



“WISE UP...ABOUT JUSTICE!”

Rev. Gary Haller
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Birmingham, Michigan
Scripture: Proverbs 21:15 and 28:5-6

When justice is done, it is a joy to the righteous, but dismay to evildoers.

The evil do not understand justice, but those who seek the Lord understand it completely. Better to be poor and walk in integrity than to be crooked in one's ways even though rich. (NRSV)

From Eugene Peterson's version, *The Message*:

Good people celebrate when justice triumphs, but for the workers of evil it's a bad day.

Justice makes no sense to the evil minded; those who seek God know it inside out. It's better to be poor and direct than rich and crooked.

In the old classic film *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, we find a young Jimmy Stewart playing Senator Jefferson Smith. He is a young, innocent, wet-behind-the-ears, brand-new senator. Soon after his arrival in Washington, D.C., he proposes a bill and discovers a dishonest deal. When he realizes the graft, he decides the only way he can stop it is to filibuster. From a meek, timid, naive man, he is transformed into a fighter for justice.

For twenty-three hours straight, though bleary-eyed, voice nearly gone, weak and wasted, he barely stands as he proclaims his call for justice and honesty. His scratchy voice yells out in the Senate chambers:

There's no place out there for graft, greed, lies, or compromise with human liberties. Great principles don't get lost once they come to light. They're right here. You just have to see them again. Lost causes are the only causes worth fighting for because of just one plain, simple rule: "Love thy neighbor." You fight for the lost causes harder than for the others. Yes, you even die for them.

In the end, Jefferson Smith convinces his colleagues – and he wins.

Let's be honest. Justice is a hard topic for you and me. We don't like to talk about justice because it would require us to take a long, hard look at how we might be involved in injustice. Or evil. And that's not at all what we want to do. When we come to church, we come because we

want to hear about God being merciful to us, not about what God requires of us. Yet when we do not deceive ourselves, we realize that our scriptures repeatedly call us to act with justice. Mercy is there, too, but often our scriptures are telling us that we are the ones who need to be merciful – it's all tied in to being just.

We find the call to justice in wisdom literature and in the prophets.

From Micah 6:8: “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

From Psalms 85:10-11: “Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; justice and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and justice will look down from the sky.”

From Psalms 89:14: “Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before you.”

For Jesus, justice plays a central role in the story of God's healing of our world. He tells us to love our neighbor, and then defines our neighbor as those who have been beaten up and neglected by the side of the road. He calls us to bring healing to those broken by the world, to offer forgiveness and restoration in face of wrongdoing.

Jesus echoes the prophet Amos who cried: “Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious...” “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 5:15, 5:24)

And that's why the Wise One of the Proverbs includes JUSTICE as one of the foundations of wisdom: “When justice is done,” the Wise One wrote, “it is a joy to the righteous, but dismay to evildoers... The evil do not understand justice, but those who seek the Lord understand it completely.”

Justice may seem like a lost cause: one naive man, like a Jimmy Stewart, fighting tremendous odds, the stuff of which Hollywood movies are made. But not just Hollywood. Maybe it is the stuff of which God's true call for each of us is made. Do you remember the powerful folk song made popular by Peter, Paul and Mary?

If I had a hammer, I'd hammer in the morning,
I'd hammer in the evening, all over this land.
It's the hammer of justice, it's the bell of freedom,
It's a song about love between my brothers and my sisters all over this land.

So, let me ask you: have you ever felt God call you to work for justice? It's there. God calls us to justice – indeed, demands it. Have you ever felt such a call from God to take the hammer of justice in your hand, even though the odds are against you, and your well-being or reputation may be at stake? Have you ever felt a crusade in your heart worth fighting for? A crusade where

no matter how tired you were, no matter how many setbacks you had, no matter how lost the cause seemed, you found it was worth taking a stand with Christ and saying, “I want God’s will to be done! Here!” I know that many among you do feel the call to work for, hammer out, ring out, sing out for justice, freedom and mercy all over this land. And not just over this land, but over all God’s world.

That’s why in Proverbs, the Wise One says something that’s true for us today: “Turn your ear to wisdom then you will understand what is right and just and fair – every good path.”¹ And what he’s saying is that when we rightly revere God, when God’s priorities, God’s Kingdom, are rightly our primary concern, then justice becomes a real concern for us. But we must first be wise enough to seek *God’s* kingdom, *God’s* intentions, *God’s* will. It’s unlikely that we’ll value justice much on our own *unless* we value God. We’re much too corruptible. So this ancient teller of wisdom writes: “When justice is done, it is a joy to the righteous, but dismay to the evildoers.”² “Justice makes no sense to the evil minded; yet those who seek God know it inside out.”³

Given that this Wise One tells us that “those who seek the Lord” will understand justice fully, it’s rather amazing, then, that often we have little concern for it. It’s like we have a hammer, a powerful hammer, but we never use it. Wise old G. K. Chesterton described our situation so perfectly. He wrote: “Children are innocent and love justice. While most of us are wicked and naturally prefer mercy.” So we never even pick up the hammer of justice.

Horace Fenton, Jr., writing in the *Christian Herald*, says that he was shaken by a question which a Latin American Christian put to him, “How is it,” the Latin American asked, “that the element of justice, which is so prominent in both the Old and New Testaments, is never included in the doctrinal statements of North American Christian organizations?”⁴

Fenton confessed that he had no answer for the man. Nor do I know why so many churches neglect this fierce and forgotten virtue. I do know that our United Methodist theological statements emphasize the theme of justice prominently, and have for more than a century. Methodists were the first church to even have a Social Creed and have long wrestled with the call to justice on many issues, from slavery to women’s suffrage, from advocating for child labor laws in a time when it was common for children to work 14 hours a day. Knowing that, over my career, our church has sponsored major events on racism, sexual misconduct, human trafficking, reconciliation with Native Americans, apartheid, immigration, and protecting children makes me think that we’re making *some* progress.

Still, this is one of the thorny issues about justice: it always seems that justice takes a long time in coming. Certainly the Old Testament prophets felt God was taking just a bit too long. And I understand that feeling. But, at least Israel’s prophets knew that God is at work in history. Are we capable of seeing that, too? The prophets knew that the story of the nations was not simply a matter of kings and armies and military campaigns. Over and above it all, God was at work and the prophets – and the wise – see it.

Many people remember Dorothy Sayers as a writer of mystery novels, but she was so much more. Sayers was one of the first women to receive a degree from an English university when

that was finally allowed, and was a student of classical languages, a translator of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Sayers writes of how it dawned on her, as yet a small girl, that God is at work in a mighty way here and now in our world. You see, she loved reading Persian history, and became especially fascinated with King Cyrus. You remember Cyrus, don't you? He was the king of Babylon who ended the "Babylonian Captivity" of the Jews. In the first year of his reign, he was prompted by God to decree that the Jerusalem temple be rebuilt and any Jews who so wished could return to Jerusalem to do that. He's mentioned no fewer than 23 times in the Bible.

And Dorothy Sayers writes: "One day with a shock, I realized that Cyrus had marched clean out of Herodotus and slap into the Bible." Here in history, she said, was "God! that fierce and disheveled old gentleman from Mount Sinai bursting into Greek affairs and working God's justice, taking an interest in our events and people" that seemed to her to be "altogether outside God's province."⁵

"Altogether outside God's province!" As if anything is outside of God's province. What Dorothy Sayers realized is that *nothing* which affects this earth and the lives of people in it is outside the province of God. John Knox, that fiery Scot, was so sure of this that he warned the sixteenth century kings that God had set a limit on their powers, and that unless the nation changed its ways, Scotland and Edinburgh would feel the pain of God's justice. Not just Israel and Jerusalem as in the past, mind you, but Scotland and Edinburgh. John Knox knew that God is yet at work in God's world!

Julia Ward Howe was sure of it. We sang her words today. She had seen politicians compromise and public figures falter and fall; she had become very disillusioned by the frailties and misdeeds of those who held power. But then she caught sight of God at work. During the War Between the States, she caught a glimpse of the God who still works in our history for justice and righteousness and she wrote words which still move us in a powerful way:

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of *wrath* are stored;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword;
His truth is marching on!

What a fierce quality in those lines. God trampling in the vintage of the grapes of wrath, God loosing the "fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword." These are not sweet and comforting words – unless, of course, you are among those who have been waiting for God to act and bring justice.

But now we come to the complicated side. We know what God wants us to do, don't we? God wants us to do justice. Micah, one of God's great prophets, put it in stirring words. When someone asked Micah, "Will God be satisfied if I approach God with my offerings and ritual and the usual trappings of religion?" Micah answered:

God has shown you, O people, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.⁶

We know what God would have us do. The question is “Will we ever do it?” Not long ago in Ohio, the back door of an armored truck came open on an interstate highway and two million dollars flew out the back. Can you imagine? It was raining one-hundred dollar bills. Motorists were gleefully stopping, grabbing the money and stuffing it into bags and sacks and into their clothing and then speeding away. One man, a Mr. Fix-it repairman, picked up \$57,000. The reason I know the exact amount is because he turned it in the next day. He said he couldn’t sleep. It wasn’t his money and he couldn’t keep it in good conscience. He was one of a very few who felt that way.

Of the two million dollars lost, only a very small percentage of it was returned, and most of it by this one man. The response of his parents was interesting. His father said, “What? He gave it back? I thought my son was smarter than that! I didn’t do a very good job raising that boy. He must have a screw loose. He gave it back? How stupid can you get?”

But his mother, with a warm, gentle smile, said: “We needed the money but I’m so proud of him. It was the right thing to do.” Returning money may seem distant from justice, but it’s the intense desire to do what is right that speaks here. It can lead you to do things others regard as naive or stupid. But those things likely will please God. Justice means to do the right thing personally. But it never stops there. Jesus was clear that we need to work for justice for others. Wherever people are hurting or abused, wherever people are mistreated or oppressed, we need to be there working for justice and working for rightness.

We know what God expects of us: we are to do justice. “Turn your ear to wisdom, then you will understand what is right and just and fair.” God’s special love of justice is stamped upon the pages of Scripture. But let me add one final note to the Wise One’s advocacy of our doing what is fair and right and just. Someone might ask, “So, where is the love of God in all this talk of justice?” The answer is simple: God’s love is wrapped up in justice. God’s love motivates the justice; and without such love, there could be no justice.

And herein is the difference between divine justice and human vengeance. God’s justice springs from love and not from a desire to give someone what she or he deserves, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, until everyone is toothless and blind.

Yes, concern for justice comes hard for you and me. Yet justice, you see, saves love from becoming meaningless sentimentalism. The Christian Gospel, and Judaism before it, says that God is both loving and powerful; and that means justice. And this God who is just: what does this God require of us? That we should do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly in following God. How right Proverbs is: “Justice makes no sense to the evil minded; those who *seek* God know it inside out.”

May we pray? God and Father of us all, open our eyes that we may see the needs of others; open our ears that we may hear their cries; open our hearts so that they need not be without support; let us not be afraid to defend the weak because of the anger of the strong, nor afraid to defend the poor because of the anger of the rich. Show us where love and hope and justice are needed, and use us to bring them to those places. And so open our eyes and our ears that we may, this coming day, be able to do some work of peace for you. Amen.

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1. Proverbs 2:2, 9
 2. Proverbs 21:15
 3. Proverbs 28:5
 4. Horace L. Fenton, Jr., *Christian Herald*, July-August, 1981
 5. Dorothy L. Sayers, "A Vote of Thanks to Cyrus," pp 23,24; quoted in Ralph E. Hoen, Dorothy L. Sayers, *A Literary Biography*, p.4
 6. Micah 3:8