

Collective Responsibility

“I, the Lord, have called you for the victory of justice, I have grasped you by the hand; I formed you, and set you as ...a light for the nations ...” (Isaiah 42:6)

In 1925 Mahatma Gandhi, a Hindu, one of the most respected spiritual and political leaders of the 20th century, compiled a list of social conditions he considered most spiritually damaging. Entitled the “Seven Deadly Social Sins,” it includes: *Wealth without work; Politics without principle; Commerce without morality; Pleasure without conscience; Education without character; Science without humanity; and Worship without sacrifice.* The Hebrew prophets and Jesus himself would surely have approved of Gandhi’s list, which, arguably, is even more relevant today than when it was compiled more than three-quarters of a century ago.

In last Sunday’s gospel reading, Jesus is a baby when the three Magi arrive to pay him homage. In today’s reading, also from **Matthew**, we encounter the adult Jesus, now age 30 or so, in the Jordan River as the heavens open, the Spirit descends and a heavenly voice intones “*You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.*” His public ministry about to begin, Jesus is being commissioned for his life of service to others and the pursuit of justice. The account echoes the words of **Isaiah** written 700 years earlier: “*Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one with whom I am pleased, upon whom I have put my spirit; he shall bring forth justice to the nations...*” And from today’s first reading: “*I, the Lord, have called you for a victory of justice. I have grasped you by the hand. I formed you and set you as ...a light for the nations...*”

The same Spirit, as we all know, descends at our own baptism, commissioning us for ministry, a life of service and pursuing justice. Through baptism, we too become part of God’s plan for fixing our broken world. In the “Dogmatic Constitution of the Church” entitled *Lumen Gentium*, Latin for “Light for the Nations,” promulgated by Vatican Council II

in 1964, you, the laity, are challenged to live your baptism by sanctifying “the places where you live and work and have your being.” The same challenge, obviously also applies to us clergy. Together, we, laity and clergy, the “people of God,” are called to live the Jesus we believe in by performing acts of goodness and kindness, helping to make our corner of the world a better place to live in.

Let’s review what happens at baptism. You and I become children of God. We are freed from original sin; indwelt by the Holy Spirit; welcomed into God’s holy people; made temples of God’s glory; rescued from the kingdom of darkness; made sharers in God’s divine life; enlightened by Christ; and empowered for a life of love and service.

Baptism can be compared to plugging a lamp into an electrical source. Once the lamp is plugged into the source, it draws power from it and begins to glow. Something like that happens in baptism. We are plugged into Christ, metaphorically speaking, and begin to draw life and inspiration from him, particularly when we encounter the neediest and most vulnerable among us.

Tikkun olam is a Hebrew phrase that means “repairing” or “perfecting” the world. Originating in the Old Testament prophetic tradition, the phrase signifies that Jews, our ancestors in faith, are responsible not only for creating a model community among themselves, but also for the welfare of the community at large. In short, we, like Jesus, as heirs of that prophetic tradition and of his command to love God and love neighbor, are *collectively responsible* for one another. And, Scripture reminds us, that faith without works, without *acts* of goodness and kindness, just doesn’t measure up. What we believe, in other words, must become the “fruit” of what we do. In Gandhi’s words, “*We must become the change we want to see.*”

In Rochester, 38% of children under 12 live in poverty, making it the 11th worst city for child poverty in the U.S. An incredible 42 percent of American children live in low-income homes and about 20 percent live in poverty. The total number of children in the United States living in poverty has risen 33 percent since 2000. Want to know where the U.S. ranks among the 24 wealthiest countries in the world? Dead last! A national disgrace, wouldn't you say? Not to mention the rotten "fruit" of at least three of Gandhi's "Seven Deadly Social Sins," namely-- *Commerce without morality; Politics without principle; and Worship without sacrifice.*

Unfortunately, the reaction to U.S. child poverty for some is still entangled in class and race, particularly for those among us who self-righteously proclaim no more handouts to lazy people, welfare cheats, and illegal immigrants who make poor choices and can't learn to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. This may be a lingering remnant of what I call...the "Ebenezer Scrooge *pre*-Christmas Eve redemption syndrome." You know the cold-hearted, tight-fisted and greedy Charles Dickens' character who, when asked what he would do about the poor in 19th century England, retorts: "*Are there no workhouses; are there no prisons?*" The truth is that neither the problem of child poverty nor its solution is that simple.

Yes, the percentage of blacks, Hispanics and native Americans living in low-income homes is about twice that of whites and Asians, which clearly raises unpleasant cultural questions that require addressing. But that's not the whole story because despite the imbalance, white children are still the largest group of low-income children.

Furthermore, the British may have created a road map for us, their American cousins, that dramatically reduces child poverty while not relying solely on handouts. No doubt the *redeemed*, post Christmas Eve, Ebenezer Scrooge, and certainly the Hebrew prophets and Jesus himself, would be pleased. A report released last month by Jane Waldfogel of Columbia

University, my alma mater, and the London School of Economics paints a fascinating portrait of how smart policies and targeted investments in Britain have produced impressive results.

In 1994, about 30 percent of British children were below that country's poverty threshold. Fifteen years later, the number has fallen to 12 percent. How did the British do it? That's what our politicians and policy makers need to study and learn from... without rancor and demagoguery, without pandering to ideological fringe groups on the right or left, and without appealing to our baser instincts.* The British example shows that child poverty is not an intractable problem, *if* we can rise above the impulse to punish parents and focus, instead, on protecting *innocent* children. In other words, if we can practice commerce *with* morality: politics *with* principle; and worship *with* sacrifice.

*As an aside, yesterday's shooting rampage in Tucson, Arizona where six people were killed, including a chief federal court judge, and a congresswoman seriously wounded along with 13 others, appears to be work of a mentally ill assailant motivated by vitriolic political rhetoric that appealed to his baser instincts.

During World War II a little village in Germany was virtually wiped out by allied bombing raids. Among the casualties was the parish church. The figure of Christ in a wayside shrine beside the church was left without arms and legs. After the war the people set about restoring the church but the parish priest insisted that there be no change in the wayside shrine. He erected a sign beneath the cross which read: "Now I have no arms and no feet. From now on you will be my arms and feet to bring healing to a broken world."

So if we really want our broken world fixed, we have to do more than talk about it or even pray for it. We have roll up our sleeves and start fixing it ourselves ... which, obviously, includes holding our leaders accountable, especially the ones more inclined to be part of the problem than the solution.

Anthony J. Sciolino

Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7; Acts 10:34-38; Matthew 3:13-17.

Baptism of the Lord. January 9, 2011. (Cycle A)