

Justice in the World: Getting the Story and the Practices Right Tex Sample

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[Note: This is a transcription of Tex's presentation at the 2003 Kairos CoMotion celebration, November 1, 2003. His presentation included PowerPoint visuals. Of necessity this is a truncated version of his presence. We highly recommend your reading his books and seeing him in person when you next have the opportunity. You can visit Tex online at www.texsample.com.]

Let me set the historical story straight about my name. My father named me Tex. He named me after an African American woman who was named Texanna Gillham.

She was born in slavery in the 1860s, I think. When my dad was born in 1904 his mother's milk was not good. In the South in those years when a white mother's milk was not good, African American women would suckle the child. So Texanna Gillham wet-nursed my dad. It was no moment of great social justice, but I think my father genuinely loved Texanna Gillham within the constraints of that kind of world. He therefore intended to name his first child Texanna. I came along with the wrong plumbing. And my dad just changed it to Tex. Quite frankly; having been professionally involved with the United Methodist Church for now almost fifty years, I wish my father had just left it Texanna. Can you imagine how tough I would have been? I think I might have been tough enough to deal with the United Methodist Church. But that's truly how I got the name.

This is an intimidating moment. Can you imagine talking last, after the superb presentations we've had? As Minnie Pearl says, I'm just proud to be here. Joretta, Emilie, Minerva ... My! My! My! My! and Thank you!

I always try to get the church more engaged with image, sound, light, move, dance and here is Regina with the marvelous work she's done. The music, the concerts, Wow! The dance, the worship, the special emphases last night. Those are so important, not just to us, to the world. The conversation groups, the way you folks keep putting us on the spot. It's been a joy to be here. I am in your debt. Thank you, very much.

Putting God's Story in the Wrong Story

Stan Hauerwas tells the story of his cousin, Billy Dick. He says, "You know Billy is a Texan because only a Texan would have a name, Billy Dick. I don't think that's quite right. I think that if Billy Dick were a Texan he would be called, Billy Bob Dick.

But, nevertheless, Billy is six years old and he's in a church just outside of Dallas, Texas.

His Sunday School teacher is teaching the children about the crucifixion. Now Billy's been going to church since his earliest years, but at the mature age of six he begins to get in touch with the fact that the crucifixion was one terrible, agonizing time. And when he begins to hear that for the first time he shoots his hand into the air trying to get the teacher's attention. She doesn't recognize him. She's continuing to work on the lesson. So Billy starts waving at her, all to no avail. And then he starts this semaphore gesture. That doesn't work. Finally he starts jumping up and down in the back row. And finally, finally, she recognizes Billy and he shouts it, "If Roy Rogers had been there, those SOB's could never have done it!"

Now, I don't want to jump up and down on a six-year old kid, but I think Billy made the mistake Christians are ever and again prone to make. The mistake is taking God's story and putting it in somebody else's story. We have a Lord in Christ, who, according to the Scripture, could have called in legions of angels to save him, but did not. And Billy wants to call in Roy Rogers.

Now, compared to some more recent stars, I like Roy Rogers. Actually I like Gene Autrey more. I liked them both. They shot the gun out of the bandit's hand. They did not grind them up in some huge earth moving machinery or something that works on cars and then drop them into a vat of acid which is then absorbed into some planetary vehicle taking them into outer space, ... the kind of shows that Clint Eastwood does or the Governor of California. I like Roy.

But notice the tendency to take God's story and stick it in another story. One of the things I'm convinced of is that if we're going to do ministry in the world we really must get our stories right. This is just key. We neglect the story of ancient Israel at our peril. There is no contradiction any greater than an anti-Semitic Christian. I hasten to say that does not mean one necessarily sides with the current state of Israel on all social issues or issues of the Middle East.

God's Story

The story of ancient Israel is also our story. It is a story of exodus and promise, a story of exile and return, a story of temple and synagogue, a story of falling away from the faith and finding one's self again and again and again in covenant with the Holy God.

It's also the story of Jesus. Our story is the story of the Savior, of Christ. It is a story that encompasses his life and his teaching. It is a story of his defeat of the principalities and powers on the cross. I don't know why we hear so much about the blood of Christ as substitutionary atonement. There may be things in that worth preserving, but that's not my point. How little we hear about the cross as God's victory over the principalities and powers. My hunch is that the reason why we hear so little about it is that we don't want to take on, as a culture, those principalities and powers that have been finally, in Christ, defeated.

It's also the story of the resurrection - "what it means to live into the resurrection story,

and that victory and that hope of the world,” as one of you put it. It’s the story of the Holy Spirit and the story of the Church birthed by the Spirit - given life, breath, flame by the Spirit. Those things have come to mean a great deal to me in terms of my life in the Church. I can get on my church-bash kick about as easily as anybody. And yet, I don’t know about you, but I cannot account for my life apart from the Church. I just cannot.

Getting Our Story Inside God’s Story

I was raised in a situation that was not altogether righteous. When I was in the fifth grade at First Methodist Church in Brookhaven, Mississippi my Sunday School teacher was a man named Mr. Archon [that’s not his real name, it’s the Greek word for “ruler]. He was the only legitimate millionaire in our town. He had that, I didn’t know what it meant, but somebody told me he had, savoir-faire. He never told anybody what to do, he asked people and they would break their necks to do it. He just had an atmosphere, a style, that you wanted to please him. He had charisma and he had an education. And, it seems, about once a month, maybe more often, he would teach us that colored people were not fully human, that they were actually condemned by God and Scripture, and we needed to maintain segregation, always - that to fail to do so was to violate our responsibilities as Southerners, more importantly, as Mississippians, and as Christians. I was taught that actively in a Sunday School class for over a year.

It just so happened that in that church there was a woman named Miss Hattie Bowie. Now, you can’t say Miss Bowie. You can’t say Miss Hattie. You dare not say Hattie. You say Miss Hattie Bowie, the whole nine yards, or it doesn’t work. She had been a missionary in Korea for about 30 years, from 1909 to 1939 when the Japanese sent the missionaries out of the country and sent the American missionaries home. So she came back to Brookhaven, as an older woman, retired on a missionary pension, and took up residence in our church.

I don’t know how she did it. I don’t think she could have survived a direct confrontation with Mr. Archon. I never remember her taking him on publicly. I never witnessed a direct confrontation ... but it seemed like every time he taught that wretched racist stuff, somehow Miss Hattie Bowie got it across to us with something I think must have been a whisper and yet, today, seems like thunder. It was something like this, “[Whispered] It isn’t true. It isn’t true.”

She would take us to her house and show us these dolls from Korea and these artifacts and this wonderful, wonderful intricate painting and she taught us to sing, “Jesus loves all the children, all the children of the world.” And everybody knows the musicians whip the teachers.

She taught us a song, forgive me anyone who knows Korean, that goes like this, “Narl Sah-rang Ha-Sheem, Narl Sah-rang Ha-Sheem, Narl Sah-rang Ha-Sheem Sung Gyung Eh Ssu Eat-Ne.” [“Jesus Loves Me”] That’s 57 years ago.

Mr. Archon took God’s story and put it in a racist story.

Miss Hattie Bowie took the racist story and put it in God's story, and dissolved it. One of our basic responsibilities in terms of ministry in the world is to get our story right and to make sure we are not selling the story out to another story.

I'm convinced that a great deal of the story of the Enlightenment has done a lot of damage to the church. I'm amazed at how often we will substitute some notion that comes out of the Enlightenment and make the Christian faith subservient to it. The thing I've dedicated the last ten or twelve years of my life to is to stop doing that. Not because there is nothing good to come out of the Enlightenment, there are good things to come out of the Enlightenment, but I want to make sure whose story is my story, and which story I'm to be a servant of, to, with, by, for.

Difficulties in the World and the Promise of the Trinity

Now there are problems in that story. One of the great gifts of the women's movement is to show us how we try to place God's story in the story of patriarchy. One of the great gifts of the gay and lesbian, the transgendered, the bisexual movement is to say that we have placed God's story in a sexist story and in a heterosexist story.

One of the things about a tradition (I like McIntyre's comment about tradition, "It's a socially embodied, historically extended argument"). I think argument is intrinsic to the Christian story. But it's an argument about getting our story straight. It's not an argument about selling the story out. I just think that's key because there is so much out there in the world right now that's working against the story. I want a story that draws its strength, draws its energy, draws its foundation (not a foundation in reason and experience for I don't think that exists) but one that draws its strength from the Trinity.

There are a number of theologians, Katherine Pickstock, John Milbank, Graham Ward, many others, they stress the importance of the Trinity and understand the Trinity as unity in difference. The ultimate reality is one of peace with difference. It is difference without conflict or violence. This is the basic character of ultimate reality. This is central to our story.

What we have so much in the Western world is a world where otherness has been bad and there is a hierarchy of "us" and "them." It amazes me now that once you see that, even in anthropology, and to see how we see ourselves as the rational, enlightened folk and the other "us" as the more primitive, not developed folk.

You see, the Trinity proposes a very different kind of reality, one of difference and harmony, have peace in the midst of difference, not conflict, not war, not death. I contend that is fundamental to our claims. And therefore getting that story straight is very important.

Christian 'Judo'

I like to call placing the world's story in God's story - Christian judo. I'll retreat from whatever violent character there is in that in a moment. What I am trying to get at is this: I have a friend named Jimmy Hope Smith. I absolutely love Jimmy Hope Smith. He is born and raised in Alabama and he talks with an exaggerated drawl. [Now spoke in an exaggerated drawl.] He's smarter than hell. He went off to college, then he went to seminary, someone told him he ought to go and get a Ph.D., and, by God, he done that, too. He got it in aesthetics. And he knows aesthetics backwards and forwards. He knows Kant, everybody knows Kant, whether they know Kant or not. And he knows Susanne Langer. He knows Walter Benjamin and Schopenhauer and Dewey and he knows Baudrillard and Foucault, he knows Susan Sontag. He knows all those people backwards and forwards. So he loves to go to a party and he loves to talk about "Oart."

The reason why he talks funny is a professor in an East Coast university told him he had to learn to talk like an educated man. It just set it in him like steel. He determined he weren't goin' talk no other way, no time, and if you don't like it you can just go to hell.

But he goes to those parties and he talks about "Oart" and people think he's dumb. So they try to make Jimmy Hope look bad. Problem is, when you try to make Jimmy Hope look bad about art it's like French-kissing a rattlesnake.

Now Jimmy Hope's got a daddy. He loves his daddy a whole lot. But his daddy is unredeemed in some serious ways. Well, he likes to go visit his daddy. In the morning in his daddy's house the first one up hits the button on the TV set and it goes on. Last one to bed at night hits the button and the TV set goes off. All day long you sit there and just watch that TV set. You eat breakfast and lunch and supper in front of it. You have conversation in front of it. You entertain company in front of it. I mean - it's just there. There is a sacred hour when "As the World Turns" comes on. Silence is stringently observed.

Well, they were sitting there one day having a conversation while the TV was going. Jimmy Hope's just having a wonderful time talking with his daddy about things. He learned a long time ago that when he argues with his daddy he better not argue with his daddy the way he learned to argue when he was at the university. Well, they're watching TV and suddenly the picture of Jesse Jackson comes on the screen and his daddy says, "Somebody ought to shoot that SOB!" [I'm cleaning this up.]

"They just oughta shoot him."

"Well, daddy, do you really believe someone ought to shoot Jesse Jackson?"

"I do! They just oughta shoot him."

"Well, daddy, if you really believe that I think you ought to go to church Sunday and I think you ought to pray for somebody to shoot Jesse Jackson."

“What’s the matter with you, boy, are you crazy?”

No sir, I just think that if you really believe that you ought to go to church and pray for it.”

“Boy, you know good and well that Jesus ain’t gonna put up with that shit.”

What I’m trying to speak to about Christian judo is trying to take the world’s story and put it in God’s story. It plays hell with it.

Practice-based Justice

The next piece I want to talk about is not only getting the story right, but seeing how important it is for the church and for those of us who care about justice to be practice-based. I’ve studied social thought and sociology, and sociology of religion for now almost fifty years. The thing I learned most is what people say they value or what they say their attitudes are do not matter as much as what they practice. I don’t listen so much to what they say the meaning of their lives is. I want to see where values, meanings and beliefs are embedded in practice. If these are not embedded in practices, they lack material, concrete reality. Furthermore, I trust a faith tradition that talks not only about getting your ideas right, and that’s important, but that talks about the faith as “a way of living,” a form of life.

When I was seventeen I worked as a wheelbarrow-pusher. The technical term was laborer. I pushed a three hundred pound wheelbarrow of concrete to lay the foundation of this business building. Then the plasterers came in. In those days they were beyond the slatted stuff, they put up the wire. Then they’d take this plaster I roll up and dump it into a vat. They had a hod, a stick with a piece of steel or aluminum on it. They’d have a trowel and they’d reach over into that vat and just scoop that plaster out and slap it on the hod. Easy as can be. Then they scoop a trowel full and slap it across that wire mesh. With a few swipes of the trowel, they made it smooth as the backside of a baby. I watched them. I was making 75 cents an hour and I’m saying to myself, “I can do that. I can do that!”

They notice my seventeen-year old arrogance and one of them says to me, “Tex, I bet you could plaster a wall.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I sure couldn’t do it as good as you, I’m sure.”

“No, I bet you could. It’s easy, you know, you just scoop it out of that vat, put it on the hod, and smear it on the wire. Come on; try your hand at it. You’ll get it right.”

So I took that hod and scoop the trowel into the vat, but it keeps getting stuck in the plaster. I cannot smoothly scoop it as they had done. I have to dig it out. When I finally get a trowel full, I can’t slop it quickly and cleanly on the hod. It keeps sticking to the trowel. I have to scrape it off the hod. Finally when I get a hod full, I again scoop the

trowel into it to get enough plaster to begin applying it. But, again, I have trouble getting enough of it on the damned thing.

When I do finally get a trowel full, I slap it on the wall in one great swath.

It immediately falls in a pile between my feet! I discover that I m able to perform this feat more than once, to my great chagrin.

I'm trying to say a couple of things. If you don't practice something, you can't do it. I don't care how good your ideas are.

Now, using ideas is a practice and a very important one, but when we are talking about justice, and we don't practice it, we don't know anything about it - except maybe a few ideas.

Have you ever asked the question why people hate progressives and liberals? I've had to deal with that question a lot. I think one of the reasons is that they see us as privileging points of view - that if you've got your ideas right, that's enough. But also, we get such moral status from having good ideas. And then I think they see us as not practicing what we preach. Little things, not big - how many of us have left a couple of dollars for the people who cleaned our rooms here at the hotel? The difference it will make is substantial in the income of those folks this week.

One of my complaints about liberals is that we don't put our money where our mouth is. My experience is that conservatives out-give us. And when they out-give us, people come to conclusions about us. Gene Lowry, who was my pastor for a year, used a prayer about once a month; he'd pick up the collection plate after the offering, walk up to the altar, put it on the altar and say, "Dear God, we thank you for the opportunity to put our money where our mouths are." The practice of giving; the integrity of that.

Practicing, So You Can

I've got another friend, named Barry Tedford, that I love, I just adore him. He lived next door to us for twenty-three years. We don't live next door to him now and I've lost a major cultural resource. I'm one of these people who spend a lot of my time reading. And I love that. I'm often in a room staring at a blank page - it just scares you to death because you've got to write something on it. I remember one day I was trying to write something on pickup trucks and nothing was comin'. I'd driven a pickup truck for a long time, but I knew Barry would know. So I went next door to see him. He has this cultural eye. He can just see things in the culture. And I said, "Barry, what do pickup trucks mean?" And he didn't laugh at me. He didn't even look at me funny the way you are. He just launched into thirty minutes of the best stuff on pickup trucks I'd ever heard in my life. We don't have time here for thirty minutes. Let me just report two things he said.

He said, "Tex boy, when you drive a pickup truck, you may not want to tote anything, but if you did, you could! Tex, boy, when you drive a pickup you've got capacity!"

The second thing he said was, “Tex, when you drive a pickup and you pull up to a stoplight, it don’t matter what kind of car pulls up there. It can be a Cadillac, Mercedes, a BMW, a Buick, a Chrysler - it don’t matter. You can spit down right on top of it!”

You know what, you can!

He started driving a pickup when he was twelve years old on a farm. He knows pickups!

You ever been in those situations with people who know justice because they’ve done it for long, long, long years?

I remember Thelma Stevens, who headed up the Women’s Society of Christian Service for something like thirty years. I once got to sit by her at General Conference and got to listen to her talk about what was going on, who was doing what, and then tell me what was going to happen. And she was right.

I was in the nastiest demonstration I was ever in, I was in dozens but I really wasn’t in very many that turned really nasty. There were a hundred of us who were protesting the beating of a couple of guys who burned their draft cards and were then beaten up by a bunch of toughs. These draft card burners were little guys. They weighed about 120 pounds, they were about five foot seven inches or so tall. But this group of toughs beat them so badly that their eyes were swollen almost shut. And they beat them up on the steps of the Southie courthouse in Boston.

So we decide to protest. When our hundred show up, there are two hundred police showed and six-hundred anti-demonstrators. As soon as we started the march, the anti-demonstration groups started running through the line. I qualified as big in the demonstration. They put us last in the line. I said, “Why are you putting us on the tail end,” and they said, “Well you get hit first.” So a guy by the name of Ed Blackman and I were on the back of the line.

As we start the march, the anti-demonstrators start running through the line in front of Ed and me. They’re not swinging at people’s heads; it’s hard to hit somebody in the head when you’ve got one shot. They’re going right for the gut. They hit these folks right in the gut. I didn’t know what to do. I was just completely at a loss. I was paralyzed by my confusion.

Ed, who’s been in this work for years, a wonderful central city pastor, he just walked right up into the middle of that action and said, “Officer, arrest that man, I’ll press charges; Officer, that man, I’ll press charges; Officer, that man, I’ll press charges.” They arrested about three guys.

When I saw Ed, I said, “Oh! I can do that.” “Officer, arrest that man, I’ll press charges.” The police only arrested three or four people, whom they let go, but it stopped the violence instantly. Let me tell you something. You can’t do that if you haven’t done it

before.

The practice of justice is so key. That's why we need a practice-based church. In church we have a reality that we continually reaffirm, that we reinstitute, that we reconstruct by those performances.

I am for the first time in my life, I am sorry to say, in a United Methodist Church where we celebrate the Eucharist every Sunday, every Sunday. We are a multi-racial, multi-class congregation and 40% of our congregation is gay and lesbian. I tell you, when we celebrate the Eucharist, there may be a homeless person, there may be someone who is a business professional person, we've got African Americans, we've got Mexican Americans (their language), we don't have Asian people, we've got Native American people, people who are well-to-do and people who are not well-to-do, folks in between. We have gay and lesbian couples and straight couples going to receive bread and wine together. And there are times when I feel like I'm in a broken manifestation (it's always broken in this life, I think), I'm in a broken manifestation of the reign of God.

The celebration of the Eucharist, the practice of that, where there is indeed this radical sharing of bread and wine, where everybody is welcome, O I love that about the United Methodist Church at its best. I remember the General Conference in Denver and the worship service put together by a coalition of those working for full welcome to GLBT people. They took the doors off of that church and brought them in during the introit and placed the doors on saw-horses. The doors of the church then become the communion table, and the Eucharist was served from the doors. I call that the welcome table. Wouldn't you?

We need to be welcoming for many reasons. For example, I think it is important for us to go to church with people we don't like. I'm pretty sure that we need the practice. I'm almost certain that Jerry Falwell is gonna be in heaven. I've got to get ready for the SOB, you know.

I work at being a pacifist. I haven't hit anybody in fifty years, but I want to. You know what I mean? I keep wondering how long I will have to pray and how long am I going to have to practice not hitting people before I get rid of the violence in my soul? You know what I mean? I need a lot of non-violent practice.

Pitching Tent in Our Situation

Let's talk about the God who pitches tent in terms of being in that world. I love that thing that comes out of the Gospel of John in the first chapter, "The word became flesh and (the English word is 'lived' or 'dwelt', but the literal Greek is 'pitched tent') with us." I like the language of pitching tent because I think it speaks to the whole issue of indigenous practices in a culture. How does the church join, in some sense, the indigenous practices of a culture?

Look at Jesus and the practices of his own time. He inhabited a language, really a

vernacular. As a Southerner I love the fact that Jesus inhabited a vernacular, you know. Even if he was a Northerner, he inhabited a vernacular. He joined the occupational structure of his own culture, he was a carpenter. At least his father was, and I suspect he followed that work for a time. He taught the marginal people of his time. He taught them an oral culture practice of story-telling, more explicitly, parable. He engaged many of the religious practices of his time and was a devout and devoted Jew.

But he also opposed certain religious practices. I don't know a single New Testament scholar who doesn't see Jesus opposing the purity system of his own time and calling that into question. But he also changed the story of the world.

I'll tell you, one of my problems with us as liberals is that an awful lot of us went to the university. What that means is that we learned literate practices. I hope you understand how much I love literate practices. What I love about my life today is that I now get to read forty and fifty hours a week. And I now, after a lot of practice, have the body control that I can do it. I get up at four every morning and write from four to six. That's just my schedule, I try to write one page a day. I figure if I write a page a day for three-hundred-sixty days I'm going to churn out something. It may be bad, but that's what I work on four to six in the morning. The rest of the morning I read, I study. I made a mistake and married a woman I really like or I'd probably not do much else. But Peggy paints, so she paints ten feet from me and I do disaster ten feet from her. We are involved in community organizing and of course in that wonderful church and a number of other things. I don't mean to suggest that one just reads, I love that literate world. I really love it.

But I'm concerned about the kind of judgments that the literati make about other people. I hope you understand that I can be very critical of this media culture that we're in, but one of the things that absolutely blows my mind is how many people on the left have nothing but dismay for electronic culture. I happen to believe that if we are going to do prophetic ministry we'd better learn how to use image, sound, speech, light, move and dance. We come here and have such wonderful multi-sensory worship experiences. My, Regina, my dear, you have been just wonderful for us, and others as well. And yet, we get to church and we're scared to death of it, "Uh, it's entertainment."

I'm always reminded of those folks, two hundred years after the printing press who thought the printing press was the work of the devil. If we don't learn to pitch tent with electronic practices in this culture, who's going to do the work to which we are called?

What about our work with the poor and illiterate folks? And poor folks who in this culture are more oral than literate? Except for the young who are a wonderful mix of the oral and the electronic. Look at rap music and the way it uses oral practices of memory devices and rhythm. Those are very old oral practices but it is also such an intensely technological genre of music. Country music - look how it uses story and proverbs or otherwise colorful sayings. Remember in oral culture you don't have texts so you want people to remember things so you have to say them in memorable ways. I just love country music because it can do that: "I'd rather have a bottle in front of me, than a frontal lobotomy" or "There's too much month at the end of the money." I'm not into

shaving my legs, for whatever kinds of reasons, I don't, but I just love Deanna Carter's song, "Did I shave my legs for this?" If we're going to be engaged in practices of justice in the world, it wouldn't hurt a bit if we knew how to live and work with the genres of music, to work with the media, and the rest.

Substantive Justice

Christian Justice: I'm in debt to Thomas Aquinas. The longer I live the more I love Thomas Aquinas. I know that sounds strange, but I do. For Thomas, justice grows out of the reign of God. The formative aim of life, of all of creation, is the reign of God. We're in a world where we need to be very careful about selling God's story out to a mere procedural justice. I remember Beverly Harrison saying in that wonderful book she did, "We are not talking about mere procedural justice, but substantive justice," meaning by that dealing with things like houses and food and jobs - substantive in that way. You see, what we are getting into with the United States is, we are getting into a kind of procedural justice where what we are talking about is the mere balancing of claims among competing interests. That's what the nation-state finally thinks. Now, don't misunderstand me, I do think we need to stand up for those kinds of things, because if you don't you don't have much else to deal with the nation-state with. You've got to watch them.

I don't agree with Richard Hayes about his interpretation of Romans 1. But I like what he's done here with human rights and scripture. He says, and please hear him, "Human rights are too thin to characterize the church's response to social issues." Let's take homelessness. It's the thick biblical-moral language versus procedural-rights language. He says, "The ubiquitous appeal of a rationally grounded notion of human rights is without warrant in scripture." You can argue with him about that. "Nowhere in the New Testament," he says, "is there any hint that housing or anything else is a right. To fail to respond to the homeless is to disregard Moses and the prophets, or to culpably fail to recognize Jesus himself.... The image of Christ cannot be adequately translated into the Enlightenment idiom of human rights and dignity." He means by that it is far richer; it is a far more profound notion, than human rights alone. He says, "To replace the powerful images of Christ with pallid, rationalistic notions of right and equity is to lose our bearing and our identity."

The picture before you [a rough, wild-haired man with a loin-cloth suggestive of the American flag on a cross] is a good instance of taking the world's story and putting it in God's story. A good friend of mine, a guy named Lou Marak, is a wonderful artist, he's just magnificent, in Kansas City. He hated a guy named Red Hunnycut. And this picture is Red. Somebody said to him one day, "Lou, you're never, never going to really get over Red until you paint him as Christ. You know, Red is the least in your life. What we do to the least, we do to Christ. So paint him as Christ crucified." So that's how that painting came to be.

Formed Freedom: Freedom as Virtue

Take a look at the issue of freedom with me for a moment. I'm very much concerned about when Christians find the notion of freedom alone or freedom from alone rather than freedom for love and justice. One of the things I love about Martin Luther King, Jr. is that while he talks about freedom and he talks about liberation, he talks about the aim of the beloved community. And I think that is because the reign of God is so much a part of his understanding of life.

Also freedom in formation, freedom is a virtue; you've got to practice it to get formed by it. We don't have a piano in this room. If we had a piano I have infinite choice with respect to pianos because I cannot play a lick. My choices are absolutely open. My friend Gene Lowery can play any song you can hum, sing, or whistle. Do you hear the kind of freedom I have; do you hear the kind of freedom he's got? Christian freedom is a lot more like the kind of freedom that is formed in our lives as God's people. Never let freedom to be reduced only to mere choice. That's a consumerist notion. Please, I support Roe v. Wade and have for thirty years. I'm talking about the consumerist notion that freedom is choice.

Note one other thing, when we start talking about substantive justice growing from the depths and the riches of Christ, and being formed in that depth and that richness of practice. For Thomas Aquinas it arises in the reign of God. It's a unitive practice, it's Trinitarian, as I've tried to suggest, it grows out of harmony in difference. I wish we had time to talk about how important for justice it is to recognize, to value, otherness and to claim that as intrinsic to a Trinitarian faith.

We're in danger; we live in the most powerful nation, probably in the history of the world. The problem with that kind of power is that the other becomes something to control. So we have to have our armies around the world, and we have little to control us.

Daniel Day Williams said, he talks about "justice as the order that love requires," and justice growing out of that. Go back to Thomas with me for a minute - Thomas is always talking about the common good, the common good shaped by the reign of God. But the common good, for Thomas, and justice, for Thomas, is really the communal love that encompasses material, social, and spiritual goods. Am I saying that plainly enough? In other words, this is not how we balance your rightful claim with my rightful claim. I know that can become important in places. But it is really what is the good, the communal love, that encompasses us as Christian people? It is out of that kind of solidarity, if you will, that we approach the issues of justice before us. That involves, then, a commitment to the common good.

Justice - Community Solidarity - Common Good

Justice that is grounded in love as the basis of a community solidarity will have a profound sense of the common good. If I've said it adequately, if you can't hear the difference between this kind of justice and justice that is a mere distributive justice based around rights with only the thinnest conception of the common good - let me give you an illustration. Do you notice now, in Iraq and Iran the talk is about freedom? And the

World Series, when they sing, "God bless America," the talk is around American's preserving our freedom and our way of life? I don't know about you, but I get very skittish about "our ... way ... of ... life." Do you wonder why, when the President talks, all he has to talk about is freedom? What else does he have? What am I trying to do here?

Please, I am not trying to talk you out of concerns about civil liberties and rights. Do you understand that? What I am trying to do is to talk about how inadequate that is for a Christian conception of justice formed and shaped out of the reign of God and therefore we are going to have a solidarity based in that kind of love and that encompasses the material realities, the economic realities, the political realities. Will that become finally true, only when Jesus comes. But I believe that is the justice we are called to live and be.

I want to work with you a bit about the white working-class. Some of you know that I worked in that area quite a little in my life. It's where I come from. I've been following the work of Joel Rogers since 1986 when he published an article in the Atlantic and said there is no turn to the Right in the United States. He's done a book with Ruy Teixeira; they talk about the new white working-class. They mean by that a much broader conception than blue-collar workers alone. For instance, they include service workers and they also include a great many people in the lower end of the white-collar jobs. I tell you, you walk into a room where you got a hundred secretaries pounding out on the keyboards that looks an awful lot like a factory. There are an awful lot of those poor white-collar jobs that really are working-class jobs. They call them America's forgotten majority. I'm intrigued, because what they are looking for there is a common good.

They say about America's white working-class that these folks have not turned Right, what's happened is that they have lost their confidence in government. That what they expect government to do is to intervene, to take steps that will serve the common good. But what happened is that they lost their confidence for government to do it. What government seems to do, as they see it, is to serve monied interests, corporate structure, and people in power in political arenas. They see the government, they see the congress as bought off; quite frankly, I see the congress as bought off. They talk about the new insecurity. They name these issues as the first and foremost kind of issues among white working-class folk in the United States.

One is health care. How many of you struggle with health care? How many of you pay the health care for your children, your adult children? Retirement security. I am trying like crazy right now not to spend any of my pension for the simple reason that I lost a third of it when Mr. Bush came into ... well I hate blame all of that on him, too ... most of it, but ... I'm trying very hard not to spend it. The reason is - I am both of my adult children's pension plan. My daughter is a hairdresser; my son is a working-class guy, a carpenter in a big corporate building. I am their pensions.

The second is education and planning. My son hates his job. I'd say, "93Son, I will pay the tuition, if you'll go to any kind of school you want to go to and get the skills to do what you want to do." He says, "Dad, I don't see how I can do that and do my work." Education and training will require some sort of cooperation with the structures, the

corporations.

Job security is the third. This also means having a job. I'm in a church where it seems every week we have somebody say, "I've lost my job and I've had real trouble getting a new one." Did you notice there was a 72% increase in Gross Domestic Product reported in the paper yesterday? Did you notice that there has not yet been any increase in jobs? I'll tell you what I would like to look at - Gross Domestic Product; I'd want to know how that is being shared with the bottom two-thirds of the class structure.

There are three others: Work, Family pressure, and Conflict. My daughter Jennifer has a daughter, Halley, she's an absolute delight she's also developmentally delayed. Jennifer is a hairdresser. She makes her money basically in the afternoon and evening. What does she do about Halley? She brings her to the shop. So what do you do in terms of child-care? What do you do with the drop in personal savings? Think about that in terms of working-class folks who maybe have hammered out \$20,000 or \$30,000 and they just had it reduced to two-thirds of that? Those are major issues in a white working-class and Rogers and Teixeira say that on the basis of an awful lot of studies, of surveys, and the rest, over an extended period of time.

What they also say, and I think it is very important, they say these are major issues for other racial and ethnic groups in the society. These are not partisan to one class or one race, whatever. This is not to suggest there may not be other issues as well, but these are some issues that are common.

Please, when you are in a northern Wisconsin with hardly any African Americans, hardly any Hispanics, hardly any Asian Americans, and if all you do is preach about racial justice, Sunday after Sunday, you are making an horrendous mistake. What about the justice issues of that very, very community? I do think there is a reciprocity with an awful lot of working people, in which, when you start caring about social justice for them and they get the sense that, you actually understand and know that they've got it tough, then when you start talking about the faith about justice for African American people, then they can care about that too. When local church has a history, a tradition, of burning about their issues, then you don't have this congealed passivity.

Do you know what this "congealed passivity" is in the churches? - its resistance. They've seen us coming alone - I'm not talking about psychological resistance, I'm talking about political resistance. "I know what this preacher wants. This preacher will be here for two years, get the medical program for the preachers up, get the conference apportionments paid, get all the monies together, and talk about justice, but don't touch anything that eating us alive here - that our schools are gone, our institutions are gone, all we've got left is this god-damned church and it ain't ours any more!" Do you hear that?

Now folks, that can take a racist turn, it sure can, but it doesn't have to, it doesn't have to. It can take a turn, because we occupy a story, an encompassing story whose aim is the reign of God. There is a love that embraces us and embraces everyone, where we can do the kind of Christian judo we need to do. We can do it when they know we love and care

for them. Justice is not a narrow piece about somebody else, as they see it, but it is a sweeping reality about life in this world and it is a world that Christ is gonna save.

Will They Find a Church Formed God's Story of Love and Justice?

When I was twenty years old I entered the Boston School of Theology. It was the first week, I think it was the third or fourth day I was there, I had never heard teachers like these folks. I had had wonderful teachers but I had never heard people like this. We went to the Church of All Nations in the inner-city, so-called, of Boston and I remember, distinctly, that evening, stepping around winos, homeless folk asleep on the sidewalk, to get into the Church of All Nations. Julius Chambers was the president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Legal Defense Fund and spent his weekends in the South working on Civil Rights - he was our preacher that night. And Chalmers came to the end of that evening (I had never been in a big city where people slept on the sidewalk. I'd grown up in a small town where the police picked up the few people, and took them to the jail, who slept on the street.) I remember Chalmers ended his sermon with a story.

Several years back there was an African American student at Boston University that Chalmers struck up a very warm relationship with - he was from Alabama. The student's wife became pregnant and they wanted to go home for Christmas. They went to see the doctor and the doctor said the pregnancy looked good, everything was in fine shape. "Take it easy, don't make it too hard a trip. I think you'll make it and you'll be ok, just rest." They took off for Alabama. They had a wonderful trip and a wonderful time with the family. And then they headed back toward Boston. They got, I think, somewhere in northern Alabama and suddenly she got something that seemed like labor pains though the baby wasn't due for several months. So he just looked for a hospital. Finally, when he found one, they pull up in the emergency drive and the hospital staff person said, "You can't come in here. We don't serve Colored People in this hospital." By the time he found a hospital that would receive her ... ah ... the baby had died. In the process of getting the baby out she very nearly died, herself.

When that guy returned to the School of Theology, Chalmers said he was a cauldron of fury. Chalmers would walk up to him and he would spin on his heel and walk away. Chalmers would speak to him and he'd go the other way and not speak back. He didn't show up for class. Couldn't get any contact with him. Faculty offices were on the third floor. Chalmers stepped through his door and saw this guy coming down the hall and steps back into his door. When the guy gets right in front of his door - Chalmers reaches out and grabs him by the arm, yanks him into the office, and whirls him across the office and then stand in the door and says, "You have got to me. You have got to get this thing out. And you're not leaving here unless you go right over me." Chalmers says the guy spoke to him in what sounded like a growl, God .. Damn .. You. God . Damn . You. If it weren't for you I could hate every white man on the face of the earth."

Where will the marginal people of the earth find people they can trust? If not the church, then who? If not you and me, then who?

=== hymn: What does the Lord require of you? ===