

A Call for Justice

Isaiah 11:1-9

When someone says to you, “We need more justice around here,” what do you think? What is justice to you? Justice is retributive. It is also distributive. Justice is making things right. It is suffering consequences or punishment for wrongdoing. It is the opportunity to pay off the debt, even a debt to society. It is the restoration of one’s rightful property or status.

One way to understanding justice more clearly is to understand the nature of injustice. Injustice is 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 when you eat someone else’s cookies and keep doing it because you think they’re yours. Biblical justice is a lot like herding cats. It is making things right for people while also respecting other people’s work and gifts. It is “the community’s guarantee of the conditions necessary for everybody to be a participant in the common life of society.”

(Philip Wogaman, former pastor of Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington, DC)

Justice has always been at the heart of Jewish faith. From its beginning, the land was given to all the people in perpetuity as a gift of God. The Year of Jubilee—every fifty years all debts cancelled, all slaves freed, and all land returned to its original owners --was given to stabilize God’s gift. Even after the rise and fall of Israel’s monarchy and the impending demise of the nation--Israel to Assyria in the eighth century and, later, Judah to Babylon in the sixth century), the message of the prophets were of justice: “with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.” (Is.11: 4) Righteousness equaled justice for the poor and for the meek. The promised Messiah would be an extension of this fundamental dream of justice that someday it would come to the world.

In most criminal justice systems, justice favors the wealthy and powerful. But divine justice favors the poor. Divine justice belongs to each of us and to all of us. Justice in biblical sense is to be awake to existing injustice and to acknowledge our participation in it – even through unjust social structures we had nothing to do with erecting. This is the only way to become free of consequences of injustice. Micah 6:8 is 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*. God’s call is always, “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, and gender, justice that frees us from addictions to control, security, and reputation.

Almost 3000 years ago, Isaiah offered a vision, an image of peace and also of justice. “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid.” And the promise is this: “They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord” (Isaiah 11:9) Predator and prey alike will not only live in peace because the mighty hand of a cosmic God demands it. They live in peace because they are satisfied, content, with the arrangement. Everyone has what they need in peaceful co-existence.

True justice, the kind that leads to peace, is always in our best interest, our self-interest, if we see ourselves through eyes of God. Father Richard Rohr, known to many for his work teaching the Enneagram, wrote, “we have often settled [at Christmas] for the sweet coming of a baby who asked little of us in terms of *surrender, encounter, mutuality or [taking seriously]the actual teaching of Jesus*. This is what I am inviting you to this Advent. The suffering, injustice and devastation on this planet are too great now to settle for any infantile gospel or any infantile Jesus.

(Preparing for Christmas with Richard Rohr, 2)

Peace is the ability of each person to live with deep joy inside their own skin. Justice is the process by which all of us have ability to live in peace. Justice is essential for peace. Justice is an expression of our own self-interest—individually and communally. When we believe that, and begin to realize its full implication, it will change our lives and potentially change our world. That’s what Christmas is all about because there is no peace on earth without justice on earth

Justice is a big concept with global implications, but what can each of us do in our daily lives to act justly? Simply this: 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 unjust social policy and oppressive systemic structures. We can choose to challenge and engage those same systemic structures ourselves, as persons, to effect those same changes. And we can devote ourselves to finding our self-interest—that will allow us to live at peace within ourselves--and with all people.

The heart of the Gospel is the transformation of people’s lives: new vision, new perspectives, new birth, new mind, and new creation. Such a transformation requires us to engage ourselves and our society to grow up into the values of compassion, equity, and love that pretty much all the world’s religious traditions embrace as their core value. 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 “reign of God.” It’s not an easy path. To do justice is to be that unique person God made you to be and To love those other people in their unique God-made personhoods as well.

As a congregation, we need to be that unique body God made us 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 a passion for justice. to overflow justice, to do justice because we can’t do otherwise. We are called to do justice because of the nature of our shared life--the commitment we share to be community in the Spirit. We do justice through Hope-Faith Ministries; Missouri River clean up, and through our partnership with More2--whenever we work for racial an economic equity in KC. We do justice because it’s the right thing to do—and it’s in our own interest!

What is justice? I offer this reflection:

*Justice is 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 is consequences for actions, for wrongs

*Justice relieved by grace.
A more invasive justice is
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*

*Justice is the power of giving
The simpler we live, the more we have to give
More power, more influence, more time and energy free
For what we value most*

*Justice is 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
Reframing, reshaping, changing the world
Our dreams within God's dream (Jack Price, ©2009)*

We do justice by doing justice, and by confessing our own participation, even unwittingly, in the perpetuation of injustice. African-American theologian and renowned preacher Howard Thurman wrote this 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 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.*

*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*

In this Advent season, let us long for the peace that always seems beyond our reach. Let us work for the justice that lies beyond our grasp. Let us choose to see this world by faith where our deepest joy is intimately tied to justice for all people. Let us live awake, with open our eyes, for each opportunity to do justice. And let us take this prayer as our very own:

Let your light burn in me, O God, 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. (Howard Thurman)