

The Spirituality of Social Justice and Advocacy - by Elin Goulden

When we are confronted by the pain and injustice of the world, we tend to respond in one of three ways. We may seek to avoid the issue, withdrawing into our own personal and private concerns. We may criticize others, blaming those in difficult situations for making bad choices, or those in positions of power for not solving the problem. Or, finally, we may be moved to take action ourselves.

There is a tendency for us to regard spirituality as what we “escape to” from the trials and the tribulations of the outside world. However, the Biblical prophets clearly indicate that this isn’t the kind of spirituality God is interested in: “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them... But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (Amos 6:21-2, 24).

Similarly, in Isaiah 58, God takes the Israelites to task for engaging in a false spirituality, fasting while serving their own interests. Instead, he calls them to a true fast that involves repentance and doing justice, and promises that “Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly.” (v. 8). If “you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted”, then “the Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your needs in parched places... and you shall be like a watered garden, a spring whose waters never fail.” (v. 10-11) The wholeness we seek through our spiritual practices cannot be realized apart from a commitment to God’s vision of wholeness and justice for all.

The New Testament is equally clear on this. Jesus says that those who give food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, and clothing to those who need it, who welcome the stranger, care for the sick and visit those in prison, do so as if to Him (Matt. 25:31-45). James mocks the dead faith of those who pass by the needy with platitudes instead of acting to meet their needs (James 2:14-17), and John questions how the love of God can abide in anyone who sees their brother or sister in need and refuses help. (1 John 3:17).

So taking action is what God asks of us, but it can and will lead us into uncomfortable places. It will ask us to change our lives, to give up our time, our money, and our sense of security. We will be confronted and challenged by our deep-rooted assumptions and prejudices. Our efforts may not necessarily meet with gratitude or approval; indeed they will bring us into sharper conflict with those who disagree with us, some of whom might be our own family and friends. In addition, pursuing justice involves us in struggles which are long-term and meet with setbacks along the way. We need a spirituality that will sustain us through these challenges and over the long haul.

In the words of veteran U.S. civil rights activist Vincent Harding, spirituality is “living God’s life in God’s world.” Regular prayer and meditation that is rooted in God’s love and vision of shalom for all God’s creatures will help us cultivate the habits of being which sustain us in the hard work of justice.

With *gratitude* for the life and gifts God has given us, rather than continual dissatisfaction with what we have and who we are, we will be empowered to reach out and share God's abundance with others. With the *humility* to regard ourselves as integrally connected to each other and to the earth, we will be able to avoid the self-seeking that spreads discord rather than harmony. We will learn not to try to "go it alone" but *build relationships* with others, allowing those we seek to serve the dignity to serve us in their turn, and to speak on their own behalf.

By cultivating Jesus' *compassion* for each individual, we will learn to resist the temptations of reducing people to abstract problems and strategies, and of demonizing those who disagree with us. In the *joy* of knowing God's love we will be able to celebrate the victories, large and small, which show signs of new life breaking forth in the world. By the same token, we will allow ourselves to *lament* when things go wrong, when God's shalom is broken, and repent of our own involvement in breaking that shalom. We will *take heart* from the great "cloud of witnesses," those throughout history and around the globe whose examples have inspired and instructed us. And through all our efforts, we will be animated and sustained by the vision of God's Kingdom of justice and peace for all.