

Sermon: To Seek Justice
Scripture: Luke 18:1-8
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
Date: October 17, 2010

One of our own congregation members, Barrie Dunsmore, writes a consistently insightful column each week for the Rutland Herald, the Montpelier Times Argus, and for VPR that I'm sure many of you have heard. This past week's column though was particularly striking to me in the alternative view it offered to the news we heard this week and in its connection to today's scripture.

As a retired ABC foreign correspondent Barrie often has some piercing insights into what's being covered in the news and how it's being covered and this past week he wrote about the recent coverage of the Chilean miner's release from their captivity. He pointed to its coverage as the "feel good story of the year" but one that problematically glosses over a severe issue of injustice. He quoted a Chilean Roman Catholic priest named Father David Pauvif who said "These miners are being called heroes but they are in reality, victims of a great injustice in work conditions." Barrie then refers back to the tragedy in the West Virginian mine last April where 29 miners were not – in fact - rescued and so died with little being done in the aftermath of that tragedy to address safety conditions in the mines. Since then at least 1500 new citations against mining companies for significant safety violations have been issued, which has not revolutionized mining safety, as you might think it would, but rather it has generated a huge increase in litigation. Mining companies are choosing to fight the US government in court rather than make their mines safer. It is then pretty unlikely that anything will be different in this situation, especially since it is has such a "happy ending". It does make me wonder though how long a similar thing would be tolerated if let's say there was some safety violation in government buildings across the country where government officials were dying as a result.... Mmmm?

It's important for us to remember that we don't live in a class-less society, no matter how much we tout the great American myth that if one works hard enough one can accomplish anything in this country. There are more *subtle* (maybe) class divisions in our society which because of their subtlety and the American myth can disguise the reality that certain Americans, most of you and I would be included in this group, have more

voice, more clout, more rank and power, maybe even more access to justice in our country than do our brothers and sisters who live on the edge, on the margins of our society.

A psychiatrist and writer, Arnold Mindell, who does conflict transformation work with highly conflicted groups, talks a lot about rank in our society, its distribution and consequences. All of us are embedded in relationships where our rank is either greater or lesser than someone else's and there are either benefits that come with our rank or not. White people have had and continue to have more rank than people of color in our country. Christians have more rank than Muslims in our country, especially these days. Men have more rank than women, which is evidenced in salary inequity. Someone who can afford to live in Charlotte or Shelburne has more rank than someone who can barely afford an apartment in Burlington. Heterosexual couples who are the standard have more rank than homosexual couples who are on the margins and heterosexual couples have more rank than singles who also are not seen as the norm. Doctors more rank than nurses, employers more rank than employees. Clergy more spiritual rank, you might say, than members of their congregations. And owners of the coalmines more rank than the miners and so on and so forth. Our rank is just a reality, not necessarily a good or bad thing. BUT, the catch is this: rank can very quickly and easily become problematic if we are unconscious of it and how it affects our relationships, because as Arnold Mindell says "The more [rank] you have, ironically, the less aware you are of how it affects others negatively." And conversely the less rank you have in a situation, the more aware, often, you are as to how your lack of rank places you in a disadvantaged and more vulnerable position.

In the scripture for his morning, it is remarkable and critical to note that Jesus places front and center of his parable a quintessential example in the first century Mediterranean world of someone without rank - a widow. In the patriarchal culture of the time women and children were valued only in their connection to a man and his family. So without being connected to a man, a widow was about as marginal a member of society as you could get, which is why the prophets are often referring to justice for the "widows and orphans". Jesus places a woman with no rank and thus no privileges in her society in conflict with a man of great rank, a corrupt roman judge of the time. The power scale is so weighted toward the judge that it is shocking that the woman gets her

case made by her persistence and receives the justice that she is due; justice against an adversary who certainly, it is assumed, had more rank than her. She received justice in a situation where rank and power was so weighted on the side of her adversary and judge that her being treated fairly would have been near inconceivable.

But I want to point out for all of us to consider consciously this morning how issues of rank and power are so prevalent in the gospel and so consistently a part of Jesus' message. If you were to comb through the gospel looking for the people and places where Jesus is in a mode of confrontation and conflict, which I might add happens a lot, you would find that 9 times out of 10 Jesus is confronting someone with rank and privilege insisting on making them conscious of how they are using their rank, and the power that accompanies rank, over and against others. It's remarkable, really, given its prevalence in the gospels, and maybe it should even be suspicious that as Christians, with Jesus as our example, we wouldn't be in a hyper-vigilant state of awareness about the use and misuse of rank and power.

I applaud our fellow church member, Barrie Dunsmore, who in true Christian form this week called out on the carpet those mining companies who are protecting and promoting themselves at the expense of the lower ranking miners who work for them. And I also thought it appropriate to applaud another member of our church within this sermon to counter-balance Jesus' use of a corrupt judge in his parable - she will remain nameless since I didn't ask her if I could refer to her in my sermon - but she happens to be a judge unlike the unjust judge in Jesus' parable, but one who as a woman is sensitive to these dynamics of rank and power, who I have heard time and again judges with fairness and equity, a judge who is committed to using her rank not for self-advancement but for the greater good. What other examples of the use or misuse of rank can you think about in the circles you run in? Remember to consider that the more rank you have the less conscious you will tend to be about how it negatively affects the people around you who have less, for if we are blind to our rank or in denial of it then we will also tend to be blind to or hard-hearted toward those around us who are voiceless and marginalized and with little rank in our country.

The Christian faith lived rightly by those of us with privilege and rank *must* be significantly about using our rank to support and care for those without it, lifting OUR voices for the voiceless where we can, pressing for justice that the oppressed cannot press

for themselves, demanding significance be granted to the marginalized. But furthermore, it seems we should also be at least suspicious of our own points of view and the points of view of the privileged and high-ranking in our society when they run counter to the points of view of those with less rank than ourselves. I think we should be extremely suspicious for instance when a white anglo-saxon protestant male clergy, a man of high moral rank in this society, rails against homosexuals as immoral. And maybe we should be suspicious when American Christians speak indignantly against more vulnerable American Muslims building a mosque near ground-zero. Or when someone of wealth and privilege promotes a spirituality that claims that what we receive in life is all about the attitude we put out to the universe. Or at least suspicious when someone who has had the breaks and privileges of a higher education proclaims that if you work hard enough anything is possible. We should at the very least be suspicious of such dynamics. I'm not saying, of course, that those of lower rank necessarily have the moral high ground simply because of their rank, nor that those of higher rank can't be good and right in their perspective, I'm only pointing to the dangerous unconsciousness that rank can engender. Examples abound so I'll stop there, but I do invite us all to live with a particular eye toward our rank and the rank of others this week as we go about our lives.

But before I close I'd also like to ask us as a congregation, specifically a congregation of people of pretty high rank in our society, in this season of prayer and inward searching about who we are and where we are going as a church, to seriously consider if there are ways that we might consciously use our rank as a body of Christ for the uplift of those who have less rank around us. I think it's pretty easy in our insulated town for our church to remain unconscious of those around us with less rank, but I also don't think we can afford such unconsciousness if we are going to be serious about living out faithfully our commitment to the way, truth and life of Jesus Christ. So please think, pray, ponder with me about this very thing and who knows what opportunities the Spirit will present for us.