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“Unsung Heroes of the Promotion of Social Righteousness”

Based on Exodus 1:8-2:10 and Great Ends of the Church

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As today’s powerful, beautiful, heart-wrenching story begins, generations have passed since Joseph and his favorable standing with the Pharaoh at the time. The descendents of Joseph and his brothers have multiplied and the current Pharaoh becomes worried that the Israelites will cause trouble for the Egyptians so he decides to “deal shrewdly” with them by enslaving them. But the scripture tells us, “the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites.” So Pharaoh comes up with a new, even more horrifying plan than simply enslaving the Israelites. He tells the midwives, “When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.” But the midwives refuse to do this heinous crime. And did you notice? The midwives have names. The midwives are so important, their stand for social righteous so significant, that we are told their names: Shiprah and Puah. It’s an uncommon distinction among women in the Bible. As the story continues, we do not learn the name of Moses’ mother. We do not learn the name of Pharaoh’s daughter. We’re not even sure of Moses’ sister’s name though we presume her to be Miriam, a sister of Moses who plays a critical role later in the story. But for now, the only women to be named in this story are the very courageous midwives who risk everything by refusing to do the evil Pharaoh tells them to do.

When Pharaoh discovers that the midwives have not been destroying the baby boys as they were instructed and demands to know their explanation, they tell him, that the Hebrew women are so strong, they have the babies so quickly that the babies are born before the midwives get there. And Pharaoh’s prejudice against the Israelites is so intense that he believes the Shiprah and Puah; he believes that the Hebrew women give birth quickly and easily like livestock. Unfortunately, Shiprah and Puah’s brave disobedience—for which God rewards them—only delays the inevitable.

Pharaoh continues his campaign against the Hebrew baby boys. And when Moses is born, his mother keeps him well-hidden as long as possible. But by the time he is three months old, she knows she needs to do something. Moses’ mom has a good head on her shoulders. She devises a plan, a plan that presumably no one else has come up with: she makes a basket raft to send him down the river. Can you imagine having to make that decision? Being in a situation where the only chance for your baby’s survival is to put him in a basket and send him down a river to an unknown, but likely dangerous end. But she takes a stand for social righteousness to save her son.

And Moses’ sister follows the basket along the river to see what happens. When Pharaoh’s daughter has it plucked out of the reeds where it got caught up, she knows the baby is a Hebrew. She knows she should turn him over to meet the fate of the Hebrew boys. Yet, she cannot bear to see any harm come to the precious baby boy. So she, too, takes a stand for social righteousness and decides to take the baby as her own. And Moses’ sister, perhaps Miriam, a pretty smart young lady, offers to recruit a wet nurse for the baby. Did Pharaoh’s daughter know that the woman she was paying to nurse her new son was indeed the boy’s actual mother? One would think that the possibility would occur to her. But again, taking a stand for social righteousness, she gives the

woman the opportunity to spend at least a little more time with her son and indeed, even offers to pay her to do so. Of course, the day would come when Moses' biological mother would have to turn him over to his adoptive mother—again, an unfathomable situation for most of us to even imagine—but at least she knew that he would be safe and want for nothing. At least, no material good.

In today's passage we find the summary of the Exodus story, and indeed, the summary of the entire Bible and indeed God's very relationship with us: "The oppressive hand of Pharaoh may be strong, but the redemptive hand of God is stronger still"¹ In this story, and indeed throughout the Bible, we see that God has a special fondness for the underdog, for the oppressed, for the poor. In this story, and throughout the Bible we find, as one pastor describes, that "God is particularly committed to those who are caught in poverty because they are denied the fullness of life. God's intention for humankind is that justice be planted among the people of the earth and take root and flourish, so that people everywhere might know life in all its fullness."² The Hebrews were not being allowed to know life in all its fullness. Far from it. The baby boys weren't being allowed to know life at all. So God intervened. God worked through these women: Shiprah and Puah the midwives, Moses' mother and sister and finally through Pharaoh's own daughter, and as we know God will later use the adult Moses, to bend the arc of history toward justice, toward social righteousness.

Yesterday I heard this essay, by Weekend Edition host Jacki Lyden³:

I've been thinking, lately, in light of the dim economic news, about the way we view the truly poor.

The first person who comes to mind is my grandmother. I can see her at her kitchen sink, re-using the wax paper; running to turn out a light; skinning squirrels, deer and rabbits her husband shot.

Mabel was poor by any means you measure — alcoholic father, fourth-grade education, no job. She owned nothing until her second widowhood, when she got a small house at age 70.

Americans look at the poor — when we look — from atop a mountain of data. The U.S. Census Bureau has the numbers. One in six Americans is being served by at least one program related to poverty. More than 43 million people live in poverty. One in seven receives food stamps.

We claim that we believe in compassionate conservatism, but we are not compassionate about the poor, says Sheldon Danziger, a public policy professor at the University of Michigan. We regard being poor in a singular, American way: failures in the accounting department of personal responsibility. America is a place where people want to believe they rise through their own efforts; an American who loses a job is not a day away from starvation. The truth is, that's because of those government programs. It's a lot better to be laid off in 2011 than in 1939.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, et al, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV—Year A*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 454.

² Timothy Hart-Anderson, "Plain Talk from Jesus on Poverty and Wealth," in *Proclaiming the Great Ends of the Church*, Joseph Small, ed. (Louisville, Kentucky: Geneva Press, 2010), 116.

³ Jacki Lyden, "The Poor Lack Personal Responsibility? That's Rich." *Weekend Edition*, NPR, August 20, 2011. <http://www.npr.org/2011/08/20/139815303/the-poor-lack-personal-responsibility-thats-rich>

But personal responsibility can't cover every moment of chance that besets human life. It can't alone make you rich or save you from a layoff.

My grandmother kept strict accounts, which I have right here, in a red-and-black notebook called, "Cash." Income \$225.80 — monthly Social Security — \$35 more from the Veterans Administration. She rented out her spare room.

I regret to say that sometimes, my grandmother's old clothes and peasant ways embarrassed me. I'm not alone. We don't want the poor to congregate in our parks or spoil public places — too often, we don't even want to see them. Across the country, laws to criminalize poverty and contain the homeless have risen in dozens of cities.

Perhaps our perceptions will necessarily change. I'm glad my grandmother survived on squirrel — but I don't want anyone else to have to.

God's preference for the poor, for the oppressed. Some people aren't comfortable with the idea that God has a special fondness for the poor. Mostly, those who don't like it happen to be those who are not poor themselves. No one likes to think that God has a special fondness for a group in which they are not included especially if we think that they are in that circumstance due to their own personal failure. But as Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez explains, "God has preferential love for the poor not because they are necessarily better than others, morally or religiously, but simply because they are poor and living in an inhuman situation that is contrary to God's will."⁴ Feeling bad about God's preference for the poor is kind of like feeling bad that people with disabilities get prime parking spots. It would be better not to have the disability. Likewise, there's nothing romantic, nice or beautiful about being poor. There's nothing there to envy. God's love for the poor, God's preference for the poor is about God's will for them, and for all of us, to live life in all its fullness. God's will for them, and for all of us, is the promotion of social righteousness. Which brings us to the Great Ends of the Church.

Believe it or not, little is known about who wrote the six Great Ends of the Church or how they came into being. But we do know quite a bit about the Presbyterian Church in the era in which they were written, over a hundred years ago. Scholar Cynthia Rigby's findings might come as a surprise that the staunch, strict, church leaders of that time were actively "engaged in a variety of social issues: They worked to remedy the dehumanizing impact of the slave trade; they advocated for women's suffrage; they fought for the basic rights of the worker. They believed that drinking alcohol was vile and immoral [not because they were party-poopers and killjoys as many of us would suspect but] because [alcohol] led to domestic violence, loss of employment, child neglect, unhealthiness, and poverty. All in all, those who upheld social righteousness were convinced that Christian believers can and should take political actions that advance the coming of the kingdom of God to earth as it is in heaven."⁵

This week in our Great Ends of the Church class, some were surprised to learn that John Calvin—known as the "Father of Presbyterianism" with a reputation for being a bit of a hard...liner—John Calvin, actually had great compassion for those in need and great passion for the promotion of social righteousness. In fact, as we learned, "Calvin labored tirelessly for a just society. Under Calvin's leadership, the church in Geneva provided refugee relief and resettlement, sought jobs for the unemployed, encouraged public education, and worked to provide health care

⁴ Gustavo Gutiérrez "Song and Deliverance," in *Voices from the Margins* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991).

⁵ Cynthia L. Rigby, *Promotion of Social Righteousness*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Witherspoon Press, 2010), 3.

for all. As the leader of the Genevan church, Calvin spoke out vigorously against unfair business practices and public policies that ignored the needs of the poor. Nothing that contributed to the welfare of the city and all its residents seemed insignificant: Calvin even expressed deep interest in providing a more economical cooking stove for the poor and prodded the municipal council to construct a sanitary sewer system throughout the city.”⁶ No matter pertaining to social righteousness and justice was too large or too insignificant for Calvin’s attention. From sewer system to cooking stoves, it all mattered because it all mattered for the well-being of the children of God. Because it all mattered to God.

And that brings us to another important aspect of the promotion for social righteousness. It’s not about us. It’s not, as some have inadvertently slipped and said this week, “promotion of self-righteousness.” Quite the opposite. It’s not about us at all. As Rigby emphasizes time and again in her book on the this Great End, “While good arguments for working for a just society are often founded in active recognition of basic human rights and dignity, the church claims a more fundamental license for its work. It is what God wills. ‘Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream’ (Amos 5:24).”⁷ God is the basis for promotion of social righteousness, not us.

The first five great ends of the church—proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of human kind, the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God, maintenance of Divine worship, preservation of the truth and perhaps this one, promotion of social righteousness most of all—are essential components for the last: exhibition of the kingdom of God to the world. Think about it. Imagine the kingdom of God when it breaks through into our reality in all its fullness and glory. Imagine what it will look like. What it will be like. Will there be homelessness? Will there be oppression? Will there be hunger and malnourishment? Will there be violence? How will we partner with God to make God’s vision of the fullness of the Kingdom of God a reality?

In a devotion based on this story from Exodus, Presbyterian pastor Terry Hamilton-Poore observed that the midwives “Shiprah and Puah didn’t have to become something they weren’t in order to make a difference. They simply went about their daily work with integrity and refused to allow that work to be used for evil. And that’s all that’s required of us, as well. When we live and work with integrity and courage, we too erode the powers of oppression and lay the groundwork for a revolution of goodness.”⁸

In preparing for this sermon, I read stories of churches doing big amazing things in the name of promotion of social righteousness: hosting rotating homeless shelters, taking in refugees of human trafficking, starting neighborhood Bible studies with participants from all walks of life from business executives to homeless recovering drug addicts. It’s easy to hear these stories and think, “wow... that stuff is amazing. I wish this church could do something that remarkable...” But we do. We do *remarkable* things: Fish, Community House on Broadway and the many impromptu mission projects we take on throughout the year just to name a few. Not to mention our history of taking a stand for social righteousness like when the Arian nation “church” tried to come to town. It’s not necessary for our promotion of social righteousness to be big and flashy or even noticed by anyone other than those receiving it. All that matters is that we make it a priority, as we have, and that we keep making it a priority, as we will.

⁶ Frank T. Hainer and Joseph D. Small, *Short-Term Study Course for Adults Revised Edition*, (Louisville, KY: Witherspoon Press, 2003), 22.

⁷ Cynthia L. Rigby, *Promotion of Social Righteousness*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Witherspoon Press, 2010), 13.

⁸ Terry J. Hamilton-Poore, “Faith Empowers Community” in *Disciplines: A Book of Daily Devotions 2011*, (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2010), 239.