

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Bart Roush
January 15, 2023
Amos 5:21–24, 1 Peter 3:8–12a, Matthew 14:13–16

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God’s Spirit.

Startle us, O God, with your truth and open our hearts and our minds to your wondrous love. Speak your word to us; silence in us any voice but your own and be with us now as we turn our attention, our minds and our hearts, to you, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Over the last several months, we have engaged as a congregation in an intentional period of discernment seeking to find possible answers to the questions of, “Who we are?” “Who are neighbors are?” and “Where is God leading us into the future?” We have looked at demographic information about our congregation, the surrounding neighborhood of where the church is located, wider trends society and in the church as we emerge from the pandemic, had several congregational conversations, and interviewed over 50 people in the congregation. In mid-December, the leadership team and I presented the discoveries made in all of those activities and the congregation was invited to dream about where God might be leading us.

One of the things we discovered, is there is some more work to be done to understand our neighbors and their potential needs more fully. We also discovered and affirmed that we are a healthy church in most any measure, even as churches in general face uncertainty in the future. We affirm that God is using the church in God’s mission in the world, and we believe that Oak Grove has a distinct voice and calling. We affirmed that we have commitments to inclusion and welcoming, that we are a community of care and support, that we are committed to equity and

justice, particularly manifested in issues of affordable housing, LGBTQ equality, environmental concerns, anti-racism. The leadership team and I will be meeting soon to discuss next steps – to get a sense of what we still need to discover to articulate our dreams clearly, and to also work on designing some plans for those things where we have adequate information. We will communicate and share more information as things become clearer.

One of the things from the discernment process that is very clear is an articulation of the values that undergird Oak Grove. As a Christian community, we center our understanding in the life of Christ, guided by the Holy Spirit as revealed in scripture, and Reformed theology as articulated in the confessions. Beyond these things, our congregational values are the underlying ethic by which we define our community. Our congregational values are a way to explicitly name the things we hold most important as we consider what it means to be a part of the Body of Christ and how we behave and make decisions. The values we named as part of the discernment process are both operative and aspirational; that is, we already see them working in our community and they are those things we aspire to consistently embody.

The seven values we identified together are Authenticity, Celebratory Joyfulness, Compassion, Deep Relationships, Humble Curiosity, Inclusivity, and Justice. Over the next six weeks, we will take a look at these values. Today, we look at the values of Compassion and Justice. We've put these together to talk about because they are very related, and yet different from one another.

First, a definition of each of the values:

Compassion

Our faith calls us toward empathy and to care for people of the world. We view all people as children of God. We consider the suffering and misfortune of others and take action to alleviate that suffering.

Justice

We believe our faith call us to work for transformation of society to reflect God’s desires, particularly for the oppressed and marginalized. We recognize this requires the work of dismantling and reforming power, structures, and systems.

With the lens of both compassion and justice, we turn to three brief readings from scripture. Listen for a word from God.

Amos 5:21–24

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them, and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

1 Peter 3:8–12a

Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse, but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called—that you might inherit a blessing. For “Those who desire to love life and to see good days, let them keep their tongues from evil and their lips from speaking deceit; let them turn away from evil and do good; let them seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer.

Matthew 14:13–16

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” Jesus said to them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.”

Each of these readings, to an extent, deal with both compassion and justice. Some of you may recall that one of my favorite Greek words is the word that is used whenever the scriptures talk about Jesus being moved to compassion. That word is *splachna*.

It is the visceral compassion that is used when the deep feelings God has for us are mentioned. It is the powerful emotions that come deep from within, from the gut. Specifically, it is the deep feeling about someone’s misfortune or difficulty. It’s the feeling Jesus has before he heals people. The feeling he has before he feeds the multitudes.

English translations tend to name this outpouring of feeling in a variety of ways – compassion, or mercy, or pity, sometimes kindness.

Mercy isn’t quite the same as compassion. Mercy comes from a Latin root meaning price or wages. It doesn’t suggest equality, but disparity. It is used to refer to our actions in response to another’s need: to offer help, cancel debt. To “show mercy” is to be in a position of power over another.

Pity usually “suggests a kindly, but condescending, sorrow aroused by the suffering or ill fortune of others. It may lead to something like mercy – an offer of help – but often there is a connotation of condescension. I don’t know many people who like to be pitied.

1 Peter talks about love for one another and having sympathy for one another in order to be a blessing. Sympathy is a little different as well. To feel sympathy, means you understand what the person is feeling. With sympathy, one can understand or imagine why someone is either going through a hard time or why someone might be feeling happy or sad.

Empathy means that you feel what a person is feeling. It’s not just an understanding, you actually feel what others are feeling.

Compassion takes empathy and sympathy a step further. When you are compassionate, you feel the pain of another (i.e., empathy) or you recognize that the person is in pain (i.e., sympathy), and then you do your best to alleviate the person’s suffering from that situation.

Compassion is the willingness to relieve the suffering of another. Compassion (again from the Latin) literally means “to suffer with.” Compassion helps us feel some of what the suffering person is feeling so that, in some sense, we can journey with them. When you’re compassionate, you’re not running away from suffering and you’re not pretending the suffering doesn’t exist.

When the disciples tell Jesus to send the crowds away so they can go to the town and the marketplace to get something to eat, he tells the disciples not to send the crowds away and commands them to feed them. Jesus disrupts the normal way of doing things and the disciples’ expectations. Jesus invites, or demands, that the disciples join him in a

compassionate response. Jesus gives the disciples the responsibility to care for the people.

We join in the compassionate response when we engage in what are traditionally known as missions or service work of the church. When we feed people. When we help provide shelter and clothing. When we tutor students. When we give to organizations that provide affordable housing, mental health services, and other social services.

In his 1964 acceptance speech of the Nobel Peace Prize, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. highlighted this compassion when he said, “I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits.”ⁱ

And, of course, alleviating the suffering of people is important. But it is not the only thing. Compassion alone is not enough. There must also be justice. Dr. King quoted the prophets frequently. The scripture from Amos, which Dr. King quoted on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial when he delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech, talks of justice being the primary thing that God wants. Amos is speaking the word of the Lord, to the people Israel. These are the inside religious folks. It is spoken most likely in the setting for worship.

The prophet is saying it is not enough to have worship and prayers if it is not also followed by action. And not just any action, but action that disrupts and dismantles the systems that create the inequity and suffering in the first place. This is difficult work, and it is work that must be intentional, and include those for whom the current system favors over others.

Dr. King was arrested and placed in jail many times as he worked and organized to right wrongs and correct injustice. One such instance was when Dr. King was jailed in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963 for organizing peaceful protests challenging segregation in public accommodations. While in jail, Dr. King wrote a letter to the progressive white clergy in Birmingham who were imploring Dr. King to take a more measured approach, or none at all, as they believed the timing wasn't right. "Dr. King rarely took time to defend himself against his opponents. But eight prominent (white) liberal Alabama clergymen published an open letter earlier... that called on King to allow the battle for integration to continue in the local and federal courts. They warned that King's nonviolent resistance would have the effect of inciting civil disturbances. Dr. King wanted Christian ministers to see that the meaning of Christian discipleship was at the heart of the African American struggle for freedom, justice, and equality."ⁱⁱ

It was from that jail that Dr. King wrote, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial 'outside agitator' idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds."ⁱⁱⁱ

Dr King as, like the prophet Amos, is speaking to the religious insiders. Many faithful people this weekend will hear words about Dr. King's dream. I have felt for a long time that instead of highlighting Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech, that predominately white churches would do well to spend the time listening to "Letter from Birmingham Jail," instead. It is a prophetic call to action to recognize that injustice in any form is harmful to all, including those who benefit from unjust systems. It is a call to be bold in the work of justice.

In that letter, Dr. King also wrote, “We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor, it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct-action campaign that was ‘well timed’ in view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word ‘wait!’ It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This ‘Wait’ has almost always meant ‘Never.’ We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that “justice too long delayed is justice denied.”

The work continues.

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church takes the work of justice seriously. Oak Grove Presbyterian church believes that just too long delayed is justice denied, and that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. Not only are we committed to the work of compassion and alleviating suffering in the world, we are also committed to dismantling the very systems that create the need in the first place. Both things, both compassion and justice are needed. We can care for people even as we work to eradicate the causes that create the need in the first place and transform and create systems that are more just and equitable.

The work of compassion and justice continues, and we are invited to be a part of it. Ten years into the work of the Civil Rights movement, after the passage of the Civil Rights act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Dr. King wrote his final book, entitled “Where Do We Go from Here.” He wrote, “the persistence of racism on depth and the dawning awareness that Negro demands will necessitate structural changes in society have generated a new phase of white resistance in North and South.” Indeed, we have continued to see over the last almost sixty years since those words were written, resistance to structural and systemic changes and the resilience of hate.

The work continues.

Knowing the work was not complete, Dr. King, in “Where Do We Go from Here,” invited people into a prophetic imagination. He wrote, “Let us therefore not think of our movement as one that seeks to integrate into all the existing values of American society. Let us be those creative dissenters who will call our beloved country to a higher destiny, to a new plateau of compassion, to a more noble expression of humanness.”^{iv}

The work continues. May we not tire of this work.

Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1964/king/acceptance-speech/>

ⁱⁱ I have a dream, writing and speeches that changed the world. Ed. By James Washington.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/letter-birmingham-jail>

^{iv} <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/where-do-we-go-here>