

Task Force on Theology of Social Justice Advocacy

Meeting Agenda

Friday, March 8, 11am PST / 2pm EST

Present: Sarah Lawton, Susanne Watson Epting, Brant Lee, Guy Leemhuis, Dora Mbuwayesango, Reuben Varghese, Ruth Frey, Jose Rodriguez-Sanjuro, Lallie Lloyd

1. Lallie offered opening prayer
2. Housekeeping:
 - a. Guy will join Sarah in getting trained in using the Basecamp app
3. Sharing / Discussion:
 - a. Reuben Varghese started us off with thoughtful comments and observations about social justice advocacy. He graciously agreed to share his notes, which are attached.
 - b. Discussion followed.
 - i. Guy:
 1. Christian compassion isn't only or always about being kind. It includes a community/shared dimension. How do we approach a person who is behaving badly?
 - ii. Sarah:
 1. Tension between love and speaking truth to the principalities and power begins with relationships.
 2. Her congregation has authority when it goes to city council to address gentrification because about one third of them are unhoused, or transitionally housed, so they aren't speaking for 'them', but they are among the people being harmed; they are the people being harmed. "Our people" are being hurt by evictions
 3. Justice work is the work of love because these are our people
 4. Who is the "we" of the Episcopal Church? Why do we assume "we" are connected to wealth and power?
 5. Love means acts of mercy and calling out domination systems

6. Frances Perkins (FDR's labor secretary) "Mother of the New Deal" was an Episcopalian and active in labor, socialist, and settlement movements of her day.

iii. Susanne

1. Reclaim our own prophetic tradition
2. Move beyond the dualism of democrat/republican. "political" can go much deeper than that.
3. We have roots in the social gospel – social because its who we are collectively

iv. Lallie

1. Preferential option for the poor – we'll know when we've arrived at justice because the most vulnerable will say things are fair
2. Keep the most vulnerable (children) at the center – that's where Jesus put them
3. Wants a robust theology of social justice advocacy so we can preach and teach anti-racism (for example) without apology for being 'political'

v. Dora

1. Definition of justice in the Hebrew Bible comes from the negative definition of injustice: when the powerless are exploited and oppressed.
2. What theology calls us to speak out on behalf of the exploited? When you identify an injustice, why should you speak out?
3. Together we are made in the image of God, as a community – not an individual characteristic or quality
4. Each of us is a brick in the temple of God (not each is the temple of God). So, the whole building is not secure if a brick is missing or weak.
5. Why should the church advocate for justice?

vi. Ruth:

1. Understand injustice as individual or collective?

2. Jesus was 'political' because he spoke out / named what was in front of everyone.
4. For our April meeting:
 - a. Dora will offer opening and closing prayer
 - b. Reuben will scribe and
 - c. Brant will share his reflections on the theology of social justice advocacy
5. Lallie closed us in prayer.

Justice Notes - Reuben Varghese 3/7/19

- Baptismal covenant - strive for justice. In our baptismal covenant, the term we is rarely used. I will strive for justice. Yet in the marriage sacrament, we proclaim our collective willingness to support the marriage. It is an observation which makes me wonder what we are to do? Is striving for justice really an I activity? When do we strive for justice?
- Inequities in health – 27 years of difference in life expectancy in the DC area, the fallout of the election in 2016, the burdens of racial, gender and sexual orientation bias and prejudice I have witnessed, and trips to Israel and Palestine have continued to reinforce my assessment about human domination systems - such as is discussed in the Last Week – political, economic and religious portions of these domination systems.
- What I struggle with is that we seem to run away from what is “right,” in favor of relationship alone. The phrase is right relationship - in my estimation. We seem to never create space in our church lives, in our community lives to discuss what Jesus considered to be right or rather what he considered to be wrong. And our role in bringing what is right to reality through our relationships with each other and our neighbors.
- I read becoming beloved community with interest - eagerly waiting for what it would reveal - the aha moment, the eureka moment ... the ark of the covenant moment. And I was disappointed at first. What it recommended was a series of activities, inventories it seemed. However, I kept coming back to the document and realized that the process that the group went through was in fact the real process and outcome we need to create in our churches - wherever two or more are gathered. They describe a group discernment process - that was guided by posing questions to get to better understanding among participants.
- I was struck by going to the diocese of Jerusalem and seeing how it has to still deal with the needs of the people in a way that our churches in the US no longer seem to play a role in – that is different from having to deal with it. We refer people to the secular government to handle things and wring our hands when that system is not

able to handle the results of the domination system. What are we doing to change the domination system? Our church is historically a beneficiary of the domination systems in place – what can we do to alter the impact of these domination systems on the vulnerable?

- Being with vs working for vs. working with ... it is important to be with ... Jesus did it for 30 years. Yet, we need to also work for and work with. Because the way Jesus did it, he lived it first hand. We are not doing that. And we need to work for and with as well as to be with ... that is the essence of our work for Christ. All three aspects are important and the church needs to lead us in this.
- Yet, we in the episcopal church writ large are the beneficiaries of the domination system vs. those who are burdened.
- And yet we seem ill prepared to deal with it. And there is considerable work in the secular world that talks about equity – which is about justice and fairness. Why aren't we using that material and working with our secular brethren?
- The language of equity - racial equity is a place to start - which talks about who benefits, who is burdened and how do we know - is a place for us as a church to start.
- It may seem political - and yes it is political. However, the justice which Jesus talked about called out the fact that human domination systems were creating the problems affecting the vulnerable - the poor, the widowed, and orphaned among them. Calling that out is not a political statement - though the solutions are political in that it requires society to come together.
- We do not confront authorities - we do not confront our domination system that we typically benefit from. For example, in our diocese, are we talking about gentrification? And the fact that it displaces people who are historically poor who grew up in these neighborhoods?
- It is in that sense we need to understand the term “social justice” ... we need to be careful how we use modifiers - especially if we do not define them well and share those definitions. Personally I do not believe we need to modify the term justice - fairness in how we operate as a people to the greatest and least among us is part of justice. When I have read about how justice is often defined in Hebrew - it seems to

be one of wholeness. God created us and our world to be whole - humans have altered the structure by and large to make somethings more whole and others less whole.

- Social - what we as a people in relationship with each other, in society, that is the justice I believe we are talking about. And we need to state it and foster discussions and dialogue. We must help our people discern this in a way that is difficult and yet do-able if we are intentional and loving. We cannot waver about what is right - what Jesus would say is right ... and do what is in our collective power to bring wholeness to all people, not just some.
- An economist - Kate Raworth - has argued that our obsession with growth is what is not sustainable. Growth allows for averages - it hides that not all are doing well. It allows us to ignore the disparities in our society because averages make our society look better. Rather, our economies should be focused on thriving - what allows our populations to thrive - all populations not just some to thrive. Likewise, the church, our church, should be focusing on if people, populations are thriving collectively. In that sense, thriving allows everyone to be whole or as whole together vs. growth which allows some to be more whole than others. Our job, our collective ministry is to bring the kingdom of God to reality here on earth. That kingdom is based on justice, on wholeness. That is what we need to focus on ... and what I would argue is
- The second half of life ... from Richard Rohr. Are we preparing our congregations for the second half of life. Where we strive for justice ... collectively. The second half of life is not just for individuals. What are we doing collectively as a church to help people realize they must act together to make justice a reality, the second half of life in a Christian community.
- As they ask in the last week, Which procession are we in? which procession do we want to be in? I want the church to be in the procession which confronts the domination system, which fights for justice in a nonviolent manner.