

Sermon: “Justice, Worship, and Gay Marriage, Oh My!”
Pentecost 26, 2008
Amos 5:21–24

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Oh boy! The First Reading today is challenging because it seems to fly directly in *our* face. There are many Christians who believe, for example, that the Bible is literally true, and, *in its entirety*, is applicable to every Christian everywhere for all time. They would say that you can’t squirm out of the *uncomfortable* parts of the Bible because you don’t think it applies anymore.

But, I wonder if they read this text the way it is written. The prophet is criticizing—in the name of God—the worship of the ancient Hebrews. Christian worship is *different* (we don’t *have* a system of ritually sacrificing animals, for example, and burning their flesh on the altar), but if the Bible is entirely applicable to all Christians for all time forever, then *this* becomes a severe criticism of Christian worship *here and now*.

I don’t *take* that view, but it is worth thinking it through. I still get nervous when this text comes up—which isn’t very often—because I worry it makes *some* people very uncomfortable. Lutherans cling to a worship format, for example, which is very liturgical. It has a lot of structure and history. It has some antiquated words. We use things like paraments and vestments. (We’ll look at all that more closely next week.) But it is *easy* for those in other church traditions to say that *this passage* condemns liturgical worship. *They* prefer to sing praise songs, throw their hands in the air, and sway. Their minister wears plain clothes, and holds a big cordless microphone like an *ice cream cone*, or a big floppy-covered Bible which never leaves his hand.

There are Christians who will have *nothing* to do with festivals or a calendar of commemorations. There are *others* who will not have any musical instruments in worship—only the human voice. There are *still others* who worship the way they did in the fourth century, and they won’t even talk about modernizing their liturgies.

But as it is written in the prophet Amos, “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. . . . Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.” The prophet would seem to say God is “turned off” by human worship, in *whatever* style it is, no matter how heart-felt or stiff, no matter how formal or casual, historic or innovative.

But *all* of this is the wrong approach *to this passage* of the Holy Bible. It is not about *worship*, fundamentally. It is about *justice*. Speaking in the name of God, the prophet is saying to the people, You believe you are shining it on with God, impressing God, drawing close to God because you are worshiping God and giving praise to God. But this doesn’t please God. What God wants is *not* praise or liturgy but *justice*. This text is about the priority of justice, not the priority of praise. It is about how God’s people conduct themselves in society, in the market place, and between neighbors and in families, *not* how they act in church!

Now, there’s *another* problem here in applying the Scripture *to our own times*. This message was written to the Hebrew people living in a homeland they believed was *given* to them as a *promised* land because of their *favored* status with God. They were the “*chosen* people,” and were expected to shape their entire society by the Laws of God written in the Torah.

How do we apply *that* to Christians today living in a different hemisphere with every kind of people, language, custom and religion being practiced in America? *We* are *not* the chosen people; this is *not* the promised land, even though some early Americans wanted to *liken* themselves to the Israelites in that regard.

Most of us may not be aware of it, but there are a few Americans to this day with extremist views, who want to see the Bible used as the supreme law of this land, and enforced on all of the

people in the United States whether they are Jewish or Christian or Muslim or atheists. Billionaire Howard Fieldstead Ahmanson is one of those people, who associated with the Christian Reconstructionist movement. His money came as an heir of the Home Savings fortune, and he has used it to support extreme right-wing causes, including his most recent donation of some \$900,000 to the Yes on Proposition 8 campaign. He told the Orange County Register some years back, “My goal is the total integration of biblical law into our lives.”¹

What *is* justice? Is *that* justice? And how can Christians living in 21st century America *pursue* justice? We get ourselves in knots over current justice issues, but again I believe we *cannot* just apply the Bible to today’s justice like a band-aid—just wrap it around our society and make it stick! The hundreds of requirements of the Law of Moses four thousand years ago for semi-nomadic peoples living in tents in the desert just does not stick.

In many ways we have a more just society now than the Bible’s peoples ever expected of themselves. They *accepted* slavery, without question, and *racism*. The *Bible’s* answers to some problems which puzzle us today was to simply put trouble-makers to death. It is often quoted, for example, that Sodomites should be put to death, and apparently Howard Ahmanson now denies he was in favor of that. But the Law of Moses also says *that’s* what you *do* with a delinquent teenager who talks back to her or his parents.

I believe *the point is* that justice in a society where Christians participate is *always in flux*. There will *always* be change, and struggle to *define* justice, as we have seen last week with the wrenching experience over Proposition 8 on the ballot. Last night, if you haven’t seen this morning’s paper, over 12,000 people demonstrated in the streets of Silverlake *against* the passage of Proposition 8. But some *Christians*—and religious people who are *not Christian*—joined forces with others to “defend traditional marriage” between one man and one woman. *That would seem* to be a no-brainer for Christians except that the *Bible didn’t define it that way* at all. Western law, for example, has come to define marriage as *requiring* the consent of the parties, but the *Old Testament* in the Bible tells stories of marriages which were virtually *forced upon* un-consenting brides. And the *Bible’s* answer to *rape* was to *require* the rapist to *marry the woman he had violated* without the possibility of divorce. Ask any women today, conservative or liberal, if they think *that* would be justice. There would be a riot!

And *polygamy* was the standard allowance to men in the Old Testament. The *New Testament* only says that a *bishop* should be the “husband of *one* wife,” so for a period of time *other* Christian men were completely free to have several wives. *Is that justice? Should that be the law of our land, today? Is that to be considered “binding” on every Christian, everywhere, for all time?*

No one knows yet how California’s Proposition 8 will shake out. The Attorney General’s office has already stated that the 18,000 same-sex couples who got marriage licenses and were married since June 17 *remain* legally married. The supporters of Prop 8 will argue *otherwise*, and it will definitely wind up back in the California Supreme Court. Last week, attorney Gloria Allred *immediately* filed a new lawsuit in the court to overturn Proposition 8 as fundamentally *unjust* because it takes away existing civil rights from only one class of people.

In the interests of transparency and full disclosure: while I am personally invested in the outcome, I believe the *church* (including *our* church) *should be* invested in the broader issues of justice. Some *conservative* Christians believe in the need to defend *traditional* marriage, and my answer is that to *protect* marriage, everyone should begin by protecting *your own* marriage, if you have one. I told several reporters last summer, “if you want to protect *marriage*, buy your wife *flowers* every week, and *listen to her* when she talks to you. *That* will help to protect marriage.” What destroys marriage is *not* that lesbian and gay people want into it, in order to have legal

protections for their relationships. What erodes marriage are the millions who want out of it, and leave a trail of serial monogamy, bitter divorces and broken families. Or those who trivialize faithful commitment.

For example (and this being Hollywood I have examples from Hollywood): **Rick Rockwell** and **Darva Conger** married on the television program “Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire,” and stayed married less than two months. **Colin Farrell** and **Amelia Warner** were married five months. **Jennifer Lopez** and **Cris Judd** lasted 6 months. **Drew Barrymore** and **Jeremy Thomas** remained married for 38 days. **Dennis Rodman** and **Carmen Electra** married, and it lasted for 9 days. **Mario Lopez** married **Ali Landry** and two weeks later she had the marriage annulled. **Britney Spears** married **Jason Allen Alexander**. It lasted for 55 hours. **Proposition 8**, on the ballot, *protects* those marriages² and state law permits those divorces, over and over and over. But Proposition 8 does not want to recognize our faithful commitment of over 32 years, and means to take civil rights away from us.

The bottom line here is *not* that the Bible can be applied *neatly*, or that an answer can be found for *every* question if you just search carefully and study long enough. The bottom line is that God wants justice to be done, and that Christians should give *justice* a priority. This is a post-Christian society we live in, so we can’t impose our Christian view on civil law, but neither can any other Christian view, whether Baptist or Catholic or whatever. But the prophet’s message is clear that seeking justice, establishing *justice* ought to be our top priority, even more important than being religious and making a public display of our piety.

Christian worship can be rich and elaborate, *or* plain and simple. We can kneel or sway, cross ourselves or raise our hands, *or all of the above*. But if we *love* God, if we are *moved* by the Good News of Jesus’ love to redeem us and to re-shape our world, then we must also *love justice* enough to *put our faith in the midst of daily life*, so that the world will know that God’s justice is love, and our love is real, and that the love of Jesus Christ can change this world until “justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” Amen.

Notes

1. These web sites were used: <http://www.nndb.com/people/374/000058200/> ;
<http://www.queerty.com/ahmansons-dangerous-crusade-goes-beyond-prop-8-20081104/> ;
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Howard_Ahmanson, Jr.](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Howard_Ahmanson,_Jr.) ;
http://www.alternet.org/blogs/democracy/106102/the_man_behind_proposition_8/ ;
<http://www.thedailybeast.com/blogs-and-stories/2008-11-03/the-man-behind-proposition-8/>

2. <http://www.hollywoodheartbreaker.com/shortest-celebrity-marriages/>

