



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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# Trying to Do the Right Thing

Dr. Bruce Lancaster

# **Trying to Do the Right Thing**

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*1 John 3:11-18*

*Amos 5:18-24*

Six years ago I was halfway through my time as Interim Pastor with a church in Webster Groves, Missouri, a township in St. Louis, socially and economically like Upper St. Clair is to Pittsburgh.

It was about this time of the year that Michael Brown, a young African American, was shot by Darren Wilson, a white police officer and for two weeks St. Louis was rocked by the Ferguson riots.

If you don't remember Michael Brown's name or the Ferguson riots, think of George Floyd or Breonna Taylor or too many others.

I received phone calls, e-mails, texts, from friends and family asking how far we were from all that was happening in St. Louis.

The geographical answer was 'that's another part of town'; we were about 10 miles south, about the same distance from Upper St. Clair to Homewood in Pittsburgh.

If you measured by the geography of social status and lifestyle and economics, we were on the other side of the moon.

But if you measure by the geography of the soul, the foundational, unchanging truth that all of us humans have been created by God in the image of God and that Jesus came and died for all people, then the answer has to be, in terms of God's geography, we were next-door neighbors.

As 1st John puts it, if Jesus laid down his life for us, so we should, in one way or another, lay down our lives for one another. Or as Amos, one of the great prophets of ancient Israel put it, unless we care for our neighbors, God doesn't even want our worship.

This is in the marrow of our Presbyterian bones, as our Book of Order says that we as Presbyterians “recognize that God calls the church to work for the transformation of society by seeking justice and living in obedience to the Word of God.”

That is, we have been called:

- not only to be concerned with theology which focuses on the truth;
- not only to be concerned with services of worship that honor and glorify God;
- not only to be concerned with caring for those within the community of faith;
- but we have also been called to focus on and be concerned with our neighbors, with what is good and right and just.

Ironically, the day before Michael Brown was shot in St. Louis, a community group named ‘Do the Right Thing St. Louis’ had held its award breakfast. This group partners with area law enforcement agencies, schools, media, and businesses to recognize and promote the positive social behaviors of school-age children in the region.

Does that not capture the tension of the times in which we live...people trying to do right thing yet caught in the midst of volcanic eruptions of violence and racial injustice and being tossed to and fro by a pandemic that has infected not only our physical health but also our economic health, and I dare say our spiritual health.

The great New Testament scholar, N.T. Wright, says, “We dream the dream of justice. We glimpse, for a moment, a world at one, a world put to rights, a world where things work out, where societies function fairly and efficiently, where we not only know what we ought to do but actually do it. And then we wake up and come back to reality.”

Reality is that the world is changing in our lifetime. The world we knew twenty, thirty, forty, years ago is not the world we live in, and the world we live in today will not be the world our children live in in the days ahead.

And you say, “Bruce, you sure have a firm grasp of the obvious.”

But maybe what’s not so obvious is that as followers of Christ we live in that tension, stressed between the injustice of the world and our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ.

We Presbyterians even ask it of all our Elders, Deacons, and Ministers: “...in your ministry will you try to show the love and justice of Jesus Christ?”

Will you try?

This is a question for all of us to balance in a way which will often not make perfect sense, the inescapable grace of God with the high call and demand of God within our lives, as John writes: “*How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?*”

Trying to do the right thing is a question that will be true for every single sin-touched follower of Jesus at some particular point in our lives.

This was the job, this was the task, of the prophets of ancient Israel, like Amos, that they kept reminding the people of what was the right thing to do.

What they proclaimed was not new. It was the same ten commandments that spoke of God and obedience to God, that spoke of promises made and of the value of life, and of truth, and of relationships, and warned again and again of covetousness, this insatiable greed within human life to have more and more and more.

It was in the light of these commandments, repeated again and again and again, that the prophets spoke and said to the people:

- How dare you settle for an imperfect world when God does not?
- How dare you treat the weak with contempt when your ancestors were weak and God did not pass them by?
- How dare you grab for more and more with no care for others when only God can satisfy the deep emptiness of your souls?

No program here, no policy, not politics, like Tony Campolo, insightful Christian author said, *“While politics seeks to find common ground, faith in Christ reaches for higher ground.”*

That higher ground is on the hill of Calvary, the cross of Jesus Christ where he laid down his life for you and me and everyone!

Right in the very heart and life and death of our Lord Jesus is the higher ground of the love and justice of Jesus Christ.

We all are aware, I hope, that what used to be far away, people who were far away, cultures that were far away, ideas that were strange or different are one mouse-click, one tweet, one text, one post away from us now.

We work with people, we live with people, we know people who are different from us, sometimes vastly different from us. They aren't far away anymore; they are close to us, and some of them are here, and some of them are us!

And we have this position or that position and as we argue or discuss, our words cross each other like ships in the night, each going their own way, hardly ever meeting, so the debate goes on and on and on.

For a critical analysis of this social dynamic, I refer you to Dr. Seuss's story about "The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins".

Yes, that Dr. Seuss who makes it easy for someone like me to see the world for how it is and how it could be. And isn't that what he does with all his stories?

The story begins with King Derwin of Didd looking down on his realm from the window of his castle, and the little boy, Bartholomew, looking back up from his family hut at the edge of the fields beyond the village.

The story has to do with the difference of perspective on the same world when seen from different vantage points, one from the power of the castle high above and the other from the powerless poverty of the little boy below.



So much injustice in our world comes because we know nothing about ‘those other people’ against whom such injustices are perpetrated.

We feel distant from others, no connection with others, we look at life from different vantage points, and many of us, most of us, are like King Derwin: Our vantage point is that of advantage.

Let me put it this way. A dam has been built that provides a wonderful deep reservoir of justice and peace and righteousness for a privileged few, but those down below the dam live by the dry riverbed of injustice and poverty.

If justice is to roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream that dam of privilege needs to be breached.

We need to step out of a silence that perpetuates the status quo. We need to open our eyes to really see the incredible struggle that is going on in the American Christian landscape where our identity, our mission and ministries are being shaped more by race than by baptism and faith in Jesus Christ.

Two weeks from today Westminster Presbyterian Church will host a Faith Witness gathering outside the doors of this sanctuary under the theme of “Do Justice, Love Kindness, Walk Humbly: End Racism.”

We need to pray with courage that the Holy Spirit would show us ways to speak and act so that, as the prophet Isaiah said, we can try to “*repair the devastations of many generations.*” (Isaiah 61:4)

## Trying to Do the Right Thing

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Some already are, but what would happen if we tried, really tried to expose ourselves to people who are not just like us but who are unlike us, whether because of race or economy or because of geography, those with whom we would not normally rub shoulders.

It would change the way we live. Some opportunities are active, others are supportive, but in this together, it would open our eyes in a way no lecture or sermon could do and change the nature of our life with one another in the world around us.

We are being called to join the holy work of justice and righteousness, to love not in word or speech, but in truth and action, to try to do the right thing.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.



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