

God Heard Their Cry
July 1, 2018
Exodus 3:23-24/Matthew 25:31-46
The Rev. Bob Griggs

This is the fourth time I've had the honor of serving First UCC, Northfield in some type of interim or supply capacity, which raises the question of why I was fired the previous three times. Actually, that's not exactly what happened, and if you're interested, I'll be happy to share the details during the picnic after the service. Whatever – it is an honor once again to serve at a church that I love and which Sue and I have chosen to be our church home.

As much as we love this church, we would not have joined if it were not part of the United Church of Christ. I am proud to be a minister in the UCC, and I've spent a lot of time over the years advocating for our denomination and explaining to people what the UCC is all about, who we are and who we aren't.

A lot of people think that the UCC is where you go when you're tired of organized religion. For them we represent disorganized religion. And though this is frequently said, it's not true. I suspect that UCC folks spend more time per capita studying and revising their church's bylaws than any other denomination. We may be confused, but we're well organized.

We are also known by a lot of people as a denomination that practices freedom of conscience in matters of faith. This actually is true but needs some context. We are biblical and look to the Holy Scriptures for guidance in our life of faith. We are spiritual and ask the Holy Spirit to lead us to truth and right action. But we are not creedal and do not tell people what to believe. We leave that to the conscience of each individual as guided by the Spirit.

For me this could not be more important. I could not serve as a minister in a denomination that forced me to adhere to a set statement of beliefs. I need the freedom to think things through, to change my mind, to grow in my faith, even as

I recognize that there will always be more to learn. I am grateful that the UCC gives me freedom to follow my faith wherever it leads me.

Finally, we are known as a denomination that is committed to social justice. This is true and vitally important, but it also needs context and history. That's what I'm going to try to provide for us this morning.

Where does the UCC's commitment to social justice come from anyway? The answer – maybe I should give a spoiler alert here– the answer is that that it come from the Bible. Moreover, our passion for social justice is not just in verses cherry picked from here and there in the scriptures, it is at the very heart of the scriptures. It is absolutely central to the biblical story of what it is to be God's people and what it is to do God's will.

Scriptures like the ones Mary Caroline read for us show the deep biblical roots of the UCC's passion for social justice. In the first scripture, the Hebrews, who have suffered horribly as slaves in Egypt, groan and cry out to God. God hears their cry, and God acts to free them from slavery. It's the story of Moses, of the crossing of the Red Sea, of the defeat of pharaoh's army, and the creation of the people of God.

This story inspired another group of slaves, African American slave in our own country, to believe God was on their side and would act to remove their chains, just as God did so long ago in Egypt land. Their hope is embodied in the hymn we'll sing after this sermon.

The United Church of Christ passion for social justice is rooted in this central story of the Bible. In the Bible, if you ask "Who is God?" you won't get some complicated theological answer about omniscience or omnipresence - instead you'll be told "God is the One who freed our ancestors from slavery."

The people sought to keep this story of their freedom alive for every generation. Every year at Passover they celebrated God's liberation of their ancestors from slavery, so that they would never forget who God is and what God had done for them.

This history went a long way in determining how these former slaves would treat other people. For example in Deuteronomy we read, “You shall love the stranger, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

It’s interesting. I’ve been thinking about this sermon for weeks and weeks. Overthinking sermons is what retired ministers do. It’s sad really. But in spite of thinking about this sermon for so long, I got this quote about loving the stranger from a Facebook post a friend made earlier this week. It was in response to the separation of refugee children from their parents in our own country. When you start talking about social justice, the conversation has a way of moving from ancient history to current events very quickly.

Building on this story of God as the one who heard the cry of the suffering slave, prophets in the Hebrew scripture tell us clearly what it is that God want us to do. They often did this in opposition to the political authorities of their day and at the risk of their own lives. The answer the prophet Isaiah gives is one of the clearest and most powerful. “Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.”

If you read the prophets, you’ll find that these words of Isaiah are not some random verse, but are the summation of what the prophets say over and over again is the will of God. Once again, these ancient words are relevant for our own day. You can hear them echoed in the testimony of Nelson Mandela. “A nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens, but it’s lowest.” This says it all.

In the New Testament, Jesus shows us by his life, as well as by his teachings, that God wants us to do justice. His life was one of tearing down the walls that separated people, of loving the stranger, of listening to the cry of the oppressed, just as God has listened to the cry of slaves in Egypt. But Jesus didn’t stop there. He so identified with those in need that he became one of them.

This is the definitive statement of social justice in the Bible. In Jesus God not only hears the cry of the oppressed and suffering, as God did for the slaves in

Egypt, but becomes one with them in their suffering. Jesus took their suffering on himself.

This is the point of our New Testament reading. After describing all the ways that some people turn their backs on the needs of others, Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these you did not do it to me.” So to ask a final question, “Where is God?” God is with those who cry out for justice. This is the ultimate statement of justice in the Bible. It is at the heart of the Bible and at the heart of God.

As we prepare to celebrate the Fourth of July in 2018, we do well to remember how deep the roots of social justice are in the good soil of the Bible. From the freeing of the slaves in Egypt, through the prophets, to the life and words of Jesus, justice is at the heart of the story. It’s the dynamic that drives it forward.

We can see from this that in its commitment to social justice, the United Church of Christ is a profoundly biblical church. We don’t get everything right in the UCC, far from it. But we got our commitment to justice right, that’s the main thing, and we can work on the other stuff.