

Isaiah 35:4-7a
Psalm 146
James 2:1-5
Mark 7:31-37
September 5, 2021

A few years back, a well-known radio talk show personality told his listeners if their church preached social justice, they should run from that church as fast as they could. As outrageous as that statement was, what troubled me even more was that there was very little outcry against it. Many of his listeners apparently either agreed with what he said, or they just did not care. The fact is, social justice is a key precept of all major religions – Judaism, Islam, and Christianity alike. If we were to run from all churches, synagogues, and mosques that at least should be preaching social justice, I am not sure where we could go.

The Catholic Church has an especially well-defined doctrine on social justice. It is commonly known as Catholic Social Teaching. This doctrine is built upon many documents issued over the years by popes, councils, and conferences of bishops addressing the challenges of contemporary society in light of Holy Scripture. The first of these documents was an 1891 encyclical by Pope Leo XIII entitled *Rerum Novarum*, “The Condition of Labor.” *Rerum Novarum* addressed major problems stemming from the Industrial Revolution – the exploitation of workers, terrible working conditions, and unjust wages. In his encyclical, Pope Leo stressed the right of people to work, to receive just wages, to form unions, and to own private property. This weekend we observe Labor Day as a national holiday in the United States, and we celebrate both the rights and accomplishments of American workers.

Since *Rerum Novarum*, popes and bishops have released many more documents building the social justice doctrine of the Catholic Church. In 1931, Pope Pius XI issued *Quadragesimo Anno*, “The Reconstruction of the Social Order,” responding to the economic devastation of the

Great Depression. In 1963, during the Cold War, Saint John XXIII issued *Pacem et Terris*, “Peace on Earth,” promoting dignity and human rights as the only sure foundation for a just and peaceful world. In 1965, the Second Vatican Council issued *Gaudium et Spes*, “The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,” addressing the solidarity of the Church with the whole human family. In 1998 the Catholic bishops of the United States wrote “Living the Gospel of Life,” and in 1999, “A Good Friday Appeal to End the Death Penalty.” In 2003, the bishops of the United States and Mexico issued “Strangers no Longer,” a joint statement on migration. And most recently, Pope Francis has issued *Laudato Si’*, “On Care of our Common Home” and *Fratelli Tutti*, “On Fraternity and Social Friendship,” reminding us that everything in creation is connected – all things and all people. All these documents, and there are many, many more, are woven together into what the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago called a seamless garment – a seamless garment that we know as Catholic Social Teaching. This doctrine of our Church calls us to respect the dignity of all life, to live and grow in community with one another, to protect each other’s rights and meet our own responsibilities, to give preference to the poor and vulnerable, to protect the dignity of work and respect the rights of workers, to live in solidarity with all people, and to care for all of God’s creation.

This doctrine and the documents that form it are all deeply rooted in Holy Scripture, which itself is jam-packed with calls for social justice. The first chapter of Genesis says God created us in God’s image. The twenty-second chapter of Exodus cites laws protecting aliens, widows, and orphans. The prophet Isaiah rails against unjust laws. The prophet Jeremiah demands fair wages. In the fourteenth chapter of Luke, Jesus favors the poor and the vulnerable. In the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew, he says “Whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me.” And in the thirteenth chapter of John, he washed the feet of his apostles and

told them, “As I have done for you, you also should do for others.

The Letter of James, from which today’s second reading is taken, contains some of the most direct social justice exhortations in the Bible. From James, we hear such edicts as, “...be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath..., Be doers of the word and not hearers only..., ...faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead., ...the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace for those who cultivate peace., (and) Humble yourselves before the Lord....” In today’s second reading, James warns us about showing unjustified deference to the wealthy. The reading reminds me of a story I heard many years ago. It seems a young man walked into church a few minutes late. He was dirty, and his clothes were tattered. The young man walked down the center aisle of the church, toward the altar, looking for a place to sit. The pews were full, and no one moved over to make room for him. When he reached the front of the church, finding no seat, he sat on the floor in front of the first pew. Within seconds, a large, well-dressed, and stern-looking usher walked up the same aisle and stood over the young man. Everyone in the congregation was watching, and most expected the usher to pick the young man up by an arm and escort him out the door. But instead, the usher sat down beside him, on the floor, and stayed there for the rest of the service. What if that happened here? What would you do? What would I do? Would I simply ignore the young man or just stare at him? Would I try to remove him? Or would I do as the usher did and sit beside him? I don’t know. I’d like to think I would do something to help make the young man feel welcome in God’s house, but I really don’t know.

On the surface, today’s Gospel appears to be a simple story about Jesus performing a miracle, restoring a man’s hearing and speech. But we need to dig deeper. It is also about concerned friends taking a person in need to Jesus to be healed. That is what the social justice doctrine

of our church is all about – recognizing the needs of others and doing something about them. Feeding the hungry. Sheltering the homeless. Comforting the sick. Welcoming strangers. Righting wrongs wherever we find them. That is what following Jesus is all about.