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# Imagine

Another World Is Possible

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## A BIBLE STUDY AND REFLECTION GUIDE

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Justice and Witness Ministries

# Mission Statement

Justice and Witness Ministries of the United Church of Christ embraces God's transforming mission to do justice, seek peace, and build community. Therefore, in response to the call of Christ, we speak and act prophetically through public witness, policy advocacy, issue education, and grassroots empowerment to build a more just, compassionate, and inclusive world.

Support Neighbors In Need, a special mission offering of the United Church of Christ that supports the United Church of Christ's justice grants and advocacy programs.

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## DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

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Balm is said to be a kind of aromatic resin which properties of healing. Sometimes we turn the hard words of Scripture into easy ones, because of our desire to maintain the status quo, not to offend friends and parishioners. And so we have “made it into a lie.” We have offered a “balm” that we did not have. We may have turned the gracious words of Scripture into hard ones and so cut off persons from the experience of healing that is offered by those words, thus making them into “a lie.” There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole. (Jeremiah 6:14)

- 1** How do we know whether such balm is available and how and when the offer of such balm is to treat “wounds of my people carelessly?”
- 2** Once we identify the balm, what should we do? How might we use it to heal our broken land and its people?

## PRAYER

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God of health and wholeness, we pray for health and wellness of your people. We pray for a system of health care equity, where all people are treated with dignity and respect, where all your children will have access to the health care services they need and deserve. Amen.

## Bible Study

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### Responding To Jesus

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Scripture: Matthew 25: 31-46

**T**here is a saying: WWJD - “What Would Jesus Do?” It grows out of the times in which we live when it is not always easy to discern the best response to difficult situations. Many Christians in today’s world respond readily to the question of personal salvation, accepting Jesus Christ as their personal Savior. But the process of salvation cannot end there. Equally important is the prophetic call of Jesus the Christ to respond to the world’s injustices. WSID (“What Should I Do?”) is a question we ask ourselves and our answer ought to be informed by our first question, “What *would* Jesus Do?”

The text in Matthew 25:31-46 reminds us that our connection with Jesus is not just personal but also corporate. A relationship with Jesus puts us in a fellowship with our sisters and brothers. In the scripture, verses 25 and following, “I was hungry and you fed me..”

### QUESTIONS:

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- 1** How does your personal understanding of the faith inform your view of justice issues?
- 2** Name some ways that you and/or your congregation can respond to some needs of persons around you and in the world.
- 3** Name some ways that you can help change the system that has caused the conditions that those persons are presently in.

# We are the resurrection

**O**n that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

## Read for Reflection

(Mark 4:35-41 NRSV)

**I**f you have ever been in a small boat in open water when a storm kicked up, you know how scary it can be — even when you are wearing a life vest. It happened to me in the Gulf of Mexico off the Florida Panhandle in a 19 foot sailboat. Water spouts could be seen in the distance, and waves arose that dwarfed the boat as it rocked violently back and forth. Rain pounded us and lightening brightened the skies. The rational part of me told me that it would take more than this to capsize the boat, that the keel was providing stability, that the mast was strong, that the lightening rod would protect us from shock, that the water was warm just in case I went overboard.

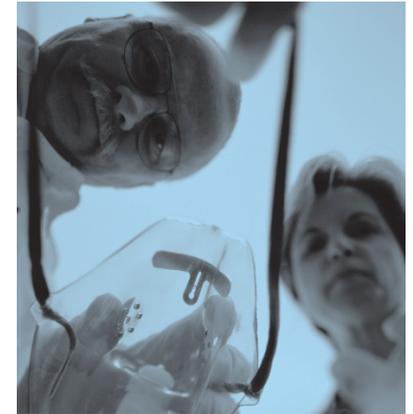


Fear is not rational, however, and I experienced more than a few anxious moments as I held on as we rode out the storm. It passed, and we made it to shore a few hours later, tired but intact. It was also exciting out there, and challenging. Boats are designed to be in the water in a range of weather conditions and unless one is inexperienced or the elements are so severe that no measures can be taken except to hunker down, most of the time you are going to be OK.

The disciples in the boat with Jesus seemed to have forgotten a few things. Weren't some of them fishermen before becoming followers of Jesus? One would think that James and John, for instance, would have immediately known what to do to keep them all safe. Was anyone bailing out the boat? Who was rowing the boat to avoid being swamped? Instead of being pro-active, however, the disciples retreat to their fall back strategy: wake up Jesus, the carpenter. He'll know what to do.

After issuing the command to calm the waters, Jesus issues his retort to his followers: Cowards! Why are you afraid? Where is your faith? And they, awestruck, are amazed at Jesus' powers to still the wind and sea, which is a great way to avoid asking oneself the questions, “What could I

health and well-being of our people. Seemingly this is done without any thought, without empathy. Subsequently, more and more people are plunged into poverty and despair. They then ask, “What have we done?” They don't speak honestly and there is no turning; just turning away to our own course, doing what is right in their our own eyes. And what about us? John and Jane Q Public. We have remained silent. We have relied on the “I've got mine, you get yours” principle. We have not been sensitive to the plight of others. Because of our greed and lack of compassion for God's people, God's heart is hardened and God laments for a sick and dying people for whom there is no healing, no closing of the wound.



Jeremiah says he is hurt for the daughter of his people. He mourns and is dismayed. Is there a balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is the health of my people not restored? (8:21-22). The reason why there is no hope for the people, no healing in Gilead or in America today is because of the hardening of our hearts (9:2). Health care is a basic right. It is a moral imperative. We are the balm. We are the balm that we have been waiting for.

## What can you do?



**A**merica's health care system is failing. It costs too much, covers too little and excludes too many. Stay on the battlefield to fight for universal access to health care! Currently, Justice and Witness Ministries is advocating for Congress to enact legislation that provides access to comprehensive health care for all Americans. It does not endorse any one model of reform. The faith community is called to engage in the work of transforming our nation's health care system into a just and compassionate system of

healing. Health Care Reform is a matter of faith. We must continue to advocate for this reform and we urge you to contact congressional representatives to join the Congressional Universal Health Care Task Force and support the registration. It is also important that you work in your state and local municipalities to begin to build networks for education and advocacy within your own constituency and among other faith groups. Encourage your members, neighbors and friends to share health care stories with us in our Wall of Woe on line at <http://www.ucc.org/wallofwoe/>.

# No Balm in Gilead

***Is there no balm in Gil'ead? Is there no physician there?  
Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?***

- Jeremiah 8:22

## Read for Reflection

Read Jeremiah 6:14-15; 8; 9:1

**M**ore than 43 million persons are without health care in the richest country on earth. Why? Because the nation's leadership and the public are suffering from hearing impairments. We do not listen to each other, nor do we hear. We are not hearing the stories of the plight of millions Americans who are without health care and the circumstances that brought them to that point. We are not hearing the stories of the many persons are under insured and who struggle to pay out-of-pocket costs for services. We are not listening and hearing the stories of those who are unemployed and have lost their employer-based health coverage and we are not listening to the stories of those women who fail to get good prenatal care or yearly exams for cancer. And finally, there are the children. We are not listening to their cries at all!



Whom are we listening to? We are listening to the special interest groups that unjustly distribute the resources of the wealthy. There is a growing school of thought (and support) that "people can and should pull themselves up by their boot straps", that people should exercise their personal responsibility regarding health habits and lifestyle, that people should purchase their own health insurance, and the excuses go on and on. The prophet Jeremiah calls God's people to task in this chapter by admonishing them to turn away from their sins and to turn back to God and to get back on the right track. This turning away leads to the judgement of falling, thus evoking God's judgement. In Jeremiah 6:14-15, the prophet lays particular responsibility on the leaders of the community not only for the economic corruption of the people, but because they have placed a bandage over a gushing artery, saying, "Don't worry, you will be all right." They have carelessly attended to the wounded with apathy and without compassion.

How parallel this lament is today. Our leaders ask us to have trust in their decision making processes, their budget proposals, their programs all the while they are slashing and cutting programs and monies that were designed and put in place to build and sustain the

have done? Why was I frozen with fear?" How often we look to others to do for us the things we might do for ourselves, or to make everything better for us with the wave of a magical wand.

We are told that Jesus wanted to go to the other side of the sea. He had been teaching the crowds who gathered on the shore for hours, and was exhausted. He and the disciples get into the boat and Jesus falls asleep, a rare moment to rest and be renewed before facing whatever would come next. But what comes next is not the man named Legion who lives on the other side of the sea; it is the faithlessness of those whom he had chosen and called to follow him as they encounter the storm.

It often feels as if we are being tossed and turned by the waves of injustice, by the winds of unmet needs of the worlds peoples, by the storms of war and politics. These are times to try one's faith - faith in a God who is just and good, faith in our churches to be leaders in the struggle for justice and peace, faith in ourselves to stay the course and not retreat into finding ways to meet only our own needs or fulfill only our own dreams. We feel vulnerable in times of economic downturn and job loss. We feel vulnerable since 9-11. We feel vulnerable not really knowing who is telling the truth about who knew what and when did they know it about our country's involvement in Iraq.



In times of vulnerability, we seek reassurance, and often we seek that reassurance from outside of ourselves. Just as the disciples looked to Jesus to take care of their vulnerability in the storm, we, too, look for that someone to make the winds cease so our boat isn't rocked and we aren't afraid any more. We think a change in political parties will calm the storm. Or a different CEO or boss. Or a new mayor or school board president. The answer is "out there" somewhere.

But Jesus reminds us that it is our own faith and trust in God that will help us weather whatever storm confronts us. The line of a song from the singing group Sweet Honey in the Rock tells it all: "We are the ones we've been waiting for." Inside of each of us is courage, and strength, and insight to lead, to inspire, to bring healing and hope to others. Should it be up to someone else to stop racism? Or homophobia? Or insensitivity to those who are homeless or facing the challenges of mental illness? Should it be up to someone else to challenge social policies or legislation that denies rights or demeans God's children? Should it be up to someone else to speak into the silence of complicity?

Of what are we afraid? Of rocking the boat? The boat is already rocking! The storm is already here! "Peace! Be still!" Into turmoil, into unrest, into uncertainty, into fear are spoken these words of reassurance. Maybe Jesus was asleep as a sign of trust that the disciples could handle anything that arose. Maybe Jesus trusts us to be the Body of Christ together to face the fear knowing that he is always with us. Maybe this is the resurrection that we are the resurrection!

## QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION:

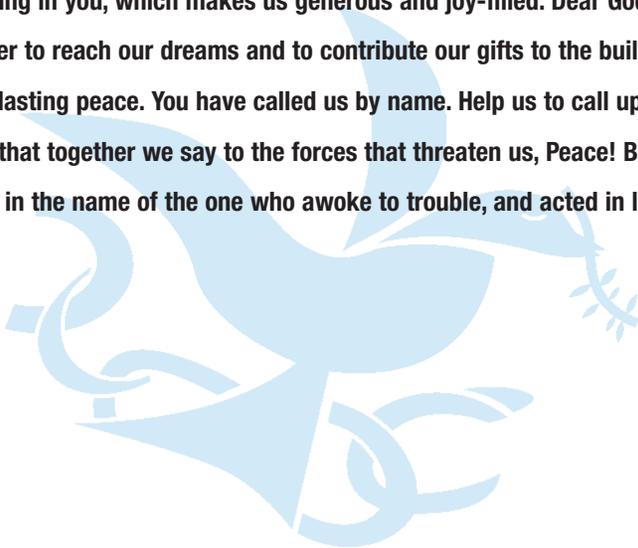
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- 1** What “storms” cause the greatest fear for you?
- 2** What is your “boat”? What “boats” are being tossed around by today’s social and political realities?
- 3** What encourages you to speak into the “storm”?
- 4** When have you experienced God calming your fears?
- 5** If the church is the “boat”, what is needed for it to reach the other side?

## PRAYER

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God of creation, of the wind and the waves, we confess our fear in times of uncertainty. Help us to know your presence in the storm. Help us to not live out of fear, which can make us selfish and hardened to the needs of others, but to live trusting in you, which makes us generous and joy-filled. Dear God, we need each other to reach our dreams and to contribute our gifts to the building of a just and lasting peace. You have called us by name. Help us to call upon each other so that together we say to the forces that threaten us, Peace! Be still! We pray this in the name of the one who awoke to trouble, and acted in love. Amen.



We need to risk for justice in our individual lives and, like charity, such risking, whatever it achieves, puts us in better relationship with each other for the several social and economic purposes we share. Risking oneself for justice also puts one in right relationship with God. Most acts to defend justice and to expand justice require some risk. Stepping out for justice draws the attention of those who think they are better off with the status quo, who see the requirements of justice first of all as threat. But we Christians, along with our Jewish brothers and sisters, remember that we were once slaves in Egypt, and that means we remember our longing for the opportunity to live in a world based on justice and compassion.

The biblical images of Esther and Daniel trying to figure out how to live faithfully in the context of a world, a nation, that they could not control may feel more resonant for many who live with justice consciousness in the United States today than do the images of Egypt. While it is true that we have democratic rights and can work at changing Egypt, changing Babylon, changing Rome, changing the United States, it is also true that we live in the meantime between the imperfect now and the hoped for then. We will draw close to the guidance and example of Jesus when we embrace justice as a living verb instead of feeling alienated from justice because there is so much injustice, so much oppression, so much everyday unfairness in our personal and shared lives.

*\*Translation based on the New English Bible.*

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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- 1** What is blocking you from appreciation of the bounty that is already in your life and what are the next steps you need to take to start living out of abundance, including finding joy in charitable activity?
- 2** What is needed for you to hear the word “justice” as good news in your personal life, in your shared life, and in your relationship with God?
- 3** How does the concept of solidarity create a bridge to personal and shared salvation in the middle of everyday life? Contrast a grounding in solidarity to a grounding limited to “my life as I live it by myself?”
- 4** Jesus turned the concept of kingship on its head when he pointed out that “the greatest among you shall be your servants. (Matthew 20:25-28) What is the guidance of this direction from Jesus for us as we live out our lives in the imperfect democracy and free market economy that is the United States?

# Practice Charity, Risk Justice

**M**ake no mistake, my friends. All good giving, every perfect gift, comes from God. ...Only be sure that you act on the message and do not merely listen; for that would be to mislead yourselves. A person who listens to the message but never acts upon it is like one who looks in a mirror at one's face as given by nature. If you glance at the image and go away, you forget what you look like. But if you look into the perfect law, the law that makes us free, and if you live in the company of that law, if you do not forget what you have heard, and if you act upon it, you will find happiness.

## Read for reflection

James 1:16,22-25 (NEB)

## Introduction

**C**harity and justice are both important biblical concepts in Hebrew scripture, in the gospels, and in the epistles. Both are responses to the needs of others and both, if not trivialized, are costly. In this bible study, the faith grounding of both activities will be considered in terms of personal salvation, salvation in our relationship to others and salvation in our relationship to God. The assumption behind this approach is that both charity and justice are not “add-ons” to our faith but are core practices of our faith. This passage above clarifies this theme.\*

When you understand that practicing charity and risking for justice are sources of salvation and of happiness, then you can embrace the opportunities for charity and justice with pleasure instead of feeling that they are burdensome. This path to salvation, like others, requires not so much a change of mind, though that is helpful, as an opening and transformation of the heart, of re-centering your life around the callings and highest hopes given by God.

## Charity

**T**he Bible is full of calls to charity and acts of charity. They include gifts to religious leaders and organizations to sustain religious practice, gifts to the poor and particularly widows and orphans, and the obligations of hospitality - opening your home and welcoming strangers. Much has also been written about the concept of Jubilee, of forgiving debts so that those in the Jewish community would not be permanently alienated from the land, the source of life-giving sustenance.

In Deuteronomy 15:7-12, we find a passage about charity that is more appeal than law, that

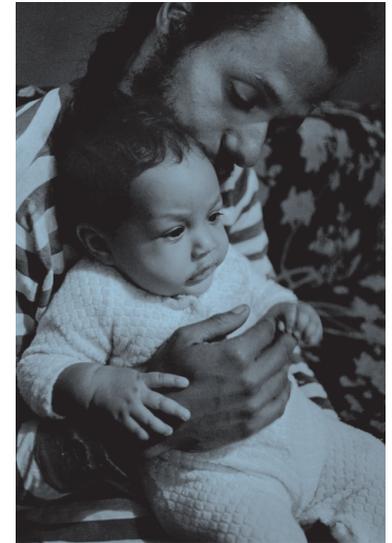
Parents should not be put to death in place of their children and children should not be put to death in place of their parents. A person should only be put to death if they have sinned.

You shall not deprive aliens and orphans of justice, nor take a widow's cloak in pledge. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and God redeemed you from that place. This is why I command you to do this.” \*

The first part of this section guides one away from oppression. This is about not taking advantage and is a powerful corrective to an oppressive understanding of “free market” principles that is too often reduced to “get what you can.” When you hear economic rules and laws being justified by greed and narrow self-interest, then you know that the speakers have turned away from the good directions of Hebrew scripture, and the good news of Jesus Christ, that we don't have to live lives within the boundaries of selfishness, the selfishness of others and our own selfishness. The market can be free, in the sense of being open and equitable and guided by individual choices, without being oppressive.

A Christian understanding of freedom can never be reduced to “doing whatever you want.” First of all, there is elementary social constraint. Freedom to do what you want stops at the point that it does injury to others, and democracy has the hope of being self-corrective, in part, because people will vote against those who, in the name of freedom or whatever other misdirection, do injury to me. A Christian understanding of freedom directs one from the freedom to do what you want to the freedom to do what is right. Figuring out what is right may not be simple, but the motivation and the landmark to do justice matter all the same. It is right to pay wages on time. It is right that people should be punished only for the wrong things that they have done.

We are reminded that we were once slaves, that we cannot assume that justice is automatic and firmly in place. Whatever there is of justice in our nation requires vigilance, caring, and action or it will not be maintained, much less expanded. Wonderful things have happened in the United States within the lifetimes of our oldest fellow-Christians. Official segregation was ended and voting rights were expanded. The legal oppression of women was ended. Accommodations for persons with disabilities must be provided in public settings. All that is needed has not been achieved, but we have been given wonderful gifts of changed laws, changed structures, and the legacy of hopes that made such changes occur.



allows us to see the healing, the salve-ation, the restoring and extending of community, that charity makes possible.

When one of your fellow-citizens in any of your settlements in the land which God is giving you, becomes poor, do not be hard-hearted or close-fisted. Be open-handed and lend them what they need on pledge. Do not harbor iniquitous (evil) thoughts when they cannot pay you back in the 7th year, the year of the remission of the pledge. Do not look down on your fellow-citizen or give them nothing. If you do any of these things, your fellow-citizen will appeal to God and you will be found guilty of sin.

Give freely and do not be stingy with your bounty. God gives you the bounty and will bless you in all your undertakings.



“The poor will always be with you and I command you to be open-handed with your fellow citizens, both those who are poor and those who are distressed.”\*

If all you take from this passage is a feeling of obligation, you are reading past the sources of salvation to be found there.

First, note that the passage is written to those who have the economic resources which allow them to be charitable. These resources are named as a blessing from God. Your money belongs to you but you do not appreciate it unless you understand that

it is a blessing. Without such appreciation, you feel unblessed and it is likely that however much money you have you will feel it is not enough. When you appreciate that you have your money as a blessing you are freed from a deep urgency to pile up more and more money and can start living out of a feeling of abundance.

Without the feeling of blessing and abundance then charity, at best, feels like duty. With the feeling of blessing and abundance your heart turns from your own needs and desires to compassion for the needs and desire of others. Charity feels like a usual and happy activity of caring for others and yields the building up of a sense of shared community, of creating a society in which people take care of each other. Such a society can spend less on its prisons and more on its parks. It is both personal and societal salvation.

Rightly understood, charity is also a path to spiritual salvation. The priests who wrote Deuteronomy see God in the ongoing process of giving the land to the Hebrew people. The gift is not merely singular and historical, but current and accessible. To appreciate that all the sources of one’s bounty; including in our time and place the United States—land, laws, resources, relationships, and opportunitites—is an ongoing gift of God that lures us toward

being thankful in the midst of our here and now lives. We are reminded that we are creatures and that God is God. The issue of God-given rights is grist for another bible study. Here we are reminded of God-given opportunity, given for us. To be charitable as an expression of such thankfulness puts us in right-relationship with God, God the source of our created life and God the source of our created world, and God the source of hopes and dreams that draw us together in right relationships to each other.

With this perspective, we can see that when Jesus gave his life to affirm such truths, however hard it was to do, it was a gift of hope and of thankfulness.

## Justice

**T**he bible is full of calls to justice and acts of justice.

The awareness of standards of justice deepens over biblical history from blood feud to an eye-for-an-eye, and finally to the great commandment to love your neighbor as you love yourself (Matthew 22:39). Hebrew scripture, the gospels, and the epistles have all contributed to the emer-



gence of the rule of law, and of democracy as the best way to create our laws. These contributions emerged over the centuries intertwined with principle-based Roman law and with laws that merely reflect precedent. In the United States that we stand before the law both as petitioners based on our own needs for justice and as those who are part of Caesar, the dispensers of justice. Attending to such double-mindedness can help us understand that we need the guidance of the gospel more than ever. We need visions of justice to correct whatever there is of narrow self-interest in our own petitions, and we need vision of justice to draw us toward greater fairness, equity, and compassion as we shape the laws and expectations that govern our official lives, that shape our institutions, and that reform our direct relationships with each other.

Once again we can find in Deuteronomy guidance that is more than obedience to the law. In Chapter 24: 14-19 we can see justice and charity closely intertwined.

“You shall not keep back the wages of a worker who is poor and needy, whether a fellow-citizen or an alien living in your country in one of your settlements. Pay the wages on the same day before sunset, for those that our poor have set their heart upon them. If you do not pay on time, then the one in need may appeal to God against you and you will be guilty of sin.

## PRAYER

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God, we are humbled by your omnipotence and comforted by your omnipresence. Even in our moments of disconnection from the light of your truth, you continue to reveal to us visions of Zion.

We bear witness to acts of inhumanity which leave us a broken people. We bear witness to injustices, past and present, which leave us worn, weary, and thirsting for righteousness. Yet, hope rises from the ashes of our sorrows as we long for the day when justice reigns!

In the dangerous times of dislocation help us to not forget your promises. May our journeys always lead us into community with each other and with you. Keep us mindful of what it means to be your people and for you to be God.



## The Danger of Disconnection

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Psalm 137: 1- 6

**I** grew up in the country, in solemn communion with nature, celebrating the patience and the peace that is stimulated by the outdoors. Each time that I return to my rural homeland I feel the impact of physical and emotional renewal. At that moment there surges up within me the sacred memory of my ancestors, those whose arduous work forged the future of my family, our barrio, and our “native country” (patria). Although I have spent more than twenty years in the United States, I am not able to conceive of myself as an individual apart from Puerto Rico and the Latin American family.

**T**he large cities of North America offer a very different experience. Each one has its high-rise central business district which is surrounded by low-lying neighborhoods inhabited by powerless and depressed people. Many of us from the country, caught in this contrast, see our dreams vanish the moment we find ourselves separated from the harmonious sounds of our “native soil” (terruño). Though the impact of this kind of environmental transition is quite involuntary, the psychological and emotional dynamics that well up within us usually cause a feeling of desperation. This kind of psychological enslavement has trapped millions in mental prisons, journeying from their social/cultural locations to strange places that are totally foreign to their previous existence.



This is the situation that confronted the Israelites when they were uprooted from their native soil of Zion by the powerful nation of Babylon in 586 B.C. Jerusalem was left in ashes, and they were transported to a strange country with a different language. In their existence as exiled, slave laborers in Babylon their human dignity was diminished and devalued by oppressive forces.

Those who had made the original journey of dislocation also found themselves with new generations that were born in the foreign land. These younger Israelites, at first, grew up listening to explanations of how they should understand themselves—not only as isolated individuals but also as a corporate community bound together by a common faith in God. Yet the separation from their familiar environment became increasingly catastrophic. They no longer had the physical and moral support of their sacred land and their Holy Temple.

Because the most basic characteristics of their national life had been destroyed, the elders gradually began to abandon—consciously or not—the teaching about their virtues, their customs, and their characteristics as the people of God.

Psalm 137 shows us a people crippled by the disconnection with their native land, sitting outdoors in resignation “by the rivers of Babylon” (v.1, NRSV). The people were paralyzed by the enslavement to which they had been subjected. How should we understand the posture of sitting down? As one of resting or as one of inactivity? The act of resting during the course of forced labor was a privilege, but the posture of inactivity was a danger. The national depression captured by the words “and there we wept” (v.1) resulted from psychological paralysis and from the geographical distance from their homeland. Permitting new historical influences to define their identity, instead of communicating the story that had defined them as the people of God, was destroying their security and future as a nation. The enslavement was designed to keep the people submitting themselves to feelings of powerlessness and depression.



A crude danger exists in consenting to the requests of our oppressors. We should not deviate from our role as the people of God in order to offer our divine activities for the entertainment of uninformed spectators. It is no surprise that the Israelites could not bring themselves to provide frivolous entertainment for their captors: “How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” (v. 4).

The concluding portion of our text describes the situation of the people of

God who have become the victims of racial injustice:

If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy. (vv. 5-6)

Their faith in God continued to be their only hope for survival; in the face of these oppressive influences from the dominant society, their intentional, sacred “activities” were necessary for their culture to survive.

The lament of the Israelites in Psalm 137 is in unison with the lament of homeless Palestinians; it is in unison with the laments of abused prisoners in Iraq, and the countless number of poverty-stricken refugees throughout the Middle East and in other war-torn areas of the globe. The lament of this Psalm may be heard quite easily if we pay attention to the cries of physically abused women and children, of African-Americans, Hispanics, Native

Americans, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders who suffer from racism; it can be heard in the cries of poor European Americans. These groups, and many others worldwide, live today with the harsh realities of systemic racial, economic and environmental injustice.

How can the people of Vieques, Puerto Rico sing when the United States military establishment refuses to clean the contamination of sixty years of bombardment? How can Native Americans sing when their people have been decimated and their land stolen? How can African Americans sing when they’ve been stripped from their homeland, and denied reparations? How can the people of Micronesia sing when their islands have become poisonous with atomic toxins? How can poor European Americans in Appalachia sing when they are forced to move because of strip mining? How can our children sing when the air they breathe is polluted by multinational pharmaceutical corporations who strive for profit at the cost of lung cancer and other incurable diseases? How can we sing when seas are ravaged by regular waste discharges from luxury cruise ships?

Despite differences between our situations and that of the Israelites in Babylon, we have a similar challenge to maintain our faith in the midst of abuse—and to work for justice. The Chinese character for CRISIS is a combination of the separate characters for “danger” and “opportunity.” Let us unite our voices in prayer that the danger of dislocation may also become the opportunity for empowerment of those who have felt voiceless, powerless and depressed! We are called by God to a ministry of justice whose foremost responsibility is to ensure respect for the human dignity of all people.

*Written by the Rev. Dr. Carlos J. Correa and the Racial Justice Ministry Team.*

#### QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION:

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- 1** The situation described in Psalm 137 is clearly describing the feelings of an oppressed people. Have you ever felt oppressed? Have you felt disconnected, or forced into an alien space or way of living? If so, how?
- 2** Can you look around your church, your community, the world, and name people or groups that may feel oppressed or kept from being at peace?
- 3** Are there any thoughts or behaviors in your church or community that may contribute to feelings of disconnection, such as the Israelites felt when their captors asked for songs?
- 4** Do you believe striving to understand the causes and depths of sorrow that make people sit down and weep will help us make this another, better world? If so, how?
- 5** What actions can your congregation or community take to work, in solidarity with oppressed peoples, toward peace with justice?