

Every single one of us here this morning would probably say we believe in social justice. Most of us would probably say we know what the term means and could offer a reasonable definition. We might even say it could be defined in two simple words. Human Rights. We could expand on the notion and say it has to do with Human rights at the individual level and also at the level of institutions.

There are others who would, maybe politely, say hogwash. There is no such thing as social justice. They would argue there is no objective standard for what social justice would look like, so how would you know when you had it and when you didn't? This might broadly be named a moral relativist's position. Others accept the notion that human beings have a basic level of value, an inherent value. However they'd argue, the notion of social justice is a leap and reaches unfounded conclusions. And then there is the argument that "social justice" is inherently unjust, because it requires the taking from some for the benefit of others, either at an individual level and/or at the governmental level through the use of force or coercion.

So what is social justice? How far should the notion be taken and how would we recognize it anyway? My colleague, the Rev. Chris Antol, now serving as a chaplain in the US military in Afghanistan, has expressed concern for what could be seen as a social justice issue. He is concerned that the United States has not been diligent enough in the processing of special visas for those Afghans who were employed by the military or US contractors to provide beneficial assistance. He would argue, as many others have, these people are very much in harm's way, for the very reason they have been helpful to the United States.

To what extent is the United States "responsible" for these people? They assumedly have been paid for the work they have done. They ostensibly have not been taken advantage of. In fact they have made money when perhaps no other jobs were available. They've been able to benefit their families. Do we have a geo-political or social-moral responsibility to ensure these people can come to the US and be taken out of harm's way? Do we have a greater responsibility for these folks, than we may for, say, those who fear for their lives due to political or religious reasons in others countries? I'd say yes, but I'm not sure my government would agree.

I believe the notion of social justice doesn't come to us naturally. We are animals after all. And the primary focus of all living things is self-preservation. As animals, we defend our territory. We defend our pack, our tribe and young. At that level of existence, there is no awareness or concern for the so-called greater good. We are simply focused on claiming and defending what we can to survive and prosper.

A corollary is that Might Makes Right. We don't have to look very far to see, that the more powerful, inflict their will on those who are unable to resist. That's the history of our very own United States. We camouflage that reality by saying Columbus "discovered" America. In truth, it was already taken, occupied, and cultivated when he stumbled on the place. Over time, the native's land was taken from them, and we claimed it as ours. The ramifications of those days, some would say the immorality of those actions, can be seen today, in virtually every corner of our nation. I simply don't believe social justice is innate in human beings.

I believe anything akin to social justice must be taught. It comes from a higher plain than mere existence, or animalistic tendencies, from greed and lust, which seem to be driven by base inclinations. Social justice seems a sophisticated construction. It requires a higher level of analysis, a broader definition of need and want.

Jesus taught about social justice, and it was a foreign notion in his day too. Reaching out to a Samaritan, who in many respects were seen as vile creatures, was counter-cultural. Yet, Jesus's message expressed a concern for "the least of us"—not just some of the least of us, but for the least of us. Most religions, in fact, contain the idea of social justice in their foundational teachings.

Catholic doctrine places a particular focus on concern for the poorest members of society. It's a central social teaching of their faith. Catholics hold the sanctity of all human life in high regard. They hold that human life must be valued above all material possessions, with a preferential option for the poor and the vulnerable.

Social justice holds a central place in Judaism as well. They believe they have an obligation to perform charity. There is the notion of "deeds of kindness" and "repairing the world". One of Islam's five pillars calls for alms-giving, a form of charity. Universalism takes the position that there is universal salvation for all, not just the chosen few. That sounds like a social justice thesis if ever there was one.

It's said, that the moral test of any society is how it treats its most vulnerable members. This is not a religious notion, but a secular one. Religion does not have the sole claim to social justice. It's long been understood that a lasting society must be based on cooperation. It must meet the needs of all, at least minimally, or it begins to pull apart.

Society can be just only if it's institutions are just. Institutions can only be just if the individuals who populate them are just. President Obama, in his most recent inaugural address reminded us that "we" is the very first word of our Constitution and that a commitment to community and the common good is an integral part of our American heritage. He spoke of shared responsibility, saying "we, the people, understand that our country cannot succeed when a shrinking few do very well and a growing many barely make it," "We, the people, still believe that our obligations as Americans are not just to ourselves, but to all posterity."

This is a sophisticated set of ideas. And maybe, because our form of government is based on a sophisticated set of ideas, it is seen as a model form of government by many around the globe. It simultaneously speaks to individual responsibility and institutional or governmental responsibility. A commitment to the whole, not just the privileged and fortunate.

Social Justice is learned, its taught. It's a higher calling than our animal instincts dictate. I think our founding fathers understood this. I think they understood we have to suppress our natural inclinations in order to have a just society, an enduring republic. There was a brilliance it seems in our founding. There seems to have been a recognition of the natural tension between self preservation and an enduring republic, based on cooperation between the many, for the benefit of all.

It established a structure where institutions push on the individual and where the individual and the collective pushes institutions. And forever it must be thus, a constant tension to maintain some form of balance. It was recognized that even good human intentions will inevitably go askew. There is a need for something more powerful, more durable than intentions. Yet, while built on these noble theories, this country has never been more than moderately successful in achieving social justice.

On an international level, I'm struck by the complexities of global warming and climate change. There is much argument and hand ringing over who owns the lion share of responsibility for helping to mitigate the problem. The more wealthy cultures that have done the most to cause the problem? Or the poorer countries who may now be burning the greatest amount of carbon based fuels, thereby exasperating the situation?

What seems clear is, so long as people operate at or just above the level of survival there will be no such thing as social justice. Social justice requires a higher level of existence, a higher level of engagement of life. And, as long as money, profit and material well being is the central point of reference, there will be no such thing as social justice. Social justice requires a moral foundation, and/or a religious foundation as the central reference point.

In the final analysis, in order to be effective, social justice must be a heartfelt construction. It's a notion that may well go against one's personal advantage, one's personal preference, in deference to the good of the whole, that which benefits the common good, not just my or our good.

When one asks an individual to go against one's personal advantage in deference to the whole, you'd better have some leverage, some form of motivation, some form of regulation. You need the power of institution, systemic pressure to mold, direct, regulate and reinforce behavior.

That is the power and one of the benefits of a faith community. A faith community teaches and reinforces a moral perspective, moral behavior. A faith community requires that we look beyond our own individual wants and needs. A faith community, as a community, requires that we place the needs of the community above our own. It teaches and encourages us to make sacrifices for the benefit of the whole. It pushes and guides us.

Jesus taught and modeled a liberal definition of society, an expanded definition of the whole. He did not confine his concern to only his own kind, those of his own station in life. He demonstrated a preferential option for the poor and the vulnerable. He broadened the definition of family, of tribe, of me and mine to include all people.

We too must change the definition of who belongs to us and who we are a part of. We must broaden our definition of who is worthy of our concern. We, like Gandhi, must learn to extract moral truth from the vast complexities of life.

Let us leverage our natural inclination to care for our own, by enlarging the circle of belonging. Let us behave in such a fashion that we become the change that we seek. And let us look to this faith community for purpose, guidance and reinforcement.

Amen