

# Do justice and love mercy!

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Edward M. Sunderland, Director of Community Ministry,  
at the nine o'clock service, September 26, 2010: The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost.*

*Based on Amos 6:1a, 4-7 and Luke 16:19-31.*

**T**his week I have been thinking a lot about the communication strategy for Community Ministry. Trying to plot out how much and how to communicate most effectively the exciting opportunities and challenges we face as we serve others. I consulted my colleagues here at St. Bartholomew's. I set up time to talk with others in the nonprofit world who communicate well using Facebook and Twitter regularly. But most of all I spent time researching. All right, to be honest I was surfing the internet. I know what some of you are thinking—procrastination! I will admit that I have never taken an examination or preached a sermon for that matter with my bed unmade but I needed to see examples of effective communication. In the course of my research I read many blogs, Facebook pages, tweets and websites. While I was procrastinating I discovered an important error in the Catechism found in the Book of Common Prayer. The Catechism asks, "What response did God require from the chosen people? The answer refers to the book of Micah and states "God required the chosen people to love justice, to do mercy, and to walk humbly with their God." That is **not** what Scripture says. The prophet Micah actually states that the Lord requires the chosen people "to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with their God." (Micah 6:8) Do justice and love mercy, not do mercy and love justice. This is an important distinction.

As a priest who is also a social worker this distinction reminds me of the two different nineteenth century movements, which in the twentieth century gave rise to the profession of social work. The Charity Service Organizations and their Friendly Visitors tried to impose the beliefs, values, and practices of the upper

classes, such as Social Darwinism, conservative economics, and even hand-washing upon the chronically poor whom they visited. Friendly Visitors loved justice and did mercy. The second nineteenth century movement was the Settlement House movement. Settlement House workers, on the other hand, tried to address the problems of the working poor and immigrants by addressing the causes of poverty rather than trying to change the behaviors and values of the poor. Settlement House workers did not visit the poor but they lived among them. They did justice and loved mercy. I have always felt more kinship with the Settlement House workers. For you see, people who love justice and do mercy do charity visit the poor. They try to do good things for those less fortunate than themselves. They try to be merciful. But when people do justice and love mercy they realize that the poor are not the problem; the system is the problem. They do justice by fighting for a more equitable system and they love mercy because we all contribute to the unjust system in one way or another.

Soon after getting my social work degree I came to New York to work to help improve the care of the dying. Since then I have worked in hospitals, and my most recent work was among street homeless men and women as the Clinical Coordinator for the Street to Home program of Common Ground. In that role it was my work to walk the streets of Midtown and encourage homeless people to seek housing. It was an amazing job. Sometimes my team and I were successful and people hardened by years of indifference, bureaucracy, and failure overcame despair and trusted us enough to tell their stories one more time and were able to be housed. Other times with other people we just kept trying.

People always thought that as a priest and a social worker who worked with street homeless I was doing good work. But actually I was not. Paul Farmer, a doctor and medical anthropologist who works for social justice providing health care in rural Haiti, talks about his own work not as doing good but rather undoing bad things that have happened to people. This is an important distinction. If he were a social worker he would have been a Settlement House worker, not a Friendly Visitor. This distinction has sustained me through long, hard and at times unproductive work of doing justice. Last Sunday in Community Ministry at the Breakfast Program a volunteer brought in two bags of pants for our guests. Pants she had bought with her own money as she often does. She handed them to one guest who handed them to another guest who handed them to someone else who handed them on and so on and so forth. When the volunteer returned from parking the car, the pants were nowhere to be found. Rather than wonder what had happened, and who had stolen the pants we had to admit that we had not undone the bad quickly enough and that it was time to move on.

Lazarus, the poor man from this morning's Gospel story, could have been my client. The Gospel is not concerned with why Lazarus was lying on the street. Was he mentally ill, did he have a substance abuse problem, cognitive impairment, or was he an undocumented immigrant? The gospel does not tell us. It merely

says he was poor and hungry. He had been on the street for a long time. Some people who have been on the street for a long time develop sores caused by poor nutrition and lying on the same spot too long, which will cause skin breakdown. Like bed sores these sores can be very painful, smell terrible, and will if untreated become infected and cause death. This is one of the many reasons homeless New Yorkers live an average of 25 years less than housed New Yorkers. This is why I do not believe that we should encourage people to live on the street by giving them handouts of food and money. We may think we are good people when we do that but we are not. We contribute to homelessness as we encourage people to continue living on the street. Jesus taught that only God is good. And God will be merciful. In the meantime we need to fight for justice. We need to get them food and housing. Not just any food but food that is nutritious and housing adequate to their needs. Not a church step or street corner but a home where they can feel safe. It is not enough to have mercy on people by giving them handouts. Hungry people must be fed. Homeless people need housing. We need to help them to get housing and not let them lie at our gate. This is the work of Justice. And I believe that when we do justice and love mercy we will be walking humbly with our God. *Amen.*

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