

Justice or Peace?

Fourth Sunday After Epiphany/Season of Reconciliation

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Texts: Jeremiah 1.4-10

Psalm 71.1-6

1 Corinthians 13.-1-13

Luke 4.21-30

This morning I am imposing on you some of the angst of my spiritual and theological life. Here is a recurring conversation I have inside my mind and my heart on a regular basis. It goes something like this:

- God is counting us to step up in faith and without fear to boldly confront injustice wherever we see it. God has entrusted us with the prophetic office “to pluck up and to pull down and to destroy and overthrow!”¹
- But who are you to place yourself in that position of judgment? And what is left after you pull down and destroy? Did you miss the part about being sent to the nations “to build and to plant”²?
- I know. I know. I get that. We make so much more progress over time when we invest in building up and planting – nurture and creation. But you cannot get to that place of creation and nurture if you do not first confront and dismantle the injustice that is standing in the way. When Jesus stood in the synagogue (as we read last week) when he read from the prophecy of Isaiah he essentially said that his work was “to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free.”³ Dr. King was right when he said “Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.”⁴

¹ Jeremiah 1.10

² Also Jeremiah 1.10

³ Luke 4.18

⁴ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr’s Letter from a Birmingham Jail can be read at this website:
<http://www.uscrossier.org/pullias/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/king.pdf>

- Did you not hear the scripture today? “If I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and have all faith so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am NOTHING!⁵” In all your prophetic urgency, where is your patience? In all of your angry declarations of injustice, where is your kindness?⁶
- I know. I know. I get that. But 1 Corinthians also said that love does not rejoice in wrong doing, but rejoices in the truth⁷. The prophets speak truth to power. And they will not listen if you are not loud! Jesus did not mince words when he confronted the powers and neither can we! We have to stand strong in our faith or the poor, the oppressed, the captives will lose hope.
- “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three: and the greatest of these is love.”⁸

Obviously the question posed by this sermon title, the question buried in this internal wrestling of “Justice OR Peace?” must be answered with the word “yes” meaning it’s both! Jesus was deeply committed to both and we cannot separate one from the other. The moment you begin pitting these passages against one another the way I just did – it’s obvious that you cannot choose between them. The Presbyterians have long understood this dilemma – this polarity – when they set aside a day entitled “Peace WITH Justice Sunday” But despite the obvious way that we cannot separate between things like social justice and peacemaking or between activism and reconciliation, it’s amazing to me how often we do.

One part of my reading during my sabbatical was a two-part series entitled *Ambassadors of Reconciliation*. It was written by Ched Myers, who would describe himself as a social justice activist, and Elaine Enns, his wife who has worked in the field of restorative justice and conflict transformation. They talked quite openly about how their two fields of research and practice have worked in silos. Not only have the two fields not collaborated. They actually have a certain suspicion of each other.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 13.2

⁶ 1 Corinthians 13.4 “Love is patient. Love is kind.”

⁷ 1 Corinthians 13.6

⁸ 1 Corinthians 13.13

A close reading of the gospels makes clear that we cannot choose between peace or justice. The small group who has been gathering on Wednesday nights through the season of reconciliation has been looking at the work of Bryan Stevenson. He is a lawyer and founder of the Equal Justice Initiative. His book speaks to this very question in its title: *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*. I'll warn you, it's not an easy book to read. He recounts his work with people serving life sentences or on death row. The stories of injustice are heartbreaking. Some of the people he has worked with were innocent. Some were not. But all had horrific stories to tell of how mitigating circumstances were ignored and children, in many cases, who were themselves victims of abuse or mental illness were tried as adults sentenced to life without parole or who lived years in solitary confinement. The picture his experiences paint of our justice system is hard to look at.

The amazing part of the story is the way in which Bryan Stevenson maintains not only the energy to keep pursuing these cases but the spirit with which he does this work. If anyone could be excused for taking on the mantle of the raging, angry prophet calling out injustice...it would be Bryan Stevenson. He has earned the right to self-righteous rage. But that is not his tone. Don't get me wrong he is a strong and unflinching advocate for justice. But he is also a humble man who understands the importance of mercy as a fundamental part of the calculus when thinking about justice. He understands this because his proximity to people who have done horrible acts has not led him to see himself as somehow above and beyond them. In fact he says toward the end of the book: "We are all broken by something. We have all hurt someone and have been hurt. We all share the condition of brokenness even if our brokenness is not equivalent. I desperately wanted mercy for (my client) and would have done anything to create justice for (him), but I couldn't pretend that his struggle was disconnected from my own. The ways in which I have been hurt – and have hurt others – are different from the ways (he) suffered and caused suffering. But our shared brokenness connected us." ⁹

⁹ Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 289.

When I look at the moment in the gospel of Luke today that elicits the rage of the crowd, it was when Jesus pointed toward God's grace being extended to the ones they viewed as their enemies. When Jesus talked about good news for the poor, release of the captives, freedom for the oppressed they were amazed at the graciousness of Jesus' words – that's where the text ended last week.... presumably because they saw themselves as the ones who were oppressed and in need of freedom. But the moment Jesus touched these stories from the Old Testament about the times when God's acts of healing and grace were extended to the Gentiles – in fact to Gentiles who were the oppressors of Israel – they were enraged. “How dare you imply that we, we who have suffered at the hands of the Romans, might be anything but above those who have caused that oppression. How dare you imply that this good news might be for them as well as us? How can you begin to compare us to ones as vile as that?”

I realized that this posture that Bryan Stevenson points to may very well be the best place we can stand if we have any hope of staying connected to both strands of the gospel I was wrestling with at the beginning of this sermon. Staying close to suffering will keep us alert to the demands of justice. Staying close to our own brokenness – our own failures – our own mistakes and missteps will keep us alert to the profound need we ALL have for the mercy and forgiveness of God. And when we can stay close to our own need for mercy, then even when we are advocating for justice we can feel the humanity of all involved as we reach across the divide to broker peace.

I am aware that few of us are living on the edge of this polarity with quite the same intensity as someone like Bryan Stevenson. But the question of whether we lean more toward what is fair or what is gracious, what is right or what is merciful is a very relevant day to day question that we all struggle to answer.

I wish I could tie it all up neatly and give you THE ANSWER to these vexing questions. But I suspect the response I received from a spiritual mentor recently is probably right on for all of us: you can never resolve the tension. If you stop feeling the tension, you've probably fallen into trouble. Which is why we continue to wrestle with the scriptures, and keep telling

our stories to each other, and keep singing, and keep praying, and keeping working. Because Jesus is in the midst of it all and he is shaping us and forming us as we follow him. Because his work is our work and we do not do this work alone. And as God promised the prophet Jeremiah, God has promised us: I have called you, I am with you....so do not be afraid.