

Justice
Amos 5:21-24
by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones
First Central Congregational UCC
18 January 2015

If you've spent any time around children, then you have experienced something like the following—Little Janie will stomp her feet, put her fists firmly on her hips, stretch forth her neck, and cry out “That’s not fair!” [See, you know what I’m talking about.]

All children seem to have an innate sense of fairness and equal treatment. No one needs to teach them to proclaim, “That isn’t fair!” Instead, we teach them how to cope with the fact that life is indeed not fair.

It appears that we humans have a basic desire for the world to make sense, to be rational and orderly with everyone getting what they deserve. But when it doesn’t work that way, we want to know why. We want the wrongs to be righted and the balance to be restored. We demand justice.

Maybe it’s part of the divine image within us? The great Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote that justice is “God’s power in the world” and “God’s role in human life.” So, if we want to draw closer to God, than we ourselves must practice justice. “Justice,” he wrote, “is as much a necessity as breathing is.”

On Wednesday morning, before I began writing this sermon, one of our members called me. She had recently experienced a deep hurt, and the institutions of law and society had contributed to that hurt. Crying, she said, “I want justice.”

The prophets understood a cry like this. Justice is a yearning that can issue forth from our deepest pain. In the Hebrew Scriptures the desire for justice is deeply connected to lamentation. It’s something we demand from a world that appears ill disposed to give it to us. Therefore we seek for God’s power to respond on our behalf.

Justice is often pictured as a blindfolded Greek goddess holding scales and a sword. The scales represent the ideal of balance between two sides of an argument. The sword represents not only power, but precision. According to this Greek model, justice is something we arrive at through reason and order.

But the Hebrew image of justice is not the same as the Greek. God’s justice is not blind nor is it about reason and order.

The Greek conception of justice is based upon a fiction. It assumes that everyone can equally come into the courts and make their case and that, free from bias, the courts will hear and rule. The Hebrew prophets understood this to be false. The prophets knew that there are people who have been denied freedom and opportunity. That there are people who cannot come and state their case. That courts and law codes are not free of bias.

But God's justice *is* biased. It is biased in favour of the oppressed, of the victims, of the poor. Of the brokenhearted, the meek, the persecuted. Because God's justice is about people and relationships. It is about compassion. About hearing the cries of people and responding. About doing everything within one's power to bless people with a better life. It is, as the prophet Amos proclaimed, a raging river that forces all obstacles out of the way.

Rabbi Heschel described this image, which is so very different from the blind goddess balancing her scales:

[It is] a surging movement, a life-bringing substance, a dominant power.

A mighty stream, expressive of the vehemence of a never-ending, surging, fighting movement -- as if obstacles had to be washed away for justice to be done. . . . Justice is not a mere norm, but a fighting challenge, a restless drive. . . what is required is a power that will strike and change, heal and restore, like a mighty stream bringing life to the parched land. . . it is God's power in the world. . . What ought to be, shall be!

It should be no surprise, then, that Rabbi Heschel, the greatest scholar of the Hebrew prophets, was one of the people who marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Rabbi Heschel understood that the biblical vision of justice compelled his presence as part of this movement for justice.

If you have not seen the new movie "Selma" you need to. It's the story of those months in which the Civil Rights Movement focused on voting rights in Selma, Alabama, including the horrific events of Bloody Sunday when the marchers were beaten on the Edmund Pettis Bridge, the nationwide, ecumenical response, and then the triumphant march to Montgomery shortly afterwards. John Beerling, who is here most weeks, was present in Montgomery for that march. He spoke about it last year during a First Forum in which members of this church shared their first-hand stories of the Civil Rights Era.

John was a Presbyterian seminary student, and when Dr. King called for clergy to come to Selma and march, the Presbyterians, like many denominations, invited clergy and seminary students to go. There was danger involved, as a young white priest from Boston was beaten and killed in Selma when he responded.

The film focuses on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his inner circle as they strategize and make decisions about the best way to proceed. It is a revealing portrait of how organized and intentional every action was. The film also shows how this difficult and dangerous work flowed from the faith convictions of those involved. Church—including preaching and singing—were essential components of this struggle for justice.

Michael and I saw the movie a week ago. I had a visceral reaction watching it. I cried more than once and even shook uncontrollably with anger and grief during one scene. So, I recommend the film highly, but caution you to be prepared.

Every year on the Sunday of the Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend, we focus on the church's role in the work for justice and a better society. This year, I'm preaching a seven week sermon series on the virtues that I'm calling "The Good Life." Since justice is itself one of the

virtues, it's fitting for us to explore it today.

When we talk about justice in the church we so often talk about social justice, but the virtues are habits of character. How do we become just persons? What are the individual traits for practicing justice?

According to the Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church,

Justice is the moral virtue that consists in the constant and firm will to give [one's] due to God and neighbor. . . . The just man . . . is distinguished by habitual right thinking and the uprightness of his conduct toward his neighbor.

The just person treats others well. They are respectful and kind. They share. They do not impose their rights over someone else's. If anything, they defer at times, surrendering what they deserve so that another might have a better chance. They treat people fairly, not giving preference to someone simply because that person is rich or is a member of the same race or religion.

We Christians, shaped by the biblical stories and the proclamations of the Hebrew prophets, also understand that justice is not simply fairness. That treating everyone equally does not cut it, because some people operate from historical and social disadvantages.

Gustavo Gutierrez, one of the founders of Liberation Theology, taught that even God favors the poor and the oppressed. If we Christians are to be part of God's work in the world, practicing justice, then we must live in solidarity with the poor and oppressed, working for their liberation.

So, we might add to the character traits I mentioned before, this very Christian idea, that the just person is someone who goes out of their way to live with and to help the poor and the oppressed.

At the end of October, a dear friend of mine, the Reverend Bruce Lowe. Bruce was 99 years old, just a few months shy of his 100th birthday. His funeral was in Dallas, Texas and was on a weekend, so I was unable to travel. I wish I had been able to attend, for Bruce was one of those special people in my life who impacted me both personally and professionally.

In the 1960's Bruce was a pastor in Louisiana at the height of the Civil Rights Movement. When Bruce took a stand in support of integration, he lost his pulpit, forced out by a congregation that didn't want a "political pastor." Bruce then spent the rest of his working life as part of the federal government's effort to integrate hospitals in the South. Bruce would travel around the region, visiting hospitals to guarantee that African-Americans were receiving proper medical care.

Bruce retired from a lifetime of good work and was enjoying his life. Then, in the year he was eighty years old, his friend Louise came to him with a problem. Her brother had come out as a gay man, and Louise was convinced he was going to hell. She asked Bruce what he thought. Bruce said that homosexuality is a sin, condemned by scripture. However, his wife Anna Marie interrupted him and said that surely Louise's brother was not going to hell.

Provoked by Anna Marie's compassion, Bruce decided that he had spoken out of ignorance. Before he could speak with assurance, he needed to inform himself. So, over a three month period Bruce researched the topic, studying over sixty books. How many 80 year

old do you know who would do that?

As a result of his research, Bruce came to the opinion that the Bible does not condemn gay people, instead it blesses and welcome them. So, Bruce wrote an extensive letter to his friend Louise arguing for the biblical support of gay people. Friends encouraged him to post the letter on-line, which he did at the website godmademegay.com. The website received thousands of responses over the years. He's had folk inform him that his letter kept them from committing suicide. He's received e-mails from around the world from people seeking help and advice. The Episcopal Bishop of Oklahoma said the letter persuaded him to support the consecration of Gene Robinson. And my own mother found encouragement from the letter whenever I came out to her.

Bruce then spent the last nineteen years of his life as an advocate for LGBT equality. He was a gentle, caring presence, demonstrating to others the love of Christ. When I was coming out of the closet, as a Baptist youth minister, Bruce was supportive, kind, and encouraging. His courageous example and prophetic power made my journey easier.

The cause of justice is advanced by large social movements but also by acts of kindness and hospitality. In ways big and little, we must respond to the cry, "I want justice." Let us treat others with respect and dignity, welcoming them, sharing our lives with them, and supporting them in their struggles.

If we are to live the good and joyful life, let us be just!