

Justice Is Like Herding Cats

Mark 9:38-50

“What does justice mean in the biblical sense and how do we live it day to day, such as when we feel we’ve been wronged and want to defend ourselves or in our deepest personal relationships?”

Biblical justice is like herding cats. What does that mean? Justice seems so clear a concept, so plain a task, yet it is so difficult, even impossible, to do. In the *Gospel of John*, a disciple said to Jesus, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he was not following us.” It’s not right, not fair! Fix ‘em, Jesus! Make it right! But Jesus said, “Do not stop him...whoever is not against us is for us. Truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.”

Justice is making things right for people – respecting other people’s work and gifts. Philip Wogaman, former pastor of Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington, DC, defined justice as

the community’s guarantee of the conditions necessary for everybody to be a participant in the common life of society.... If we are, finally, brothers and sisters through the providence of God, then it is just to structure institutions and laws in such a way that communal life is enhanced and individuals are provided full opportunity for participation.

Justice belongs to each of us and to all of us. It is a moral imperative essential to enjoying intimate and loving relationship with God. It is being awake to existing injustice, to acknowledge our participation in it – even just through unjust social structures we had nothing to do with erecting.

If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell and if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

I don’t know quite what that means -- “their worm never dies” but it sounds really bad. I do know Jesus was not teaching about Hell, but using popular and commonly-held beliefs about Hell to emphasize how important this matter of justice was, its significance in terms of our relationships with each other including the little ones and the least of these. It also has great significance in terms of our relationship with God.

Micah 6:8 represents a summary of the message of ancient Israel’s great prophets: “What does the Lord require of you?” The first thing is to *do justice*. Do it yourself! Make sure your society does it! Practice fair and equitable treatment – judgment that’s not judgmental, justice that is blind to wealth, power, social status, race, or gender.

There is another more radical, painful, and wrenching step: biblical justice that is redistributive justice -- “finding out what belongs to whom and returning it to them” (Walter Brueggemann, Sharon Parks, Thomas H. Groome, *To Act Justly, Love Tenderly, Walk Humbly: an Agenda for Ministers*, Paulist Press, NY) **Biblical**

redistributive justice recognizes that, through history, some pretty dramatic inequalities have arisen in how wealth and access to the benefits of societies are distributed. Biblical justice is about correcting inequitable redistributions. It's like a very proper lady who goes into a tea shop. She has brought with her a bag of cookies from home. She reads a book while sipping her tea. The shop is quite crowded and soon a man sits down at her table, orders tea, and smiles at her. As he sips his tea, she reaches out and takes a cookie. To her amazement, he also takes a cookie -- one of her cookies! She takes another, then so does he. She is shocked when he takes the last cookie, breaks it in two and offers to share with her. She is so upset, she quickly finishes and leaves. At the bus stop, she reaches into her purse for money to buy a ticket only to discover her own unopened bag of cookies. (Brueggemann, *To Act Justly*) Injustice is characterized by our eating someone else's cookies and doing it so long we think they're ours.

Justice is a big concept with global implications, but what can each of us do in our daily lives to act justly? We can insist that our church work for justice, that we are actively involved in partnerships with other churches, government, and business to effect changes in social policy and systemic structures. But we also need to recognize that we as followers of Jesus, seekers for truth, must challenge and engage what motivates and drives us.

The heart of the Gospel is the transformation of people's lives: new vision, new perspectives, new birth, new mind, and new creation. Our faith calls us to justice, to respond to the radical call to set our lives in sync with the vision of life Jesus saw and taught – the “kingdom of God.” It's not an easy path. It's not the safe way to get through life, but it is fundamentally life-changing and life giving. Nothing less is worthy to be called the Gospel of Jesus as author Annie Dillard asks:

"Why do people in church seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? ... Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? ...We should all be wearing crash helmets." (Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*)

But if we do believe what our faith testifies, what can we do about it? Simply, this: live our lives, love our gifts, embrace our story. Each of us is unique, different from anyone else who has ever lived or who ever will live. Tradition tells us that:

God sends each person into this world with a special message to deliver, with a special song to sing for others, with a special act of love to bestow. No one else can speak my message, or sing my song, or offer my act of love. These are entrusted only to me. (John Powell, *Seasons of the Heart*)

I cannot prove the validity of this idea, but I believe it to be true and its truth is reflected in the traditional story of Rabbi Zushka who was dying and someone asked him what he thought life beyond the grave would be like. The old man thought for a long time, then he replied, “I don't really know. But one thing I do know: when I get there I am not going to be asked, ‘Why weren't you Moses?’ or ‘Why weren't you David?’ I am going to be asked, ‘Why weren't you Zushka?’

To do justice is to be that unique person God made you to be. To do justice is to bring God's life to light through us. In our differences, we share a call to act for justice, to become people whose very lives just drip and ooze justice. They overflow justice. We do justice because we can't do otherwise. The same thing is true of Crossroads Church that we do justice because of the nature of our shared life, the commitment we share to be community in the Spirit. We do justice through activities like the Missouri River clean up and our partnership with the Metro Organization for Racial and Economic Equity here in Kansas City. MORE² is a community-

based organizing group that seeks to change unjust policies and work for racial and economic equity across the Kansas City area primary through personal relationships. It has proven to be very effective.

We do justice by sharing and confessing our own concerns as African-American theologian and renowned preacher Howard Thurman shared his many years ago:

*My concern is for the life of the world in these troubled times.
I confess my own inner confusion as I look out upon the world.
There is food for all, yet many are hungry.
There are clothes enough for all, yet many are in rags.
There is room enough for all, yet many are crowded.
There are none who want war, yet preparations for conflict abound.
I confess my own share in the ills of the times.
I have shirked my own responsibilities as a citizen.
I have not been wise in casting my ballot.
I have left to others a real interest in making a public opinion worthy of democracy.
I have been concerned about my own little job, my own little security,
my own shelter, my own bread.
I have not really cared about jobs for others, security for others,
shelter for others, bread for others.
I have not worked for peace. I want peace, but I have (in effect) voted and worked for war.
I have silenced my own voice that it may not be heard on the side of any cause, however right, if it meant running risks or damaging my own little reputation.
Let Thy light burn in me that I may from this moment on, take effective steps within my own powers, to live up to the light and courageously to pay for the kind of world I so deeply desire.*

(For the Inward Journey: the Writings of Howard Thurman, selected by Anne Spencer Thurman (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1984), pp. 50-53, 55

So, what is justice and how do we live it in our daily lives?

*Justice
making things right – righteous!
How will it be right?
Can it ever be right?
How many wrongs make a right?
Small rights
Correcting injustice where I see it
In my life where it touches me
Righting the wrongs I can
How do I know what's right?
I have to choose
Then deal with those who disagree
Justice
receiving the consequences for actions, for wrongs
Justice relieved by grace
A more invasive justice
To sort out what belongs to whom
And to return it to them (Brueggemann)
It doesn't work to force redistributive justice
We each must want it -- want to try it*

*The power of giving
The simpler our lifestyle
The more we have to give
More power
More influence
More time and energy freed up
Relationship
For what we value most
The more we know ourselves from within
Transparent motives
integrated action -- powerful
Justice
Dreaming
Learning what you want
discerning our wants
In light of what is
Ultimately important
Using our power
In partnership with God
To make a difference
Reframe
Reshape
Change the world
Our dreams within God's dream (Jack Price, ©2009)*