendations to the General Assembly Council in March of 2005 so the selective divestment may begin to take place.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has a long history of standing in support of our Jewish friends and of the right of the State of Israel to exist within internationally recognized and secure borders. Our denomination has long been concerned with finding a just peace in the region and, over the last fifty-six years, we have expressed our concern for peace between Israel, the Palestinian people, and the Arab states. Therefore I am greatly surprised and appalled that some of our Jewish neighbors have seen in our divestment initiative such a clear stand against Israel. It is simply not that. Unfortunately some Jews interpret any public criticism of the policies of the Sharon government by non-Jews as anti-Semitic, anti-Jewish and anti-Israel. The truth is that we are not singling out Israel or joining the Arab boycott as some have suggested. Instead, we are hoping to press for positive change in the midst of the inhumanity of suicide bombings, mounting civilian casualties in Palestine, and the construction of a “separation barrier,” which in the end will not contribute to the creation of peace in the region. Our initiative does not aim at undermining the legitimacy of the State of Israel, but we do hope to work for changes in Israeli policies that are detrimental to peace and justice in the Middle East. We stand in solidarity with our Jewish neighbors and will continue to condemn the despicable violence inflicted on innocent Israeli citizens by radical Palestinian groups. But we will also stand firmly against the occupation of Palestinian lands and against the “security barrier” that stretches into the West Bank isolating huge amounts of Palestinian land and affecting the lives of thousands of Palestinians that are forced to live in abject poverty and desperation.

In a way, what the Presbyterian Church is doing has a lot to do with the parable of the widow and the unjust judge in today’s gospel reading. As a woman and a widow she was one of the most vulnerable members of her society in first century Palestine. But she was thirsty for justice and she was determined to speak up for her rights. We don’t know anything about the widow’s opponents or about the nature of the case at issue. The gospel writer was not concerned with such details. What we must pay attention to here is how the judge is described, a man “**who fears no God and has no respect for people**” (v. 2), and who is unresponsive to the widow’s pleas.

Although a weak member of her society, someone whose cry for justice might easily go unnoticed, the widow did not allow the circumstances of life to discourage or silence her. She kept coming back to the judge saying, “**Grant me justice against my opponent.**” (v. 3).

And Jesus said, “**Listen to what the unjust judge says.**” (v. 6) “**Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.**” (v. 5)

The verb translated in the gospel reading as “**to wear out**” (v. 5 – Greek verb *hupopiazo*) in Greek means literally “**to give someone a blow under the eye or to give a black eye**” to someone. The intention of the writer was undoubtedly to underscore how the widow’s ceaseless claims for justice became a visible mark to everyone of the Judge’s failure to do his job. Although the judge is said not to have any respect for humans or fear of God, he was certainly concerned about his own prestige and position in society. The widow’s insistence made him vulnerable to embarrassment before other members of his society who might wonder about his skills and commitment to justice as a judge. What the moral obligation failed to achieve, the effect of the woman’s persistence accomplished. **She shamed the judge into action.**

The parable goes on to draw a drastic contrast between this unjust judge and God. God grants those who trust God justice not because God is compelled to do so. God’s justice is based solely on God’s love and grace.

The judge, representing the powerful, acts out of self-interest. He doesn’t care about the widow or her plight. When he finally acts, he does so seeking to safeguard his own interests and his image before his community. God, the only true power in the universe, acts out of love. God grants justice because God cares about those whose lives are threatened by injustice.

The main message of the parable is clear. The church must be persistent like the widow and keep the faith. God’s time and human time do not always coincide. The reality of evil in our world may try to undermine our faith and our commitment to make a difference in a world that does not fear God and does not show respect for human life. But we are challenged by Jesus’ story to show the untiring pursuit of justice the widow displayed.

I am proud that Presbyterians are taking to heart Jesus’ teaching and are using the power of moral persuasion to call the attention of both Israelis and Palestinians to the self-perpetuating cycle of violence that is disrupting the social fabric of life in the Middle East. We are a small denomination and some have doubted that this particular action of the General Assembly will truly have any relevant impact on the relations between Israel and Palestine. I, particularly, am happy that our denomination is taking careful but firm steps to speak about justice and peace to our Israeli and Palestinian brothers and sisters. What else could be expected of the Church that

carries in its memory the teachings of the one who called us to be his disciples by saying,

“Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be known as the Children of God. And I say to you, ‘love your enemies, do good to those that hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To those who strike you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from those who take away your cloak, do not withhold your coat as well. Give to everyone who begs from you and of those who take away your goods, do not ask them again. And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.”

And if anyone accuses the Presbyterian Church of taking sides by choosing to carry out our divestment initiative, in all candor, I will say that we are indeed taking sides. But we are not taking the side of Palestinians or Israelis, we are taking the side of life. As Leonardo Boff, a Brazilian Roman Catholic theologian, said so wisely, **“God is the God of life, and always takes the side of those whose life is threatened or who are forced to die before their time. That is what happens with the poor. Hence the God of liberation is the God of the poor and the outcast. God always hears their cry, from the cry of the oppressed in Egypt to Jesus’ desperate cry on the cross.”**

When I was a child, my younger brother and I used to get into fights all the time. We had a hard time learning the difficult lesson that in a family we must live together, respect each other’s private space and learn how to share as well. My brother had the awful habit of trying to wear my new shirts before I had a chance to wear them myself and since we had the same friends, he would always tell them that he did not like that particular shirt and would pass it on to me. So we did fight about that and about many other things as most siblings do. My mother would always interfere and would try to teach us the importance that fraternal love had in our household. When her arguments failed, she would tell my brother and I to go to the living room and she would take out the old vinyl record, place it on the victrola and play the Blue Danube. She’d then sit down and would make my brother and I waltz together until we were laughing again and had made peace with each other. We knew better than to try not to dance or to go too slowly. My mother would stand up and count 1, 2, 3 to get us back in the right rhythm. So we always preferred not to go on fighting when she told us to respect and love each other.

Sometimes I have fun trying to imagine what would happen if I could make some of these world leaders who seem to lack respect for each other dance together. Unfortunately the barriers that stand between them are much bigger and stronger and older than the fights my brother and I got into occasionally. For that reason, it is important for the Church of Jesus Christ to do all we can to make this world a better place for Palestinians and Israelis. If we cannot make them waltz until they make peace with each other, perhaps we may be able to shame them into action by choosing to withhold funds from companies that are causing harm to innocent Palestinians and Israelis. Perhaps the divestment will spark some kind of worldwide

awareness about the situation in the Middle East and peace will become a reality rather than a distant dream. Perhaps by choosing to act now, the church will show the world leaders that we can no longer allow the conflict to go on indefinitely – there is real human suffering among Israelis and Palestinians that needs to be tended to. Perhaps, the divestment initiative will put in simpler and more meaningful words how much we care for Israelis and Palestinians and, through love, we will be God's instruments in bringing down the barriers that so long have separated these two Semitic peoples. Perhaps, by pursuing justice in the midst of so much injustice we will be able to teach an unforgettable lesson to future Israeli and Palestinian generations. A lesson that is best expressed in the words of Dostoevsky.

**“Love all God’s creation, the whole and every grain of sand of it.
Love every leaf, every ray of God’s light.
Love the animals, love the plants, love everything.
If you love everything you will perceive the divine mystery in things.
Once you perceive it, you will begin to comprehend it better every day.
And you will come at last to love the whole world with an all-embracing love.”**
May God help Palestinians and Israelis find this all-embracing love.

Amen!

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