

West Branch Friends Meeting  
August 18, 2019  
Sue McCracken, Pastor  
“What is Justice, Really?”

Have you ever gotten to the point where you just don't want to turn on the TV news, open a newspaper, or read news on the internet any more? There are days I have those feelings, but then, before you know it, I decide to record the evening news in case I'm not home when it comes on, and I can watch it later!! Some would probably call me a 'news junky', but I want to know what's going on in the world, even if it's not good news. I have noticed, though, that at the end of the national news I watch, they always include a 'feel good' story, just to remind us that we should take heart, there are still wonderful people doing good deeds!

Today I want to take a look at a word I've been hearing used a lot on the news lately, and that's the word 'justice'. It often seems that when a black man is shot or killed by a police officer, the friends and family of the man gather in the streets and the phrase you will hear most often from these protesters is, "We want justice for \_\_\_\_\_." A recent example was the man who was pinned to the ground by a large policeman and in the video you keep hearing him shouting, "I can't breathe! I can't breathe!" And he couldn't, and thus his life breath was snuffed out.

I'm sure you've all heard the familiar verse from Micah 6: 8 (from me, and others) that says:

***“He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.  
And what does the LORD require of you?  
To act justly and to love mercy  
and to walk humbly with your God.”***

But because that language is a bit dated, here's what Micah's author might have written today, reading this verse from [The Message](#):

***“But he's already made it plain how to live, what to do,  
what GOD is looking for in men and women.  
It's quite simple: Do what is fair and just to your neighbor,***

***be compassionate and loyal in your love,”***

Normally when we hear protesters saying ‘we want justice,’ they are really saying – we want a person punished, or we want vengeance. Our legal and judicial systems are based almost entirely on this idea of retributive justice – ‘this much bad, deserves this much punishment’. Unfortunately, this seems to work well for our society when we want to define justice, because this sole focus on divine retribution leads to an ego-satisfying, but eventually, unworkable image of a loving God. So the question that arises in my mind is a simple, ‘if we can let go of our Old Testament idea of a vengeful God, and focus on Jesus’ – and Paul’s - totally different understand of God, that God is love, then we may have to also think about justice in a different way.

Father Richard Rohr says, “Both Jesus and Paul observed the human tendency toward retribution and spoke strongly about the limitations of following the letter of the law...” So what IS the true meaning of justice? What if we began to see there actually is a different biblical notion of justice, one opposite of retribution, beginning with some of the Jewish prophets – Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Hosea? A definition that is very different from the retributive justice many of us are content to support? Rohr says that if we read carefully and honestly, we will see that God’s justice is actually restorative! Each time one of those prophets got after the Israelites for their acts against God, this is what follows:

***“And here is what God will do for you: God will now love you more than ever! God will love you into wholeness. God will pour upon you a gratuitous, unbelievable, unaccountable, irrefutable love that you will finally be unable to resist.”***

Can we understand and believe that idea? God ‘punishes’ us by loving us more?? Listen to these additional Old Testament passages from The Message:

Isaiah 29:13-14a

***“These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is***

***based on merely human rules they have been taught. Therefore once more I will astound these people with wonder upon wonder;***

And Ezekiel 16: 60; 63

***"I'll remember the covenant I made with you when you were young and I'll make a new covenant with you that will last forever... You'll remember your past life and face the shame of it, but when I make atonement for you, make everything right after all you've done, it will leave you speechless."***

Is it really possible to believe that God 'punishes' us by loving us more? That's what these passages are saying! God's justice is fully successful when God's grace is extended, and we are forgiven, and then blessed!

As Isaiah says of God, in 55:8: ***"My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways."***

Here's the question I think we need to ask ourselves: Do we really think fear, anger, intimidation, threats and punishment are going to lead people to God – to love? What if Ephesians 5:1-20 (The Message) is our guideline:

***"Good friend, don't forget all I've taught you; take to heart my commands. They'll help you live a long, long time, a long life lived full and well....Earn a reputation for living well in God's eyes and the eyes of the people. Trust GOD from the bottom of your heart; don't try to figure out everything on your own. Listen for GOD's voice in everything you do, everywhere you go; God's the one who will keep you on track."***

Going back one more time to that familiar verse about justice in Micah 6:8:

***"But he's already made it plain how to live, what to do, what GOD is looking for in men and women. It's quite simple: Do what is fair and just to your neighbor, be compassionate and loyal in your love..."***

If what is fair and just is restorative justice, what does that mean for our justice system, especially if our love is to be compassionate and loyal? I

know when we met to prioritize the issues we wanted Friends Committee on National Legislation to focus on in their lobbying efforts, one of our common issues was judicial reform. Supporting that Friends' organization would be one way to work toward the goal of restorative justice: justice that restores the wrong doers to know love and change their lives, by providing ways to help them become successful members of society.

I hate to admit it, but most of society – us – wants a damning God. A God who severely punishes those we think deserve to pay for their sins, and a God who rewards us for not breaking the law. So how do we change that thinking? Maybe the first thing we do is start taking the idea of a loving God seriously, and that involves showing God's restorative love for all who need it. And that's not easy, because we feel the pain of all who have suffered at the hands of those who have done harm, and even taken lives by their actions.

But what might happen if we always kept in mind that we have a passive, ever-forgiving, endlessly merciful God? This is the God we see in Jesus. Can we come to the point where we understand God extends grace, mercy, and forgiveness, freely, to all, with no strings attached? Can we grow to the point where we view each person as beloved by God, and as forgiven by God? Only then will we have the hope for justice that involves restoration.

When I was thinking about this whole idea of justice, I remembered the words of a song called "God is God" by Steve Earle. The song reminds us that we need to stop viewing God as another human, just like us. We humans want a God who sees justice as retributive. But listen to the words of this song:

***"God of my understanding, don't care what name I call.  
Whether or not I believe doesn't matter at all.  
I receive the blessings...that every day on Earth's another chance to  
get it right. Let this little light of mine shine and rage against the  
night...As our fate unfurls,.....every day that passes I'm sure about a***

***little bit less...Even my money keeps telling me it's God I need to trust; And I believe in God, but God ain't us.***

And we need to always keep that in mind....God is a spirit, not a human-like creature living above the earth, thinking like we do. Our God is one who seeks to restore, not destroy.

And finally, as we go into our time of open worship, maybe this quote by Thomas Merton will keep our focus on the restorative nature of justice:

***“Our job is to love others, without stopping to inquire whether they are worthy. That is not our business, and in fact, it is nobody’s business. What we are asked to do is to love, and this love itself will render both ourselves and our neighbors worthy.”***

And I might add, worthy of restoration!