

Gospel: Matthew 21:33-46
Philippians 3:12-17

word count 1,976

“Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ. Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. Only let us hold fast to what we have attained. Join in imitating me, and mark those who so live as you have an example in us.”

Paul’s letter to the Philippians has always been one of the best loved of all his writings, and I think it is because in his writing, we can feel the pulse of Paul’s own concern and commitment to this church community beneath only the thinnest skin of literary and theological concerns. He writes:

“Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us.”

What the NRSV translates as “live” is literally the word for “walk.” The term draws its meaning from the vision of human life itself as a journey along which there are many decisions to be made. In Hebrew, the term for “daily living,” is *halakah*, which is also the term for “walking.” How to the point: the word brings us the reality that the example of how we walk through our life is really what constitutes what makes up our lives. The paths we choose to go down are reflections of who we are.

World Communion Sunday was established in 1936 by Presbyterians in the hope that the idea of sharing a common meal with Christians across the world would be a powerful symbol. They hoped that others would join in, and today Christians of all kinds join in breaking bread as one on this first Sunday in October.

The idea of a universal sharing that would illuminate how bound together we are as spiritual beings makes this day special. Two Muslim women refugees presented the best example of this universality a few years ago.

The bread we use in Holy Communion symbolizes the presence of God in the world.

Haxere Hasani and Emine Paloji are two Muslim women whose families escaped the war in Kosova and found refuge in America. After the terrorist acts performed in the name of their religion, they asked if they might bake the loaves of bread for the World Communion Sunday in St. John’s United Church of Christ in Kutztown, Pennsylvania. Their gift of bread from the members of their own Islamic community to members of the Christian community is a symbol. It elevates the awareness of our need to be conscious of God’s presence in the midst of chaos. It reminds us that people outside of our faith also lift up their own care and concern based on their sense of faith and human ethics in a statement that makes us recognize that we are not alone in celebrating a oneness with creation, even on a day celebrated by Christians.

An assault on the human race cannot be tolerated anywhere, and the Hasani and Paloji families have experienced in Kosova comparable devastation and mass murder on a terrible scale. In breaking bread in our worship on World Communion Sunday we acknowledge that we are participating together with God in the suffering of the world.

Two more Hebrew words to learn today that are central to the core of our existence as followers of Christ’s example. Mishpat and zedekah. Justice and righteousness. What is your

halakah—what does your walk ultimately say about your life? How is it reflected in your search for mishpat and zedekah?

The parable that Jesus presents us in today's gospel reading is about the vineyard that was leased to the tenants to run. In exchange for working in the vineyard, these people were expected to produce good grapes to make good wine. When the harvest came, the owner sent emissaries ahead to let them know that it was time to collect what was due, and instead, the tenants killed them. He sent his only son thinking that surely they would respect him; surely they would give him what was due. Instead, the only son was killed.

Jesus asks, "When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" The religious authorities standing nearby knew he was talking about them. Religious systems today might question whether there are parallels between their own institutional self-idolatry and the Pharisees whose forgetfulness of what God called them to do made Jesus turn this story so pointedly to condemnation.

After all, what good is it to hear musings or pontifications about God on Sunday, if we don't even know the biblical concept of mishpat and zedekah, justice and righteousness? We hear it throughout the scriptures—it's the bottom line, the "hum" that moves above the ground of all being. The text today says what will happen when these are not present. The owner said, "The realm will be taken away from you and given to a people producing the fruits of the realm."

What kind of grapes is the owner looking for? What do we know about these words mishpat and zedekah? One simple definition is that justice and righteousness means the right ordering of relationships and resources. We are the hands and hearts and minds of the Creator on earth, and if we believe that this earth was made to work with us on it, then we have to work with a sense of justice and righteousness for the whole system. It can work only in the right ordering of relationships and resources, when people learn to cooperate instead of compete, love instead of dominate.

It involves our relationship to that which we call, "God." It involves our relationship to the earth. It involves our relationship to one another. It involves our relationship to ourselves. When any of these relationships and resources are broken, weakened, distorted, neglected, that's when injustices occur. The world doesn't work, but humanity is continually called and redeemed, so that justice and righteousness might restore those relationships and resources. The realm is about healing and making whole that which has been broken. It is about mishpat and zedekah.

We are very aware of our own fears for our personal stability. Many of us have very real concerns not only for our nation's financial well-being, but our own personal finances as well. As someone said this past week, "The only real difference between the American shareholder and a pigeon, is that the pigeon is the only one left among us that can still leave a deposit on a new Lexus." We come here with real concerns, and are reminded not to worry about tomorrow.

In our churches today you might get the impression that the bottom line is stability, having a good feeling inside of us, being at peace with God, nurturing our own spirituality. But that can't be all of it. The inner peace we may experience is a gift so that we might have the inner strength to work for justice and not for just-us.

We are the hearts and the hands and the minds to whom the vineyard was given. What more should be done for us who live in what is still the most prosperous and most opportunity-filled land in the world? We were given a good beginning and it is up to us to bring it to fruition.

I don't anthropomorphize God and I am not the kind of preacher out there who thrives on putting words into God's mouth. But if I did, I think she would be a "Clara Peller" kind of God. Do you remember Clara Peller? She'd be a short, elderly, to the point, and demanding Deity. I might think that after all of these blessings that were given to us, God might say, "Where's the

beef? Where is the justice and righteousness? I expected to find a people who worked for the right ordering of relationships and resources so that all creation might be blessed.”

We are growing into a warm and inviting sanctuary. But what is the bottom line? If the church does not help produce justice and righteousness, then its halakah will stop.

We have a wonderful heritage of music. I love to hear our church choir. You are able to lift us up every week. We have a music director and a musician who loves what they do and it shows. We have more programs because of a dedicated director of education, and a smooth running facility because of the devotion of our administrator and bookkeeper. How wonderful. We know that here the music, liturgy, preaching, Sunday school, and programs must serve the bottom line. The question is, do we empower God's people to do justice and righteousness?

We have grown in numbers. These past years our budget has increased and will by necessity increase again this year. We do more. But that's not the bottom line. The question is, has this growth enlarged our ministry of justice and righteousness? Who do the workers in the vineyard serve?

Today's "Neighbors in Need," offering is part of our walk with our sister churches this World Communion Sunday. This is your life, your halakah. How to the point: that the word brings us the reality that the example of how we walk through our life is really what constitutes what makes up our lives. The paths we choose to go down are reflections of who we are. The apostle Paul says, "Brothers and sisters, observe those who live according to the example you have in us." Do it well!

Mishpat and zedekah. Oscar Romero was made Bishop in El Salvador because everyone thought he would simply maintain without changing in this war-torn country. Soon after he was installed, a priest who was a close friend was killed because he helped the peasants start a cooperative. Soon the killing of priests and innocent people got worse. Oscar Romero began to speak out against the injustices to the poor. He defended the rights of those who were exploited. He wrote an open letter to U.S. President Jimmy Carter asking him to stop the flow of weapons to El Salvador, which were only increasing the bloodshed. He asked soldiers in the El Salvadoran army to refuse to kill their fellow citizens. The Bishop knew what mishpat and zedekah were about. Soon after he took this stand for the poor, Bishop Romero was assassinated while leading the Mass. Oscar Romero discovered what the bottom line was. It was justice and righteousness, working for the reordering of relationships and resources.

Jesus didn't want people to miss what he meant when he said, "Seek first the realm and God's justice," so he told them, "Inherit the realm. For I was hungry and you fed me. I was thirsty and you gave me to drink. I was naked and you clothed me, in prison and you visited me, a stranger and you welcomed me. As you have done it unto the least of these you have done it unto me."

In telling this story, Jesus helped his listeners to know what the bottom line is. Each Sunday we gather within the blessed community we are reminded that the bottom line is about love, love that is willing to focus, work and sacrifice in order to bring about mishpat and zedekah, justice and righteousness.

This is an open table. Bring your entire self to this table in whatever part of your journey brings you here today to find wholeness.

Sermon resources: George Jonson & Montreal Diocese Lectionary Resource—Philippians.