

I. Intro

A. Today is the last of the 6 spiritual streams from Richard Foster's book Streams of Living Water, & for this we return to a familiar one: **Social Justice**

1. At least it's familiar to a lot of Mennonites. This & the Holiness stream tend to be predominant with many Mennonite Christians
2. Some of you were probably breathing a little easier this morning seeing Social Justice in the bulletin ... perhaps thinking, "Now you're talking my language ..."

B. I should know ... for this is certainly comfortable spiritual language for me

1. I grew up with parents and a church that strongly supported Mennonite Central Committee as a relief & dev't organization
 - a) In fact I spent some of my teenage years living in Bolivia with MCC where my father worked on a team of nurses combatting the spread of tuberculosis in rural villages
 - b) My parents sympathized with the poor and marginalized and I saw in Bolivia poverty and injustice that really influenced the direction of my life
2. At age eighteen, drawing upon the Peace Church traditions of nonviolence and opposition to all wars, I chose to conscientiously refuse to register my name with the Selective Service
3. When I spent two years in the Mennonite Voluntary Service program in San Antonio, Texas, besides working at various social service agencies, I got involved in other justice causes:
 - a) The anti-nuclear weapons movement
 - b) The sanctuary movement for refugees fleeing war in Central America
4. My major at Goshen College was in social work, a field of study that's famous for attention to social welfare and social justice
5. In saying all of this, I'm a bit self-conscious of sounding like the Apostle Paul in Philippians 3 when he boasted about his pedigree as a righteous Jew: He was from the tribe of Benjamin, a zealous Pharisee and a persecutor of the church
 - a) I too could have confidence in my pedigree as a "social justice Christian" ... & I know that some of you could, too
 - b) But on 2nd thought, maybe this comparison with Paul in Philippians 3 is doubly appropriate because ...

Paul was then willing to trash his own religious accomplishments for the greater good of what Christ did for him

Text: Matt. 22:35-40; Phil. 3:3-8; Amos 5:10-15, 21-24

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So too I am reminded that I must be willing to regard all my Xian social justice works as worthless garbage for the sake of the infinite value of knowing Jesus Christ my Lord!

II. Let's look a little closer at our Bible texts for today

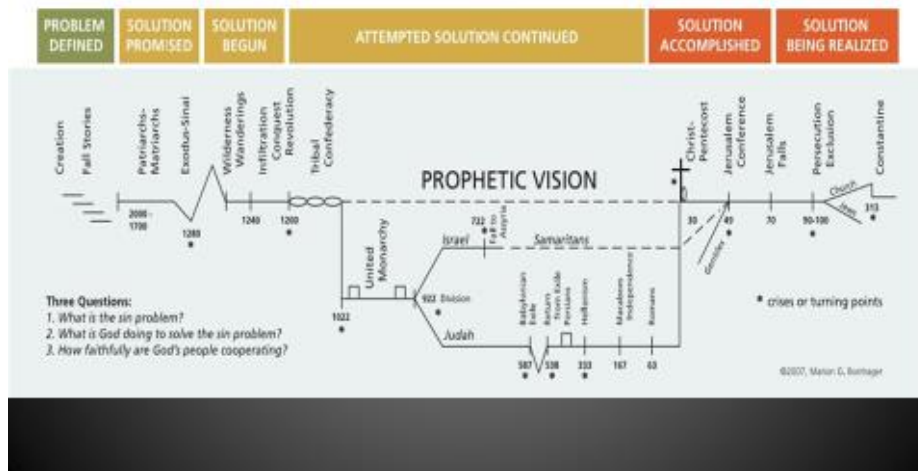
A. As I was growing up in church, one of the most important & fundamental Bible passages for me was what we heard today from Matt. 22 re. the "greatest commandment"

1. Jesus refuses to be limited to a single narrow definition of the greatest commandment in the law
 - a) Instead he quotes 2 commandments (about love of God AND about love of neighbor) ... & he gives them equal authority & importance
 - b) In a simplistic way you could say Jesus was combining the contemplative and the holiness traditions ... tying them together so they couldn't be separated from each other
2. What most speaks to me is that last summarizing verse: *On these 2 commandments hang all the law and the prophets.*
 - a) In Jesus' day, that phrase "the law and the prophets" had become a code language, referring to the whole Bible as they had it at that time ... the Hebrew Bible
 - b) This was a reference to the two largest and most prominent parts of the Hebrew Bible, the parts containing most of the stories and the teachings, about God's chosen people and for God's chosen people
 - c) Jesus was claiming to distill & synthesize the essence of all the Law and the Prophets into 2 commandments of equal weight: love of God, and love of neighbor

B. Rather than assuming what that means, let's break down that message of the Law and the Prophets a little:

1. Hopefully most of you will remember back to 2 years ago during our Year of the Bible emphasis ...
 - a) in our worship services we were walking through the Old Testament sections of God's big salvation story, sometimes called the Heilsgeschichte
 - b) If you want a little visual reminder, I invite you to look in the back of your blue hymnals ... in that back pocket, amid some other copied songs, is a foldout visual timeline of God's salvation story

HEILSGESCHICHTE – SALVATION HISTORY



2. The part of the story called The Law moves from the creation thru the Exodus and the Israelites in the wilderness, up to about 1240 BC

3. The part of the story we call The Prophets continues after that ...

- a) It follows the Israelites' conquest of Canaan thru the prophets acting as God's spokespersons when Israel was ruled by kings
- b) On the timeline you see the Prophetic Vision continuing into the divided northern and southern kingdoms of Israel & Judah, ending in destruction and exile for both

C. You may be wondering, "What do the OT prophets have to do with our 6 Spiritual Streams?"

1. Though Richard Foster's book was written in the 20th C, it gives us some helpful lenses to recognize the spirituality of various Bible characters, in both Old Testament and New Testament

2. In Foster's book, 5 of the 6 biblical characters he uses as prime examples for each stream are New Testament characters:

- a) James the half-brother of Jesus, for Holiness stream
- b) Mary, Jesus' brother, for the Incarnational stream
- c) Apostle Peter, for the Evangelical stream

3. Just now we were looking on the timeline at the beginning of the time of the Prophets

- a) We heard some of the writings today from the prophet Amos, but to understand Amos, we need to recall the prophets who came just before him historically

Text: Matt. 22:35-40; Phil. 3:3-8; Amos 5:10-15, 21-24

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b) These prophets were Elijah and Elisha, and they might call them examples of the Holiness tradition

If you recall, Holiness Stream people care about developing "holy habits" and living a virtuous life

Elijah and Elisha were obsessed with rooting out idolatry, so that their people would worship only Yahweh in Jerusalem

c) Or perhaps Elijah and Elisha were examples of the Evangelical stream,

Remember that Evangelical stream people care very much about the Word of God

The crusade of these 2 prophets against Baal worship was firmly based on the Law of Moses, with commands like, "You shall have no other Gods before me."

4. Now with Amos, I don't have to guess if he's an example of the Social Justice stream:

a) Foster holds up Amos as the prime biblical example of this kind of spirituality

b) Amos was the earliest of several classical prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah and others

III. What Amos & the classical prophets cared about most was not idolatry, **but about the morality and ethics of God's people in daily social life:**

A. Baal worship was not what really concerned Amos:

1. When our text today quoted God as being critical of Israel's worship festivals, their sacrifices & music, Amos was not telling them that festivals and sacrifices and music were all bad

2. Amos was opposing their particular worship practices because all of their worship actions were being overshadowed or nullified by the injustices that those worshiping people were guilty of

B. In other words, how they lived and treated each other, including the poor, the widows, the orphans, & the foreigner, had to be congruent with their worship

1. Israel's elite leaders were proud that they were following all the rules for proper worship and for keeping themselves ritually clean,

a) but God thundered down thru his prophet Amos, "*let justice roll down like mighty waters ... & righteousness like an everflowing stream!*"

b) Amos told them that the injustices of their own society were so blatant that God rejected their carefully planned worship!

2. When I was at seminary, I remember reading a Bible commentator who boiled down this message of Amos into 3 simple

Text: Matt. 22:35-40; Phil. 3:3-8; Amos 5:10-15, 21-24

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words: "Devotion – not devotions" This always stuck with me, even though I can't remember who wrote that.

3. The social justice tradition tells us that all of our "*devotions*" (the pious words and activities we routinely say and do) ... are worthless to God if they are not accompanied by "*devotion*" (Spirit-inspired holistic compassionate action to relieve suffering and work for justice)

C. And what were these injustices that made God so upset in the book of Amos?

1. Social context means everything, for answering that Q ... Amos came along prophesying maybe 30 or 40 years after death of Elisha ... & during that time the kings of Israel changed twice

2. Amos prophesied during the kingdom of Jeroboam II, probably the greatest and most "successful" king that the northern kingdom of Israel ever had

a) During Jeroboam's time Israel's armies enjoyed success and Israel's territory was the largest that it ever enjoyed

b) There was a lot of wealth being generated, at least in the capital Samaria ... This was the most prosperous time ever for the northerners, given that they did not have Solomon's grand temple in Jerusalem

c) But with prosperity, independence and power also came abuse of power, exploitation, and injustice

Poor people were sold into slavery for even small debts

The justice system did not render justice, but it oppressed people even more

Powerful men sexually abused their own daughters-in-law and got away with it

Greedy merchants used crooked weights & measurements to cheat the poor

Ie. the rich got richer at the expense of the poor ... & it was not so-called "sinners" doing this, it was those claiming to belong to Yahweh acting this way!

3. Hmm ... if you look around today, to my view, things are not so different in our so-called "Christian nation", one of the largest and richest nations ever on the face of the earth ...

a) It's our government killing people and supporting oppression around the world

b) It's our tax dollars supporting unjust economic and political systems

c) And sometimes the business and political leaders responsible for today's injustices do claim the name of Christ as they do actions that

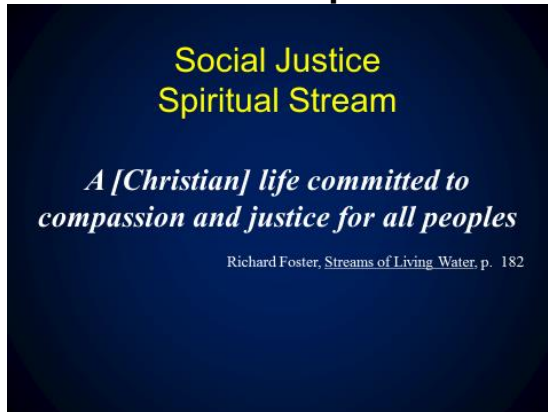
Text: Matt. 22:35-40; Phil. 3:3-8; Amos 5:10-15, 21-24

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Christ would never do. ... Lord, have mercy on all of us!

IV. Let's return to briefly summarize this Social Justice tradition

A. A really short definition would say it's "A [Christian] life committed to compassion and justice for all peoples"



B. To expound on that a bit using Jesus' words in Matt. 22: Social justice spirituality represents the intersection of the 2 sweeping movements of the heart – love of God and love of neighbor



V. Strengths & Perils

A. Strengths

1. *Calls us to live in just social relationships ... & it holds out God's vision of shalom that can soften our cynicism*
2. *Helps make faith & church life real, not theoretical ... it puts names and faces on words like justice or homeless*
3. *Gives us a foundation for ecological concerns ... God's shalom is for all of creation, not just for the humans*
4. *Helps us connect the personal and the social with integrity ... we are part of larger systems ... From within a jail cell in segregated Birmingham Alabama over 50 years ago, MLK wrote, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."*

B. Potential Perils

1. *Social justice becomes an end in itself*
 - a) Danger of caring for social needs while ignoring the condition of the heart
 - b) In midst of this work, we MUST stay rooted in profound spiritual realities ... Danger of associating only with secular activists and losing our spiritual moorings

2. *Strident legalism* (much like peril of Holiness) ... easy to judge others by outward standards

3. *Becoming too closely identified with any particular political agenda*

a) Christian faith has political implications, but dare not be co-opted by any political persuasion or system

b) The church must stand as the conscience of the state, according to God's priorities

c) Wow, how timely is this one? 2 days before a contentious national election, can anyone say "ouch" with me?

While historically some American parties and politicians have been less sensitive to justice issues than others, I cannot as a Christian declare that either of our major political parties is THE PURE SOCIAL JUSTICE PARTY.

Lest anyone think that it's only Christians favoring the Democrats who have to worry about this peril, plenty of Christians who view abortion as a huge justice issue are also tempted to be co-opted by Republicanism

VI. Conclusion

A. Draw to a close with some words on how we can practice the Social Justice Tradition

1. *Open ourselves to the possibility that God may want to use us ...* God often uses ordinary people to do extraordinary things

2. *Become informed as global citizens ...* read about more than just local events ... seek out intelligent analysis, not just the headlines

3. *Become advocates for the powerless & exploited ...* start looking for the invisible and the voiceless and God will show them to you

4. *Write letters to officials in the cause of the poor ...* this can counteract sense of helplessness

5. *Support relief agencies, food pantries, homeless ministries ...* with money or time

6. *Become involved politically ...* though not all Mennonites agree on this, many just outcomes have resulted from careful political engagement

7. *Pray against the evil powers that can dwell within institutional structures ...* Do not overlook praying against the powers of darkness in our world ... evil thrives where people dismiss its existence

B. Final words of caution and encouragement

1. The needs of the world can be so enormous as to paralyze us

Social Justice Spiritual Stream

Final Words

- You can't respond to every injustice or human need ... Are there 1 or 2 causes God IS calling you to?

Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water*

into doing nothing ...

- a) You cannot answer every cry of human need or respond to every instance of injustice.
- b) Even if this is not your strongest spiritual tendency, are there 1 or 2 causes that you would have energy for?

2. You cannot do this on your own!

Social Justice Spiritual Stream

Final Words

- You can't respond to every injustice or human need ... Are there 1 or 2 causes God IS calling you to?
- You cannot do this on your own!
"Trust in the Lord with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding" Prov. 3:5

- a) You need the contemplative tradition to keep you close to the heart of Jesus, so that you don't burn out.
- b) You also need the evangelical tradition to remind you of people's spiritual as well as material needs.

C. Will you pray with me ... *"God of the poor, friend of the weak, give us compassion we pray. Melt our cold hearts. Let tears fall like rain. Come, change our love from a spark to a flame."*

(Graham Kendrick refrain, "Beauty for Brokenness", Sing the Story #115)