Bearing Witness

Epiphany Sunday

January 8, 2017

[Isaiah 60:1-6](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearABC_RCL/Epiphany/Epiph_RCL.html#Ot1) [Psalm 72:1-7,10-14](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearABC_RCL/Epiphany/Epiph_RCL.html#Ps1)

[Ephesians 3:1-12](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearABC_RCL/Epiphany/Epiph_RCL.html#Nt1) [Matthew 2:1-12](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearABC_RCL/Epiphany/Epiph_RCL.html#Gsp1)

“So natural is the union of Religion with Justice, that we may boldly deem there is neither, where both are not.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Let me repeat that.

“So natural is the union of Religion with Justice, that we may boldly deem there is neither, where both are not.”

Are those the words of some wild-eyed radical? The sentiments of a progressive Christian who confuses politics with faith and salvation?

No, they’re the words of Richard Hooker. Hooker was a priest in the Church of England in the 16th-century. He was Anglicanism’s first great theologian.[[2]](#footnote-2) Hooker is traditionally seen as the source of Anglicanism’s “three-legged” stool of authority: scripture, tradition, and reason[[3]](#footnote-3) and its via media, or “middle way” between Roman Catholicism and Puritanism.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Since Hooker lived more than 400 years ago and was a contemporary of Shakespeare, let me translate his 16th-century words: If religion—that is, our life of faith—does not have justice, it isn’t religion. Or: If we don’t live our lives practicing justice, we do *not* have lives of faith, and our religion is hollow, even non-existent.

Strong words.

We live—as always—in strong times.

Some of you may have heard that with a new law the State of California “prohibits state funds from being used to pay for travel to a state that authorizes discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression.” Right now, Kansas, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Tennessee are on the, so-to-speak, no-fly list.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Two days ago at a monthly pot-luck, a colleague of mine at CSUB who disagrees with the new law said that this law is the height of political correctness. I told him I disagreed with him.

When I was thinking about this later I wondered: What would his reaction be if anti-LGBT laws were instead laws enforcing racial segregation?

But my aim here is not to be political. Or, rather, my aim here is not to be *merely* political; my desire here is to be *religious* and political. In other words, I agree with this new California law not merely because I’m a progressive Democrat—I agree with it partly, perhaps even *mostly*, because I am a person of Gospel faith and beliefs. I agree with it because I try my best to live by our baptismal covenant.

Please turn to page 305 in your red Book of Common Prayer and say with me:

*Celebrant:* Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God

in Christ?

*People*       *I will, with God's help.*

*Celebrant*   Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?
*People*       *I will, with God's help.*

*Celebrant*   Will you strive for justice and peace among all
                  people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

*People*       *I will, with God's help.*

By not supporting governments that discriminate, and even oppress people, we *are* proclaiming by word and example, by witness and action, the Good News of God in Christ: our Jesus who welcomed and ate with, healed and blessed the outcast, the rejects, those considered somehow less than human.

By not supporting governments that discriminate and even oppress people, we *are* seeking and serving Christ in *all* persons, proclaiming to them and to everyone, especially to those in power, that each and every one of us is a child of God, beloved and embraced.

By welcoming all persons equally, we *are* striving for justice and peace among all people, and respecting the God-created dignity of *every* human being.

What I’m saying here applies to many other groups—but not just to groups: what I’m saying here applies to *people*, to *persons*, to *soul-endowed human beings* just like you and me: women, Latinos and Latinas, the migrant and immigrant, Muslims, and all people of other faiths; the homeless, the illiterate, the hungry, the trafficked, the abused.

Someone could say that boycotts are a “negative” action. I don’t think that’s true. Being against injustice and oppression of our LGBT friends is to be *for* their humanity, it is to see Christ in each and every person. Witness the economic pressure put on South Africa that helped end apartheid, South Africa’s version of our segregation and Jim Crow. I’ll return to this point later.

What got me reflecting on all this was a combination of two things: first, our toxic political climate—we’re now in the throes of “Double, double toil and trouble; / Fire burn and caldron bubble.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Second, today’s reading—not the Gospel reading about the three Wise Men, but the Psalm:

Give the King your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to the King's Son;

That he may rule your people righteously
and the poor with justice. . . .

As usually with the Psalms, we need to emphasize the parallelism: justice and righteousness are equals, twins, born from the same womb. Far too many Christians emphasize righteousness, being right with God, and forget about justice. But you can’t be righteous if you’re not just. You can’t be righteous if you don’t *work* for justice.

Now, this psalm was originally for Solomon.[[7]](#footnote-7) But King Solomon reminds us that absolute power *does* corrupt absolutely. Solomon did *not* serve righteously and justly.

But I’m reading the King of the Psalms here as *us*, God’s royal priesthood. So, as the psalm concludes, I’m substituting “we” for “he”:

For *we* shall deliver the poor who cries out in distress,
and the oppressed who has no helper.

*we* shall have pity on the lowly and poor;
*we* shall preserve the lives of the needy.

*We* shall redeem their lives from oppression and violence,
and dear shall their blood be in our sight.

Because of the Bible’s and the Gospel’s emphases on loving all others and doing justice, if we are to be faithful Christians, justice *is our calling*.

I’ve been inspired in this calling these past few months by reading a biography of the life and ministry of John Hines.[[8]](#footnote-8) John Hines was the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church from 1965-1974. Those of you old enough will remember what a tumultuous, even tortured, yet wildly hopeful, era that was. If you weren’t there, one way to educate yourself is by listening to Pete Seeger and the early Bob Dylan.

I’ve long said that the Episcopal Church woke up in the ‘60s and discovered it had a conscience. John Hines, inspired by the Holy Spirit, reading his Bible, and calling on Jesus, was the one with the bishop’s crook in his hand poking and prodding us along, calling and inspiring—inspiriting—us not only to see but to *do* something about rampant and intrinsic—institutionalized—racism, segregation, and poverty, these rots that still gnaw both at our body politic and our humanity.

Hines proved that Gospel action can bring about radical change. [Desmond Tutu](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Desmond_Tutu), now retired [Archbishop of Cape Town](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archbishop_of_Cape_Town), said that Hines' efforts to divest church-held assets in South Africa played an important role in the demise of [apartheid](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Africa_under_apartheid).[[9]](#footnote-9)

I hope you’ll read the series of reflections by Bishop Hines running now in Midweek. I’m going to repeat here what was in our newsletter this week. Hines declares, with very strong language, that no one can

with humility receive the Sacrament of the broken body and poured blood of Christ while [anyone is] denied access to decent housing and jobs and the right to self-determination because of the oppressive character of political and social structures in which we find it convenient to acquiesce.

Do we believe what this great prophet of the Episcopal Church tells us? Do we *dare* believe it?

Hines, of course, faced severe opposition, even vilification.

If we, like Bishop Hines, take on “the oppressive character of political structures,” we too will face opposition.

We, like Hines, most confront our own convenient acquiescence to what the author of the letter to the Ephesians calls the principalities and powers of this fallen world.[[10]](#footnote-10)

My deepest hope, my profoundest wish, is that we, we here, we of St. Paul’s, will be an even stronger, more active, and louder Church of Witness.

This means that each and every one of us—each and every one of us—will need to bear Gospel witness in our lives, *by action*, especially here in this small, yet vital, part of God’s Kingdom.

Amen.

1. Richard Hooker, cited by Sarah Coakley, *The New Asceticism: Sexuality, Gender and the Quest for God*, 134 n. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Hooker>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “The threefold sources of authority in Anglicanism are scripture, tradition, and reason. These three sources uphold and critique each other in a dynamic way,” <http://www.episcopalchurch.org/library/glossary/authority-sources-anglicanism>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <http://www.episcopalchurch.org/library/glossary/via-media>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. [AB 1887 webpage](https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=https-3A__oag.ca.gov_ab1887&d=DgMFaQ&c=8Ipd-S27WuaKn7LZs55QTnbDbMQSs_VN5Yh9G3ue5PM&r=ZA_ySFm1BwkArliE-SBBlQ&m=5ELBtu7vzeRiHkhSCHgsEFtwLqq1DlHE3oFL8-pajkw&s=jM4rXcb-v4g-qLE6w_JGICAd0-rgRMm6repjPkTFEGg&e=). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Macbeth* IV.i 10-19; 35-38. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms*, 248. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_E._Hines>; biography: Kenneth Kesselus, *Granite on Fire*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_E._Hines>; Wolfgang Saxon (1997-07-22), ["John E. Hines, Episcopal Leader, Dies at 86,"](http://www.nytimes.com/1997/07/22/us/john-e-hines-episcopal-leader-dies-at-86.html?pagewanted=1) *The New York Times*. Retrieved 2010-09-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ephesians 6:12, KJV. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)