

CHALLENGING THE SYSTEMS

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California

Luke 1:46-55

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Steve Brizzi, a minister in Arkansas, noticed two little girls standing in front of the plastic lighted nativity scene on the front lawn of the church. One of the girls was not wearing a coat so he asked if she weren't cold. She replied, "The Baby Jesus was cold, so I put my coat on him. He's better now." She saw a cold, plastic Jesus, and she responded. In that simple act, now told across the country, she shined light for the world.

"Light for the World" is our theme this Advent and Christmas. Jesus Christ is the light for the world, and the call to each of us is to join the Jesus Light Brigade and let his light shine in the dark spots of this world. Last week I listed four acts of Jesus in his ministry that shined the light. First, Jesus met human need, as did the little girl in sharing her coat, as we did and are doing in giving to the African Hunger Appeal. Secondly, Jesus freed people to live their lives by forgiving and encouraging them. Third, Jesus taught his followers a new, ethical way of living, a way of living that fits the New Age. Fourth, Jesus challenged the systems that oppress people. Let's look today at that act. The light for the world shines when the oppressive systems are challenged.

You may think this is a strange Christmas sermon, but the real, deep meaning of Christmas is discovered when we take Jesus' acts seriously and when we look at the entire Christmas story, not just the sentimental parts. The story begins with Mary, and our gospel lesson this morning is one of the most revolutionary documents in the world's history. Mary sang a song in response to Elizabeth's greeting. Perhaps the song was ancient, for Hannah, the mother of Samuel, expressed some of the same sentiments centuries earlier. Perhaps all Jewish mothers sang this song; certainly it is a song that mothers--and not only mothers, but all of us might sing.

Mary sang that she had been chosen to serve God in a special way, and the God who called her to be a mother, the God who called her to serve, is the God who "has shown strength with his arm (Luke 1:51-53), scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree. God has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away." These are powerful words, revolutionary words, proclaiming that God is on the side of the little people, the people who are caught in systems, the people who are poor and have few or no chances. This is the context of Mary's understanding. This is the context of Jesus' ministry. This is the challenge to which you and I--the church--are **called**.

Jesus was loving and tender with the powerless, but he was emphatic and merciless with the strong and the powerful. His strongest language was reserved for the religious leaders who supported the oppressive systems. He drove out the moneychangers from the temple, not because the business was evil as it fulfilled an important role, but because they were chating the people. The cheaters made the temple "a den of thieves."

Light reveals. When light shines on a dark corner, everything that is in the corner or happening in the dark corner, is now revealed for people to see. The church--you and I--is the conscience, the light for society. The church's task is to ask the question, "What about people?" Challenge the systems, challenge those in authority, "Hey, what about people?" To business when it operates solely on the profit motive, we ask, "What about people?" The profit motive when unchecked leads to wealth for a few and poverty for the many. To the scholls when, in times of financial crisis must cut back, we ask, "What about the children--especially the underachiever, the handicapped?" To the city when it is tempted to consider only business or taxpayers, we ask, "What about the people, especially the elderly and the poor who can't afford to live here?" What

about people? To let the light of Jesus shine is to challenge systems to be responsive to human need; what about people!

Challenge the systems that crush people. There are two movies I commend to you, excellent movies about two women who fight the systems--"Places in the Heart" and "Country". "Places in the Heart" is set in Texas during the depression. A widow fights for her farm which is threatened with foreclosure by the local bank. The movie is a moving account of how she organizes her family, confronts the cotton buyer, holds off the bank, and saves her farm.

"Country" is a movie, based on a true incident, of an Iowa farm family threatened with foreclosure by the Federal Home Administration. Gil Ivy couldn't cope with the threat of foreclosure. He had done his best trying to keep the farm, but the low prices and high costs were too much. The FHA threatened to put him and many others off their farms. Gil couldn't cope; he retreated into himself. He focused his anger, disappointment and resentment on himself and set about to destroy himself by drinking heavily. A neighbor did destroy himself by committing suicide, but Gil drank. Then his anger and bitterness erupted, not against the system--the FHA and its rigid policies--but against his family. In particular, Gil took his anger out on his son whom he beat. Gil then ran away, deserted his family, as some men are prone to do. I suppose I responded to this movie because of its midwest setting. The family were Methodists who attended church regularly. The characters are true-to-life of the farmers as I remember them.

But, the wife, Jewell Ivy, did not retreat into herself. Like Edna in "Places in the Heart", Jewell fought. The women are often the strong persons in a crisis. Jewell, like Mary, believed in putting the mighty down from their thrones, scattering the proud, and exalting those of low degree. She fought for her nest, her children, her farm, and, historically accurate, her efforts resulted in a federal judge telling the FHA to lay off.

The church of Jesus Christ is on the side of the little guy, the poor, those who are caught in systems that crush. The haughty say, "Serves them right; they shouldn't have borrowed in the first place." The mighty say, "Anyone can make it in this country if they work and pull themselves up by their boot straps." The Christian says, "Hey, what about people?" and shine a light revealing what is happening. D. Douglas Roth, pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in Clairton, Pennsylvania, concerned about the unemployed in the economically depressed steel town, accused the Mellon Bank of fostering a system that crushes people. He preached that the bank refused to invest in area businesses and that it controls both the courts and the churches. Pastor Roth who refused to obey his synod's forbidding him to carry out pastoral duties, continued to preach until arrested and jailed for refusing to obey his bishop. The Christian is on the side of people and challenges the systems that crush people.

Challenge the systems that promote and perpetuate inequality, the system of racism, the system of sexism, the system of poverty. The Roman Catholic bishops are creating quite a controversy with their recent letter on economics. They are challenging the systems that create and promote inequality. The Bishops call for a commitment to economic justice, contending that inequality of wealthy must be judged morally unacceptable. They wrote, "No one can claim the name of Christian and acquiesce to poverty." Their letter is creating controversy but according to Dr. Theodore Runyon, United Methodist professor at Candler School of Theology, Emory University, where I recently heard the Garrett Lectures, the Catholic document is mild compared to John Wesley and historic Methodism.

Challenge the systems that become inflexible and rigid, and this includes churches. Systems, institutions, become rigid, devoted to perpetuating themselves and people get hurt in the process. Mr. Schroeder, in the news with his heart transplant, complained to President Reagan about Social Security's cumbersome policies. They "jumped" and he

got his disability check. We call it "red tape." Or when it is said, "I'm sorry but there's nothing I can do." The FHA local administrator in "Country" was caught between the policies and his understanding and sympathy for the farmer's plight. Eventually he resigned the system and helped the cause, but his initial position was, "I'm sorry, but that's policy." "We have rules." Or, a favorite, "You can't fight city hall."

We even have systems in the church that need to be challenged. The comic strip, Kudzu, has a star (probably referring to Michael Jackson) say to the preacher, "It's very lonely being a superstar, preacher!" To which the preacher responds, "Well, you can talk to me, son! Human relations is my business!" The star says, "It's just that you feel like everybody wants a piece of you and you can't trust anybody! People treat you like an object--not like a person". They all want something from you and you feel like they're using you." To which the good preacher responds, "Say, Michael, how would you like to discuss all this on my t.v. talk show?" People do get exploited.

Of course, systems are necessary in our society, but they need constant oiling, greasing, some WD-40. I tell our church Board of Trustees to be alert, for the unwritten goal of Trustees is to close the church. Trustees are the happiest when there are no people scratching the paint, dirtying the floors, breaking the equipment. Our church trustees, however, are responsive to the challenge, "Hey, what about people." Yes, we need rules and procedures, but they are to be flexible, adjustable and responsive to human need. People can't always fit procedures, policies, and rules. To let Jesus' light shine is to reveal the times when people are hurt by systems.

When you challenge systems that oppress and restrict people, remember you are not alone, nor are you just representing Christ in this world. You are not just obeying a dead teacher. Christ is alive. The Holy Spirit is energy working in this world and when you do Christ's work, God is present with you, offering strength. You find that when you bear the burdens of others, your own burden gets lighter. When you let the light shine, the darkness in your own life is expelled. That's the mystery, wonder, of Christmas and the Christian life.

"Let your light shine so that others may see.." said Jesus. Make Christmas this year really special. Let the light for the world shine in your life, in our church, and in the community, by responding to human need and by challenging the systems that hurt people.

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