

Truth, Justice & the Kingdom Way (Summer Saints 2021: William Henry Sheppard)
A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on July 18, 2021
Friendship Presbyterian Church

*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;
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals
I will not look upon.
Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:21-24)*

*“With what shall I come before the Lord,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”
He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:6-8, NRSV)*

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4:16-21, NRSV)

“But let *justice* roll down like waters” ... “What does the Lord require of you but to do *justice*” ...

Justice.

When we hear this word, we usually think of people who have done wrong getting what they deserve – *that is Justice*. And without a doubt, that *is* partly true. The idea that good is rewarded and wrong punished is a satisfying one and one that we would, naturally, will to be the case everywhere. But it is only a small part of what the Biblical prophets – like Amos and Micah from whom we have just heard, and others – mean when they speak of “Justice.”

For them, Justice is much more than outward obedience to law or the punishment of lawbreakers but speaks to a vision much bigger, much more expansive ... a vision held by Jesus ... a vision of what the Bible calls the Kingdom of God ... a vision passionately pursued by our Summer Saint for this morning.

Today, we listen deeply to the life and witness of a late 19th-century / early 20th-century Presbyterian missionary to Africa, and one of the very first black Americans to spread the gospel on that continent. His name was William Henry Sheppard, and he answered the call of God and took up the challenge. His faith helped to make new disciples among a previously unreached people, and his passionate advocacy for them changed the world. Though largely unknown today, Sheppard played a crucial role in exposing a scandal of horrific proportions. It is a story that must never, ever be forgotten.

William Henry Sheppard was born in Waynesboro, Virginia in March 1865, about a month before the end of the Civil War. He was never a slave ... his mother was a free woman of mixed-race background, while his father was a barber and also the sexton at a predominantly white Presbyterian church.

The seeds of his future were planted early. Sheppard remembered as a child being told by a white woman in that Presbyterian church that she was praying for him, that one day, God might call him to Africa to serve as a missionary.

At the age of 15, he enrolled at the Hampton Institute, the pioneering institute of black higher education in Hampton, Virginia, where he learned from such teachers as Booker T. Washington. He was fascinated by the "Curiosity Room," an anthropological collection maintained by the school's white founder, Gen. Samuel Armstrong. Graduating from Hampton in 1883, Sheppard moved on to what is today Stillman College, a Presbyterian institution in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. There he met Lucy Gantt, a teacher in a one-room schoolhouse, and the two soon fell in love and became engaged.

Finishing his studies at Stillman in 1886, he was ordained as a minister in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.), and served as pastor at Zion Presbyterian Church in Atlanta for the next two years, though his greatest desire by this time was indeed to serve as a missionary in an African

nation and he applied to do just this. The request, however, was controversial within the white denominational leadership. Some argued that black ministers might function especially well as missionaries in African countries, but the Presbyterian Church's foreign missions committee refused to send Sheppard to Africa without "white supervision." Fortunately, Sheppard got his chance in 1890 after a young white minister, Samuel Lapsley, volunteered to take on Sheppard as his partner and to go to the Congo with him to set up the Presbyterian mission there.

As it turned out, there was little supervision involved. What may have started out as an almost "servant and master" relationship very quickly turned around completely because of Sheppard's extraordinary gifts. Arriving on Africa's Atlantic coast at the mouth of the Congo River in what is today the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the two made their way inland to the lands of the Kuba people (now often known as the Bakuba), and there, in 1891, they founded the American Presbyterian Congo Mission, at a village called Luebo.

Sheppard was well aware that he was entering a region deadly to Westerners. The rivers and lakes were filled with crocodiles and hippopotami, and the dense forests, with elephants and panthers. No one was safe, even in the settlement, as houses were invaded by scorpions, fleas, and snakes. Common illnesses included deadly "blackwater fever" and malaria. Sheppard himself suffered 22 bouts of malaria in his first two years!

In the eyes of the Africans he met, he had an ambiguous position: he was black but a stranger nevertheless. They called Sheppard "Mundele Ndom," usually translated as "black white man," but nevertheless soon grew to love him, and that love was returned. He soon learned to speak the Kuba language, which he described as "highly inflected and musical." and this helped him discover parts of the Congo region that no American or European had ever visited.

He became a keen observer of the culture into which he had transplanted himself. He recorded his observations of Kuba crops, textiles, and music, and over time, developed a large collection of exquisite crafts. He also learned to hunt and was photographed at one point with a giant snake he had killed, surrounded by a crowd of admiring Kuba natives. Once killing a hippopotamus with his rifle in order to feed a group of starving villagers, Sheppard later shot other hippos and dried their meat so that he could make trades and keep the mission well provisioned. Overall, he adapted to life in Africa much better than his partner Lapsley, who died of a fever in 1892. Sheppard mourned for him as a "friend and brother," and carried on alone, eventually joined by other U.S. missionaries, white and black.

On Sheppard's first (relatively brief) return home in 1893, he stopped in England, where he met Queen Victoria and was inducted into the Royal Geographical Society. Back in the United States, he visited churches – preaching and giving speeches about his experiences in the Congo to win financial support and more recruits for the mission effort.

He also made the best of the time in another way too, finally marrying his fiancée Lucy, and returning with her to the Congo, where she managed the mission school, learned the local languages, and led the choir. The Sheppards became the acknowledged leaders among the

missionary community that grew up at Luebo, one in which black and white American missionaries and black Africans lived and worked together, in a way that was simply not possible in the United States at the time.

Sheppard and his wife had three children together over the next few years there, but the loss of two of them to disease proved to be too much, and in 1898 Lucy returned to the United States with their remaining child.

But such personal, family trials were not the only ones being faced by the mission and the Kuba people. The region of the Congo, which had only recently been explored by westerners, had also caught the attention of King Leopold II of Belgium. The Berlin Conference, held in 1884-85 to regulate European colonization and trade in Africa, had officially recognized Leopold's rule over the Congo Free State as a personal possession not subject to review by the Belgian government, on the condition that Leopold would pursue the goal of improving the lives of the people within his domain. This trust would prove to be sorely misplaced, even by already spotty European colonial standards.

Ivory had been the Congo's main export, but Leopold focused on rubber. The mass marketing of bicycles and automobiles in the 1890s greatly increased the demand for rubber and sent prices soaring. When a rubber-producing vine was discovered in the Congolese rainforests in 1890, Leopold forced out the competition and acquired a monopoly on the scarce commodity. Soon, the Congo was producing 20,000 tons of crude rubber a year at a 900 percent profit. The high return was due largely to cheap labor – *very* cheap labor.

As word of atrocities leaked out of the Congo by 1896, Leopold responded with sham investigations and hollow promises of reform. The American Presbyterian Congo Mission became a key whistleblower. In 1899 it directed Sheppard to investigate personally the villages that were purportedly being attacked by the Zappo Zaps, a subtribe of the BaSonga Menos that Leopold's agents employed in the Kasai district. They were cannibals who filed their teeth to a point, tattooed their faces, and carried poisoned-dipped spears and arrows. Leopold supplied these mercenaries with guns to terrorize the Congolese into harvesting rubber for him. Not meeting exorbitantly high quotas was met with horrifying consequences.

On encountering the Zappo Zaps himself, Sheppard understandably feared for this life, but he soon discovered that *they* assumed all foreigners were allied with Leopold, so they didn't hesitate to describe their activities to him, and boasted of their cruelties. Sheppard carried with him a Kodak camera, with which he took first-hand photos of the atrocities and wrote a damning report.

The Mission then hired William Morrison as its legal representative. Morrison, also a Presbyterian missionary in the Congo, wrote letters, gave speeches, and twisted arms in private. His actions led the British Parliament to pass a unanimous resolution calling on the signers of the Berlin accord of 1885 to take action to protect the Congolese.

In 1904, Sheppard returned home on furlough and, like Morrison, spoke out against the widespread and systemic cruelties taking place. President Theodore Roosevelt even received him at the White House the next year to hear the case against Leopold, which led to the U.S. Senate giving unanimous support to a resolution calling for an immediate end to the atrocities.

Sheppard himself returned to the Congo in 1906 and in the next year wrote an article for a church journal in which he attacked the Kasai Rubber Company, a Belgian contractor, for what was happening in the Kasai basin. The company brought libel charges against him in response, but they were dropped at the trial, as the horrifying stories only multiplied in the press and the prosecution could produce no evidence to support its own spurious accusations.

In the end, Sheppard was acquitted, King Leopold was disgraced, and in 1908 the Belgian parliament issued a new charter that placed the Congo under its *own* control. Amid scandal and international outrage, Leopold died in 1909, only several weeks after Sheppard's trial ended. Over the 25 years of Leopold's rule in the Congo, the native population had declined by about 50 percent. It is estimated that as many as 10 million Congolese died from violence and starvation.

Sheppard's work was done there, and he returned to the United States in 1910 for good and soon settled in Louisville, Kentucky, where he spent the rest of his life serving as pastor of Grace Presbyterian Church and helped to establish a highly successful settlement house for Louisville's black population. He still gave lectures but had to depart before eating when talking in hotels to *white* groups, and he had to read in a Louisville newspaper article of the "little pickaninny" who had somehow become a fellow of the Royal Geographical Society.

Suffering a stroke, he died on November 27, 1927, in Louisville. Large interracial memorial services were held in both Louisville and Waynesboro. Lucy, his wife, followed in 1955, and they were buried side-by-side.

In the years after his death, Sheppard was almost forgotten, but Adam Hochschild's best-selling *King Leopold's Ghost* in 1998 brought him back to public attention. Two full-length biographies have since been published, recognizing his achievements as a missionary, an explorer (he has sometimes been called the "Black Livingstone"), and an advocate for the people of Africa.

His alma mater, Stillman College, honored Sheppard by naming its library after him, and the Presbyterian Church named its central Alabama Presbytery after him (the one covering Birmingham and Montgomery, and if you can believe it, Tuscaloosa *and* Auburn!): The Presbytery of Sheppards and Lapsley, the presbytery in which I grew up.

I think to fully appreciate the life and witness of William Henry Sheppard, especially in light of the prophetic call to justice, it's helpful to go back to an episode with Sheppard and Lapsley on

their way to Africa for the first time. It turns out that their activities there were enabled by the very man whose atrocities Sheppard would later expose!

Back in 1890, the pair had traveled to London first, en route to the Congo; and while there, they met Gen. Henry Shelton Sanford, an American ally of King Leopold, and friend of a friend of Lapsley's father. Sanford promised to do "everything in his power" to help the pair, even arranging an audience with the King when Lapsley later visited him in Belgium. The truth is, neither the secular Sanford nor the Catholic Leopold were interested in the Presbyterians' work, except insofar as this spiritual mission into newly acquired territory could begin the process of "civilizing" the natives and legitimizing Leopold's rule. In other words, for Leopold, there's nothing like religion to make what were (in his eyes) savages into good little *obedient* savages – and slaves.

The history of religion in the hands of corrupt power has always been about control – about either instilling fear and obedience in subjects by divine sanction or pacifying them with sweet dreams of another world long enough to make them forget how bad they have it in *this* one. And thus, so often in the age of European colonialism, much well-meaning missionary work ultimately served imperial interests. Not intentionally, of course, but mission primarily about making people fit for heaven, or even the broader aim of feeding and clothing them, doesn't fundamentally challenge the powers themselves.

And this is where a truly biblical vision of Justice comes in, and why it's essential ... why it's at the very *heart* of the Gospel ... for it speaks to the pursuit of right relationships between people and peoples ... between *you* and *me*, yes, but also between *us* and *them* ... in communities and societal structures built on the universal compassion of God, not human arrogance, greed, and indifference.

As the Hebrew prophets knew all too well, official religion usually fails this vision completely – either by its silence in the face of rank *injustice* or even its enlistment in legitimizing corrupt powers with phony piety. The prophets looked on the grand festivals of their own day ... the grandeur of the Temple itself ... they looked deeply into the hearts of priests and kings and power brokers, and saw there vanity and futility, not faithfulness. They saw a nation putting on a show of old-time religion, but missing its heart ... believing all the "right" things, singing all the right songs, saying all the right prayers, but ignoring the everyday cruelties perpetrated by the powerful against the poor and the most defenseless ... leading the holy ruffian Amos to exclaim:

*Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*
(Amos 5:23-24, NRSV)

Several centuries later, as told in the gospel of Luke, Jesus opens the scroll of another prophet, the prophet Isaiah, and claims the anointing of one who is to bring good news to the poor, release to the

captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed, and the proclamation of the year of the Lord's favor.

This is no private message of Heaven for the solitary sinner – it is a *public* revolution ... It is the bold declaration of a Great Divine Re-set that addresses the *whole* of society and the bondage which has held it fast for so long. As such,

- It is *Good News* to the victims of power and those simply left behind ...
- It is a breaking free from resignation to “That’s just the way it is,” that insidious mantra that can justify any cruelty or inhumanity ...
- It is literally a declaration of a divine Jubilee, an economic reckoning in which debts are cancelled and lands are returned to those from whom they were taken!

This is the vision that William Henry Sheppard gave his life to. He went beyond a purely spiritual message of “pie in the sky” or even a charity that nobly tries to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, for he believed in a *whole* gospel – working tirelessly for a truly biblical vision of Justice in which the most vulnerable of God’s children are protected and cherished. His proclamation of Jesus brought together eternal hope, earthly bread, *and* God-inspired demands for the freedom and dignity of his adopted people. And his efforts were not in vain.

All together, his was a glad and bold proclamation of the Kingdom of God – of God’s Dream for the whole world. And we today, as fellow disciples of Jesus Christ, look for and work for that day when this Dream will be manifest reality for all humankind ... to the glory of God! Amen.