

WHY JUSTICE IS FOUNDATIONAL TO CHRISTIANITY, ISLAM, AND JUDAISM

Temple Israel, March 27, 2017

An Interfaith Panel with the Reverend Dr. Stephen R. Montgomery (Idlewild Presbyterian Church), Dr. Yasir Qadhi (Memphis Islamic Center), and Rabbi Micah D. Greenstein (Temple Israel)

Introduction by Rabbi Greenstein

On behalf of our President, Elkan Scheidt, and every member of Temple Israel, welcome, shalom, salaam! I want to begin by sharing something I do not take for granted and I hope you don't either. Whenever I have a question about Muslims or Presbyterians, I don't have to Google, watch TV, listen to a commentator, or leave Memphis, because two of the most knowledgeable individuals about Islam and Presbyterianism anywhere in the country and world are on the stage with me right now. That, however, is not why I feel so lucky, fortunate and blessed. These two whose intellectual depth and wisdom make Dr. Qadhi a world renown Islamic scholar and Dr. Steve Montgomery part of a legendary chain of Presbyterian ministers are also dear friends of mine. We not only speak in the same places and on the same programs like tonight, we eat meals together and we sign our private e-mails, even when we disagree, as brothers.

Let me tell you what is on my heart and mind and why this evening is so important before the three of us teach how central and foundational justice is to the religions we represent. The reason I am heartened by this crowd is because Christians, Muslims and Jews have spent far too much time reading or talking ABOUT each other than actually knowing one another. It's much easier for a Jew to be a stick figure to a Muslim, or for a Muslim to be a stick figure to a Jew, or for both Jews and Muslims to be stick figures to a Christian when you don't mix much with people different than yourself- but once you get to know a person of another faith who is just as honorable, even more so than some people in your own faith –when that happens- you are never the same again because you are no longer talking about Muslims or Christians or Jews, you are talking about my friend.

So for the next few minutes, please get up if you are able and find at least one practitioner of the two faiths you are not, and do more than introduce yourself. Please find a Muslim and Christian if you are a Jew; find a Jew and Christian if you are a Muslim; find a Jew and a Muslim if you are a Christian, and when you encounter that person of another faith, after introducing yourself, please answer one question. Here's the question. What is it you admire MOST about the other person's religion as an outsider? You have 5 minutes to meet 2 others and exchange your answer....

One of the many things I admire so much about Christians is the way Christians can be totally in the moment when they pray. I was at a church where Bubba the mechanic with only a high school education was asked by the Pastor to lead a prayer and this nice man who barely spoke in complete sentences when I met him sounded like Moses, Jesus, or Mohammed in offering the most beautiful spontaneous prayer in the moment. Out of his mouth came such gratitude, sincerity, and genuine love.

And when it comes to Muslims I know, I could speak about the Memphis Muslim families I have come to admire and love, whether it's tonight's speaker Dr. Yasir Qadhi, or having dinner down the block from here at the home of the Khandekar Family, or longtime friendships and community work with Dr. Bashar Sala, Nabil Bayakly, and so many others, but in studying Islam with Muslims who know Islam versus outsiders who do not, I am fascinated by their prophet's story. Mohammed's father dies before he is ever born. His mother dies before he is six years old. He's handed over to a foster mom who is so poor, an Imam taught me, that her breasts were not full enough even to feed him. So he grows up essentially an orphan, and only at the age of 40 does he start to get this revelation to stand up against the enslavement of people.

The people who first came to this new faith were people who were enslaved, children women, some wealthy business folks who had made money their God, but what I have learned is that the earliest companions of Mohammed were people who needed justice, just as I have learned from my brother Steve Montgomery that the message of Jesus is a foundational message of social justice. But that's me as an outsider.

Please show your love as we warmly welcome Rev. Steve Montgomery and Dr. Qadhi, for 10 minutes each, followed by me for 7 minutes, since I have already spoken too much by way of introduction. Ladies and Gentlemen, Steve Montgomery and Yasir Qadhi.

Social Justice From A Christian Perspective

by the Rev. Stephen R. Montgomery

Where else but in Memphis, Tennessee can something like this happen? Where else but Memphis is there a Temple Israel, with a rabbi who is one of the leading rabbis in the country. Don't take my word for it. Check out Newsweek. And a Muslim who is one of the leading Muslim scholars in the world. Don't take my word for it. Check out the cover of the New York Times magazine several years ago. And then there is the Presbyterian pastor who *looks* like a rabbi. It is good that we are here.

It is vital for us to realize that what you will hear Micah say about justice from the Jewish perspective is 100% true to our faith experience as well, because the Hebrew Bible, which we call the Old Testament, is fully 2/3 of our Christian scriptures. And it is my contention that justice is not just an "issue" for Christians to deal with, but is integral to our faith.

I emphasize that for several reasons. First of all, many of us Christians were raised with the idea that the God of the Old Testament is an angry God, a God bent on vengeance and violence and spitefulness; and then, all of a sudden, just like that God became gentle, and loving, and compassionate when Jesus came to earth. And we see pictures of Jesus with a sheep around his shoulder, and a picture of Jesus sitting with the children. Ahhh! Just last week I had someone in my office tell me they liked the New Testament God, not the Old Testament God.

There are too many problems with that for me to get into all of them, but let me share a few: The God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament is the same God, the One Eternal God, the maker of heaven and earth. And so what Micah said about God who has a passion for justice, is true for us Christians as well. That passion, that yearning for justice is found on nearly every page, from the Levitical and Deuteronomic laws in which justice for the poor and elderly and widowed and sojourner were written into their legal codes. They institutionalized justice;

It's where the prophets declared in no uncertain terms to "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream."

And the psalms. Yes, there are some that provide rich inspiration and wisdom in our search for "inner peace" or "spiritual health," ("The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want"), but we tend to neglect the cutting edge of the Psalms. *The central theme of the largest book in the bible is that of a God with a passion for a just creation.*

Why is all of this important to Christians? Because this is the world view from which Jesus emerged. When we forget that, the results are disastrous, and even deadly. You see, those who divorce Jesus from the scriptures that nurtured him, have a tendency to spiritualize Jesus. Jesus is not concerned with things of this earth, they tell us, but only things "eternal;" that is, a personal and spiritual concept of salvation. And there is some of that in John's Gospel especially, but "eternal life" take place on both sides of death. In his opening sermon in Luke,

he quoted Isaiah: "He has chosen me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and to announce the acceptable year of the Lord." He is proclaiming a kingdom of justice and liberation to be established in favor of the poor and the marginalized of history.

What happens when we spiritualize Jesus? Two examples. In the ante-bellum south, theologians and preachers developed what was called "the spirituality of the church," which meant that the church should only concern itself with "spiritual" issues, and not get involved in economic or social or ...heaven forbid...political issues. And so the church had nothing to say about slavery, because it was an economic issue, a social issue, a political issue. Many in the church still adhere to that. "I don't want to hear politics in the pulpit, they say. The results are devastating, even deadly.

In Germany in the 1930's, many Christian clergy, followed the same doctrine. Bishop Muller, who as appointed Bishop of the Lutheran Church by Hitler, told his flock that Christians should be concerned with the Kingdom of God (that is, "spiritual things" like getting to heaven,) and leave the things of the earth to the "experts." And so once again, the church had nothing to say as Jews were shipped off to Auschwitz, Berkenau, Triblinka. Devastating. Deadly.

So let's take a look briefly at Jesus, what he said and what he did. Jesus told stories. We call them parables. One was the parable of the Good Samaritan. Most of you, of any faith, probably know the basics: The question posed to Jesus is "Who is my neighbor?" And at the center is a man who has been the victim of a violent attack, robbed and leaving him half dead by the side of the road. Two religious leaders, a priest and a Levite see him but pass by on the other side of the road. Now Jesus has set up his listeners to be prepared for a third category: Israelite. If I say "Larry, Moe," you will say "Curly." However, to go from priest to Levite to Samaritan is like going from Larry to Moe to Osama Bin Laden. They were the enemy. (This illustration is from Dr. Amy-Jill Levine, the noted Jewish professor of the New Testament at Vanderbilt University.)

Jesus' outrageous decision to lift up a despised Samaritan infidel as the moral hero leaves no doubt that the love of neighbor Jesus has in mind is one that reaches out to people of foreign nations and foreign religions. Do you think that has justice implications for travel bans and walls? The guide to a deeper peace and justice and security is found in the kind of neighbor-love that reaches across dividing lines, that provides help to the refugee and victim of violence, that binds up the wounds of the suffering and works to build an encompassing community of compassion and mutual help.

There is a second parable that was the final parable Jesus told in Matthew's Gospel. It's called the "Last Judgment" or "The Parable of the Sheep and Goats." Long story short: In the final judgment those who help "the least of these, our brother and sisters," are those who have a place of honor at the right hand of God, who are the sheep. Those who do not feed the hungry, provide drink for the thirsty, who do not welcome the stranger, who do not provide clothes for the naked, who do not take care of the sick or visit the imprisoned are the "goats," and will be at the left hand of God. (I have to admit I never have understood what Jesus had against left-handed people and goats, being a left-hander and someone who had goats as a child, but that's another issue!)

But the point here is clear, and here is the clincher: Those who help the suffering in all these different ways are ministering to Jesus himself. “Just as you did it to the least of these,” he said, “did it to me.”

Now, it doesn't take any imagination at all to see the justice implications for the Christian faith. It's even more poignant today because this parable was addressed to *the nations* and not just to individuals. Take a look at the proposed budget that is before Congress now: Hungry and you gave me food? Look at the cuts in the WIC program, and possibly even Meals on Wheels. Stranger and you welcomed me? Did you see the number of colleges and universities that have fewer international applications this year? Sick and you took care of me? Not if you are a poor woman and needing medical care from Planned Parenthood. In prison and you visited me? More prisons are being privatized, where the bottom line is, in a word, profit.

Jesus said a lot more about justice, but we also look at what he did. While he walked the earth, Jesus delivered people from paralysis, mental illness, leprosy, deformity, muteness, suppurating wounds, blindness and more, without demanding a religious litmus test. But again and again in word and deed he returned to the plight of the poor, whose poverty, in true prophetic fashion, he considered no historical accident, but the fruit of social injustice. He continually crossed over virtually every boundary that the legal, political, and religious leaders had established. He lived with the poor and shocked “respectable people” by eating with social outcasts. He went through Samaria and talked with a woman at the well, an outcast's outcast.....the longest recorded conversation Jesus ever had. He acted and spoke in a manner that caused him to be experienced as a serious threat by the establishment groups. That's what he did.

Finally, we look at *who he was and who he is*. The route to discovering who Jesus really is must resemble that of his first friends and followers. When we allow that, we affirm that God has not only approached, but has shared their lives to the full. They are hungry? *So was he*. They are poor? *So was he*. They are tortured? *So was he*. They are killed? *So was he*. They are empowered to live lives of love and justice? *So was he*.

Wherever we go, and whatever we do, God has already been there in Jesus. And so must we.

Other thoughts, had I had time to make them. Primarily a quote from William Sloane Coffin:

“If I had one wish for the churches of America, I think it would be that they come to see the difference between charity and justice. Charity is a matter of personal attributes; justice a matter of public policy. Charity seeks to alleviate the effects of injustice; justice seeks to eliminate the causes of it. Charity in no way affects the status quo; while justice lead inevitably to political confrontation. The prophet did not say “Let charity roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream, but justice...” (William Sloane Coffin)

Social Justice from an Islamic Perspective

by Dr. Yasir Qadhi

“O ye who have faith! Ensure that ye all stand up for justice, as witnesses to God, even if that mean that you testify against yourselves, or your parents, or relatives.” [4: 135] And in 6:151, we are told, “O ye who have faith! Ensure that you stand up for the sake of God, as witnesses to the truth. And make sure that your animosity to a group of people does not cause you to swerve from justice. Be just, that is the essence of piety.”

So in one verse we are told to stand up for justice as witnesses to God, and in the other to stand up for God as witnesses to justice. The two concepts: being faithful to God, and being just, are literally intertwined together. And we are told that standing up for justice means that at times we might have to testify against ourselves, or loved ones, if we or they commit mistakes. So there is no ‘Taking the fifth’ in Islamic law, because justice is a higher ideal than even ourselves. In particular, when it comes to those whom we don’t get along with, perhaps even our enemies, the Quran says that we need to be extra careful that our feelings don’t interfere with our values and justice. It’s so easy to blind our judgment when it comes to those whom we oppose, hence the extra caution.

The pursuit of justice is so highly regarded in the Islamic tradition that we are told one of the primary reasons for sending the prophets, and for revealing the books, and even for blessing mankind with ‘use of iron’, meaning physical strength and the might of a judiciary system, is so that justice is upheld.

And in our faith tradition, God has 99 majestic and beautiful names, and one of them is *al-Muqsit*, or the One who is Just. And if there seems to be an alliteration between *muqsit* and ‘justice’, it is because the Arabic work, the Quran word, for justice is actually an Arabicized adoption from the Latin word for justice, which is *iustus*. From this Latin root, Old French make it *justice*, and Middle English then adopted it, whereas a millennia before the Old French adoption, the ancient Arabs made it *qistās*. Hence, the Quranic word for ‘justice’ is quite literally the same as the root for ‘justice’, so when Muslims say that the Quran commands us to be just and to practice justice, we don’t even need a translation, because that is literally the word used!

How is justice maintained? In the prophetic model, one of the primary ways of maintaining justice is to take on the cause of the marginalized and fringe; the downtrodden and weak. One of the earliest Quranic prohibitions involved the prohibition of female infanticide; of the most basic and early prophetic teachings is that one’s race and ethnicity are irrelevant, all of us are from Adam, and Adam was created from dust. One of the most dramatic incidents that all Muslim children are taught about the early life of the Prophet involves a case where a rich and powerfully privileged elite member of the Quraysh, his tribe, took advantage of his 1 % status to essentially steal the rights of a lower ranking member of a tribe that was considered lower class: the Prophet risked his life and single handedly stood up to challenge the elite of the Quraysh to stand up for justice and give the man his dues. What’s interesting for Muslims in

particular to remember is that the man whose right was taken away was still an idolater, he wasn't a monotheist believing in the God of Abraham, yet still our Prophet risked his life in order to establish justice. As one of the greatest theologians of medieval Islam, IT, said "God blesses a nation that is just, even if it doesn't believe in Him, and takes away blessings and power from nations that are unjust, even if they believe in Him."

So when it comes to justice, and especially given the current climate we find ourselves in, we followers of Abraham, need to stand up and assert the rights of the downtrodden, to speak for those who might be too intimidated to speak,, such as the 'undocumented workers, aka 'illegal aliens', to fight for the rights of religious folks who might have quirky personal rituals or habits but who merely wish through those habits to come closer to God as they see fit. And only when we do so will we be standing up to God, and standing up to justice, and acting as witnesses to God and justice.

A bit of an eschatological note to end this on: mainstream Muslims believe, and if I'm not mistaken so do many Jews and Christians, that the Messiah shall return at the end of times. For us Muslims and Christians, that Messiah shall return since we believe he's already been here once, and perhaps for many of you he might be coming for the first time, but the relevant point is that in our traditions, the return of Jesus is explicitly linked to the establishment of justice. In other words, one of the main purposes of sending the Messiah to the world is to establish justice.

Social Justice from a Jewish Perspective

by Rabbi Micah Greenstein

Judaism is not the religion of the Old Testament. Let me explain. Judaism without the Hebrew Bible is unthinkable, but Judaism with only the Bible isn't Judaism. So we begin with the phrase from the torah, Justice, Justice shalt thou pursue. "*Tzedek, tzedek tirdof.*" in Deut. 16:20 but the most important question for Jews is not what the text says, but rather, what does it mean?

Justice, justice, shall you PURSUE. The term "pursue" carries strong connotations of effort and eagerness. This implies more than merely respecting or even following justice; we must actively pursue it.

Then there is the redundancy of the phrase, since the sentence still works if the torah had said, "Justice shalt thou pursue," why "Justice, JUSTICE, shalt thou pursue," This means that we must pursue justice justly, for just goals can never be achieved by unjust means. The worthiest of goals will be rendered less worthy if we have to compromise justice to achieve it.

It is inspired by a justice verse like this, the Torah's vision of a just society, and a 3,000 year history living as a mistreated minority, Jews repeatedly have been in the forefront of struggles for justice. It is no accident that even though Jews comprise not even 2% of the American citizenry today, 50% of the freedom riders in Mississippi during the civil rights struggles of the 1960s were Jewish. It is no accident that the first clergyman in the city of Memphis to speak out against the Ku Klux Klan was not a Christian minister but the Rabbi of this cong from 1915-1924, William Fineshriber. In Jud, it is not enough to be concerned for the life to come," the 20th century social justice leader Rabbi Abraham Heschel taught, "Our immediate concern must be with justice and compassion in the here and now, with human dignity, welfare and security.

Justice is central to "Torah" which does not mean law but is the same Hebrew word for a parent (horah) or a teacher (morah). Torah DOES refer to the scrolls in the ark, the Pentateuch, but it also refers to the totality of Jewish teaching and tradition. Torah is what God has revealed to us, and what we discern of God: ideas and ideals, laws, commandments and opportunities for holiness called mitzvahs, our religious heritage. Torah is the Jewish quest for meaning, our way of life, a path for our souls, and to tonight's topic, *Torah is the design for a better world grounded in justice and peace.*

Perhaps Judaism's noblest teaching is that great summary of all religion from the prophet Micah. What does the Lord require of thee? Only "to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly before God." Most people don't notice that in this exalted summation of religion's purpose, "doing justly" precedes even the command "to walk humbly before God." So a passionate belief in & concern for justice for all people is inherent in Judaism. It stems not only from the biblical prophets but from the fundamental nature of the Jewish faith. One God means One humanity, and transforming human society from a jungle of fear, hate, and violence into a Kingdom of God on earth is Judaism's justice mission.

Just as there was a giving of the Torah that was active and involved God and our ancestors, so too there is a receiving of Torah that is active and involves every child of Israel, and hopefully, every child of God. To restore this world to wholeness and peace for all people, requires an ongoing dialogue with the other, whether the other is our Jewish , Christian, Muslim, Hindu or “other” neighbor. What I am saying is that Otherness is a pre-requisite for justice, including empathy and aspiring to walk in other people’s shoes. Holiness occurs when power and goodness co-exist in perfect harmony. We sanctify God’s name by being holy ourselves. How do we accomplish this? Through actions which promote justice.
