

A Social Justice Series That Did Not Conform to the Pre-Cooked Conversation Categories of MSNBC, Fox News, The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, or Popular Blogs from the Right or the Left

Kristy Farber, Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, Asheville North Carolina, and Mark Ramsey, Westlake Hills Presbyterian Church, Austin, Texas

“I really appreciate your preaching,” a church member said to us. “It is meaningful... , but have you ever considered preaching more directly on social justice?” Issues of social justice are very much a part of our preaching, but over the years, much of the social justice preaching we have heard and preached ourselves has ended up sounding more like an editorial than proclamation of the gospel. Like many churches, our congregation casually assumes that “everyone more or less agrees about the issues of the day,” while the reality is that the people to whom this series was addressed land in very different places on the political and social landscape.

It’s not that we haven’t addressed important issues—homelessness, race, income equality—with our congregation, but we have mostly done that in the context of education where there is dialogue and sharing of ideas. But preaching is largely a one-way street. That responsibility feels heavy, especially when preaching about social justice. At the same time, our church member’s request stayed with us, and we began to wonder how we might construct a series that honors the diversity of faith perspectives that inform people’s opinions on the issues of the day and doesn’t end up sounding like some op-ed column. We started by listing potential topics: immigration, poverty, guns, homelessness, health care, race, war, torture. We spent six months staring at that list before shaping a Lenten sermon series around these topics. Our ground rules: don’t try to tackle every aspect of every problem, let the Biblical text lead the theological approach, and relentlessly try to edit out anything that sounds like it might come straight from Mika Brzezinski or Bill O’Reilly.

In our sermon for the First Sunday in Lent, we preached together and said, “We are going to plunge as deeply as we can into the most vexing, justice-resistant problems of our world... , and we’re going to try to do it together, being tuned more to God’s expectations for our world than the talking heads of news shows and the acerbic writers of editorial pages.... The goal is not to solve it, but to experience God’s expectation for God’s redeemed future.”

Then, the series proceeded, with three of these being two-voice sermons: *Lent 2*: “You Are Not Your Own,” on Race, texts Romans 7:4-6 and 1 Corinthians 6:19 (page 25 of this issue); *Lent 3*: “One in Four,” on Poverty, texts Acts 2:43-47 and Luke 4:14-20; *Lent 4*: “Scoffers and Murmurs,” where we looked at the overall role of scripture guiding us in these efforts, focusing on Psalm 1; *Palm/Passion Sunday*: “Does God Provide,” on War and Torture, texts Genesis 22:1-19 and Luke 22:47-53, 63-65 (page 30 of this issue).