

## The Joys of Justice

First Congregational Church of Kittery Point  
Kittery Point, Maine  
June 28, 2009

Marvin M. Ellison

2 Samuel 12:1-7a  
Psalm 72 (NCH 667)  
Mark 6:30-44

At the heart of the faith tradition is the call to seek justice as right-relatedness with self, others, and the earth itself. While Christianity is sometimes characterized as a religion all about love, that's only half the truth. This faith tradition, born out of an Exodus escape from slave bondage and then further defined by the prophetic mandate to speak truth to power, is passionate about fairness, freedom, and advocacy for the marginalized and dispossessed. Jesus stands squarely within this justice tradition. After all, he was killed not for his good works of charity, but for his disruptive insistence that justice be done and that a whole new order of righteousness be established, what he called the Commonwealth of God.

Now, I'm all for love, and central to the faith tradition is a radical, life-altering affirmation that nothing can ever separate us or all creation from the love of God. But we miss something essential if we don't appreciate how justice is also a primary love-language of the Bible. Called to love neighbors as ourselves, we demonstrate neighbor-love not only when we show respect and regard for others, but also when we work to create the social, economic, and political conditions necessary so that our neighbors can flourish, both the neighbor known and unknown, both the neighbor near and far. As

Martin Luther King, Jr., put the question, what good is a religion that cares about the state of a person's soul, but does not care whether he lives in a slum, or whether she lacks access to health care, or whether the earth is contaminated, or whether children are educated?

Consider two contrasting images of justice. American jurisprudence images justice as a blindfolded, impartial guardian who treats like cases alike and seeks balance. In contrast, biblical justice comes across with a far more disturbing, far more unsettling edge. Justice is imaged as a "mighty stream," a flash flood that suddenly comes cascading down the mountain, shoving aside everything that stands in its way, making the whole landscape new. Moreover, biblical justice is partial, it takes sides, and the side we're to take is for those left behind, outcast, and on the margins.

Justice making requires adopting this perspective-from-the-margin in order to see things properly. Remember, the tradition tells us, that once you were slaves and how the God of freedom released you from bondage. Because God is a God of liberation, not of oppression, you must pay attention to those among you who are entrapped and enslaved, without resources and without dignity. In biblical terms, we're to be forever alert to "the widows, the orphans, and the sojourners" in our midst -- but then what?

To apply a prophetic measure of justice, we must utilize a twofold test. First, ask how the marginalized are doing. Don't focus on whether a Donald Trump, a Martha Stewart, or a Tiger Woods are doing. Assume that the status quo is working for those with power and status. Instead, ask how the single head of household with dependent children on public assistance is doing, whether she has adequate housing, health care, and income. Or, again, ask how the non-English speaking, recent immigrant arrival is faring.

If their basic social and economic needs are secured and if their self-respect is honored, then we may rest assured that things are rightly ordered. But if not, things must change.

There's a second test. Ask if you're willing, at least in principle, to trade places with the least well positioned member of society. Who's the most vulnerable, the least powerful member of this community, of this congregation, or of your own family system? If you hesitate to change places with that person, or if we find ourselves hesitating to stand on the margins and share the fate of any of those with less power and status, then we have our marching orders.

Three stories offer further insight into biblical justice. The first is the prophet Nathan's challenge to King David, but the story begins in the previous chapter which tells how a powerful king felt entitled to take possession another man's wife and stopped at nothing, not even killing violence, to get what he wanted. When the storyline picks up in 2 Samuel 12, the prophet chastises the king not for his sexual sin, although adultery is clearly a problem here, but rather for the sin of misusing his power and role to take advantage of and exploit others. Injustice, biblically speaking, is about the misuse of power, and the prophetic call is for accountability.

A second story is told by the biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann, who speaks of biblical justice as an open-ended process of rereading social reality. A very proper lady went to a tea shop. She sat at a table for two, ordered a pot of tea, and prepared to eat some cookies which she had in her purse. Because the tea shop was crowded, a Jamaican black man took the other chair and also ordered tea. The woman was prepared for a leisurely time, so she began to read her newspaper. As she did so, she took a cookie from the package. As she read, she noticed that the man across also took a cookie from the

package. This upset her greatly, but she ignored it and kept reading. After a while she took another cookie, and so did he. This unnerved her, and she glared at the man. While she glared, he reached for the fifth and last cookie, smiled, and offered her half of it. She was indignant. She paid her money and left in a great hurry, enraged at such a presumptuous man. She hurried to her bus stop just outside. She opened her purse to get a coin for her bus ticket. And then she saw, much to her distress, that in her purse was her package of cookies unopened.<sup>1</sup>

“The lady is not different from all of us,” Brueggemann writes, and rightly so. “Sometimes we possess things so long that do not really belong to us that we come to think they are ours. Sometimes, by the mercy of God, we have occasion to see to whom these things in fact belong. And when we see that, we have some little chance of being rescued from our misreading of reality. Justice concerns precisely a right reading of social reality, of social power, and of social goods.”<sup>2</sup>

Biblical justice is about sorting “out what belongs to whom, and [returning] it to them.” This insight has helped me think about the recent struggles over marriage equality here in Maine and elsewhere. In mid-April I attended the legislative hearing at the Augusta Civic Center on the proposed bill to extend civil marriage rights to same-sex couples. As I listened to the opponents of this measure, I heard their many reasons for reserving marriage to heterosexual couples alone. There was painful talk about perversion, about harm to children, and about marriage for the purpose of procreation alone. But I also heard a subtext: “This institution of marriage is ours, we don’t want to share it, and we don’t plan to share it especially with the likes of you.”

That posture is not only unpleasant and uncharitable. It's unjust. It's also historically mistaken. Historian John Boswell has traced the development of Christian marriage and discovered that as early as the sixth century, there were church rituals used to bless same-sex couples. In collections of church rites, these liturgies for same-sex couples were preserved right next to similar marriage liturgies for heterosexual couples, but Boswell noticed a significant difference. Marriage for heterosexual couples was, for the most part, about property and progeny. However, for same-sex couples, who could not legally inherit each other's property or produce children, the purpose of marriage was to celebrate and support the love between two intimates, who pledged to live together as next of kin. Boswell's argument, which, granted, is controversial, is that the Western love tradition about marriage is – surprise, surprise -- a gay tradition, one which later came to be embraced by heterosexual couples, as well. But today, because this history is widely ignored or discounted, many presume that marriage has always been for heterosexuals only. So, what does justice require of us, we may ask, especially if we take seriously the biblical mandate to “sort out what belongs to whom, and to return it to them?”

Finally, justice is about restoration, about healing the broken places and making new beginnings possible. Several years ago, an interfaith group of clergy I belong to was gathered on a Monday morning, and a United Methodist pastor arrived to share a highly distressing story. It seems that on the previous Saturday night, three middle-school boys had broken into the church building, grabbed catsup and mustard bottles from the church kitchen, and then sprayed the contents of those bottles on the walls, ceiling, and

furnishings throughout the sanctuary. Come Sunday, when congregants entered the church for worship, they were horrified to discover that their church had been trashed.

During our clergy meeting, a rabbi turned to the United Methodist pastor and said, “My people know all about having our houses of worship desecrated. We stand with you in your sorrow and outrage. If it would help, let my congregation come meet with your congregation.” Justice making is about solidarity and standing together in the midst of tragedy, pain, and evil.

Longer term, justice unfolded in another direction. The three boys were apprehended. Two of them, brothers it turns out, along with their parents, met with church members at a gathering arranged at the church, where the boys could hear first-hand how their misconduct had harmed others, where church members could voice their pain and anger, and where the boys were offered a chance to set things right by helping to clean up the mess and do community service. This process of restorative justice led to the boys and their parents joining the church and becoming active in the youth group. The third vandal didn't fare as well. His parents hired a lawyer, who helped him evade responsibility, and sadly, some years later, this young man has continued his delinquent behavior, facing multiple arrests and even serving jail time.

Justice is about power, about sharing, about restoration. When we use our power to heal the broken places, there is cause to rejoice. Although justice-making is never easy, straightforward, or uncomplicated, engaging in this sacred work is also an unexpected source of joy because to do justice is to share in the very passion of God. Martin Luther King, Jr., said, whenever a people stand up for justice, no matter what happens, they can never fail. Kate Millet, not a Christian but a kindred spirit nonetheless,

put it this way: “This work of expanding human freedom is such good work, we’re lucky to have it.” Thanks be to God.

---

I’m a teacher more than a preacher, so forgive me if I give out a writing assignment this morning. I’d like you to take out paper and pencil. Well, actually not right now, because I prefer that you listen to this sermon, but sometime during this coming week, would you be willing to do an exercise and see what you discover? A Seminary colleague offers a course on ministry with the dying and bereaved, and she begins by asking students to write their own obituary. She invites them to think not only about when and how they might die, but also about their legacy, about whom and what they will leave behind, and about how the world will be different because of them.

Someone -- I wish I could recall who -- proposed that Christians should live in such a way that their lives would only make sense and explicable insofar as others could recognize that at the very core of their being was a passionate love of God and devotion to God’s cause. So I ask you as I ask myself: if we were to die tomorrow, what evidence would we leave behind to demonstrate that we were followers of Jesus? Would others have reason to recognize us as peacemakers, justice-lovers, and friends of the earth, three key markers of Christian discipleship?

---

<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “Voices of the Night—Against Justice,” in Brueggemann, Groome, and Parks, To Act Justly, Love Tenderly, Walk Humbly: An Agenda for Ministers (Paulist Press, 197 ), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.