

Sermon Title: Fair Balances
Text: 2 Corinthians 8:7-15

July 2, 2006
Memorial Presbyterian Church, Appleton, WI
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We watched a video this past week that I understand is an adaptation of the John le Carrè novel, entitled, *The Constant Gardener*. It's a mystery, and so I don't want to let the cat out of the bag for anyone who's not seen it, and it's not the plot that stuck in my mind as I made my way to this morning. Suffice it to say that there were many times when I sort of needed to remind myself that this was *fiction* after all...but also wondered just how much this fiction resembled life as the story dealt with issues of wealth and poverty, the first world and the third world, and the economics of intimidation.

But in one aspect, the film's extraordinary cinematography, the images were, I knew from personal experience, both vivid and real. Much of the story takes place in Kenya, and there are just incredible shots of the huge shantytowns that are a regular feature of third world and emerging countries. And I know, both intellectually, and because I've had the privilege of travel there, that the contrasts between wealth and poverty are starkly and disturbingly real. Actually, Kenya's slums, so I'm told on a world standard, are pretty nice, but still they lack the sorts of things we not only take for granted, but can hardly imagine being without: running water, a sewage system, central heating and cooling, or even floors that are anything more than dirt of concrete slab. While following the twists and turns of the plot, it was hard for me not to ponder the simple fact that far more of this world's population lives in such shanties and slums than enjoy the little corner of the earth we've carved out for our family on River Drive.

The contrast sits harder, at least for me, on weekends like this one, during which we are able to celebrate the incredible gifts we enjoy by virtue of the accident of our birth. No, the amazing benefits of the country whose founding we will celebrate in the next couple of days with fireworks, and picnics and parades, did not come cheap, and I in no way mean to undervalue the sacrifices of those who endured greater hardships than I will ever know to secure "the blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our posterity" as the founders of this nation so boldly wrote in the preamble to our constitution. But to borrow a phrase from Paul, there is a fundamental way in which we are all "late born" to these gifts. They were at least to some extent secured before we got them, and, especially when I consider the poverty and bondage within which huge segments of the world's population dwell, a prize which is ours to be lost. Somewhere between the bratwurst and the sparkler we really should, I think, give ourselves a little pinch, and remind ourselves that there is not sufficient reason for our great good fortune. It's not the just reward for our own hard work, or even the hard work of our parents and grandparents—of any great, or greater, or greatest generation. It all really is, to use that oddly religious word that imposes itself on what is otherwise a political document, a *blessing*: a gift that comes from beyond us, that can, in the end, be secured only by the grace of the Giver.

I'll be asked on occasion what it is we mean as Presbyterians when we talk about *Reformed Theology*, and I can show you the shelf of books in my office dedicated to just *one* theologian's attempt to articulate it as proof that there's not an answer to the question that will fit into a single sermon, but I doubt that there's a better *starting* point than precisely here. When folk in the *reformed tradition*, that is, those who roughly trace their history back through John Calvin and

John Knox (which is *us!*) talk about God, and the universe, and all the things in between, one of the things we *must* say, early on, is that whatever we know, or have, whatever we enjoy or endure, is a gift from a God who simply cannot be fully comprehended. To put it formally, we begin with the understanding that the mind of God is inscrutable, but (and it is a very important *but*) it has been revealed to us that the *intention* of God in relation to this world is an *intention* of Love. Not because it is merited, not because it is logically required, and maybe even in spite of all logic or merit, God has chosen to show God's own self to us, and the only word in the human vocabulary that even comes close to capturing what we've seen is *Love*.

Or, to put it into the language we shared this morning from Paul's letter to the church at Corinth, by the poverty of God in Christ, we have been made rich. By the grace of God, we are a people of abundance. Or as it gets worked out in the letter to the Ephesians, "by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift from God!" That is the bass note in the chord of Reformed theology. It's the lens, which colors and clarifies all else we say and do. It's the first word. But it is *not* the *last* word.

You see, that's the trap I see in celebrations such as we will enjoy this long weekend. We tend, I fear, to mistake the *what* of God's action for the *why* of our existence. That God has blessed us is a wonderful thing. But Paul, in speaking to the Corinthians, asks us to consider to what end that gift has been given? Follow Paul's logic: if God in Christ, the source of all there is, uses that great abundance in order to bless this world, then doesn't it just make sense that those who are blessed with abundance in this world use it to be a blessing to those in need?

It's a scene that comes toward the end of the film I mentioned a few moments ago. The main character, Justin, in search of the conditions relating to his wife's murder, ended up in a remote village in Sudan when a band of Janjaweed fighters swept over the hill—a visual and visceral representation of the genocides that have swept that nation, but are a bare blip of conscience on most of our radars. As that character, Justin, races back to the United Nations relief aircraft that brought him to the village, he sweeps up a little girl, trying desperately to rescue just one from the horrific slaughter. But the pilot calmly, and insistently explains that it is impossible to take the little girl along. "There are millions just like her," he says. "But we can help *this* one," Justin replied.

I'll let you rent the video to find out that fictional girl's fate, but for *this* mostly patriotic soul the agony of that scene shot through my heart. The balances are *not* fair, and their weight falls fully on the side of the world that I enjoy. But what is all that wondrous blessing except evidence for a conviction unless it finds some way of rebalancing those tragic scales that seem to dominate our world, so that "the one who had did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little?"

What is it, exactly, that we are spending this "blessing of Liberty" on? That's where "Reformed Theology" really hits the road. It's not just that we are blessed by a God who, for some unaccountable reason *loves* us. It's that in the light of that overwhelming love we can act as God himself acts in this world: giving as deeply as we can to the need of this world—because the deeper we dip into the well of that love the more we will realize that it is quite simply inexhaustible.

One of the freedoms we will trumpet most loudly in our celebrations of the grand Constitution whose preamble stakes such bold claim to Liberty's blessings is the freedom of Religion—to gather in the name of, and worship the God in whom we believe. How tragic, then, that some insist that the proper application of that freedom is to use it to mark out in dark lines “us” and “them,” and who wrap that freedom in a base kind of patriotism that sneers at any who dare question? Wouldn't it be the ultimate tragedy if we used that very freedom which has been secured for us but the sacrifice of so many and diverse people to construct a notion of “security” that would deny those very freedoms from those who think, or act, or believe differently from us?

One of the true saints in my pantheon of folk who understood this fragile line between our citizenship and our faith is William Sloan Coffin, and I'm reminded of words he wrote that were commended to you all during our time of sabbatical last year: “Individuals and nations are at their worst when, persuaded of their superior virtue, they crusade against the vices of others. They are at their best when they claim their God-given kinship with all humanity, offering a prayer of thanks that there is more mercy in God than sin in us.”¹

As we gather at the Lord's Table in the midst of this celebration of our nation's independence, I can't help but realize that this “independence” which we claim is really best understood when it is coupled with a profound sense of our ultimate *dependence* on the Creator those founding fathers and mothers had the sense to invoke. As I take a bit of the bread, and dip it into this cup, my mind is going to be drawn along by images of those purple mountains, and amber waves, and spacious skies, that they might, at the close of my day, be understood as a gift acceptable according to what has been given me. My prayer will be that in God's great mercy, we will truly seek, and earnestly find that fair balance between our great abundance and this world's deep need.

Let us pray.

¹ William Sloan Coffin, *Credo*. Louisville: Westminster John Know Press, 2004, p. 85.