

“Justice and Righteousness”

Date: August 2, 2020

Place: Lakewood UMC

Occasion: Virtues, series

Theme: Justice

Texts: Psalm 72:1-8; Isaiah 59:9-11, 14-15; 1 John 3:16-18

Today we take a look at the virtue known as *justice*. For many people when they hear the word *justice* they think of police officers enforcing the laws of the land, or they think of a courtroom and judges. But that is not how the Bible perceives justice. Today I will try and to help us make the distinction, because it is a very important one.

We have a crisis today, just like the one Isaiah was confronting when he spoke these words in today’s lesson. It’s a crisis of justice. It’s been with us for a long time, though it may not have affected you personally, and therefore you may not have been aware of it.

Now that we have cell phones and people are recording policemen acting badly, and we have mass communication we now understand more quickly how the covid-19 virus has affected minority communities more than white communities. Now we see how issues of justice lie underneath those differences.

It’s not just racial justice, but we can also talk about justice for women as well – pay discrepancies, sexual harassment, and treatment in the workplace. There’s also economic justice that affects not just people of color but large segments of society – both black and white. There is something out of balance when one percent of the population owns over \$25 trillion in wealth, which exceeds the wealth of the bottom **80** percent.

You may or may not feel the effect these issues. We who live in the U.S. seem to have a false sense of the strength of this particular virtue. Our country was founded on the principle of “liberty and justice for all.” There-

fore, we like to think of the U.S. as a model of equality and opportunity. After all, we are not living under a formal system of apartheid. We are convinced that anyone can come here to pursue “the American dream.”

We reassure ourselves that justice is alive and well here at home. But the truth is justice is not alive here in the U.S., or anywhere else in the world. How easily a modern-day prophet might cry out with Isaiah: “Justice is driven back, and righteousness stands at a distance; truth has stumbled in the streets.”

Justice has to do with how we relate with one another; what we value and the priorities we set. Justice has to do with our faith. At its very center justice has to do with love. Someone once put it this way, “Justice is what love looks like at the public level.” (endquote) It is a civic virtue that a civil society depends upon.

Plato and Aristotle defined it thusly, “Justice is giving each person his due.” When we fail to do that, when we ignore the calls of those who are suffering injustice, we are ignoring the cry and supplication of God. Hear again Isaiah: “The Lord looked and was displeased that there was no justice. He saw that there was no one to intervene and He was appalled.”

One of the blessings God has given all of humanity is an intrinsic sense of justice. Even children recognize when someone is not being treated fairly. It is a natural grace that God freely gives to all people.

God has created us with a finely tuned mechanism that senses when things are unfair. Some refer to it as a “moral compass.” To a certain extent, all of us instinctively know what is right and wrong.

Unfortunately, because of sin, we are not always sensitive to justice for others. No longer is the fairness indicator very good at telling us

whether we are really being wronged. It can't help us decide if we just think we're being wronged and if we really are.

And we often don't recognize when other people are being treated unfairly, especially if it doesn't affect us. It's much like the two little boys who went to the dentist one day and waited until all the patients had been seen. When the dentist came out, the older boy spoke up, "Doctor, I want a tooth taken out. But I don't want to have to wait until the pain killer kicks in. We're in kind of a hurry."

The dentist was very impressed with this young man's courage. So he said to him, "Show me which tooth it is that hurts." And the little boy turned to his smaller buddy and said, "Show him your tooth, Albert!"

This is the way our fairness indicators are calibrated. We don't mind pain or mistreatment, as long as it's not our own. When others suffer under the strains of injustice and oppression, our sense of outrage is never completely engaged.

However, if it us, or someone in our group, then the matter takes on grave importance. Recalibrating our fairness indicators, getting them back into good working order, that is the goal of kindling the virtue of justice.

According to the Bible, justice begins with God. We talk about having a *fairness indicator* and that seems to imply that we determine what is just. We talk about what *our* rights are within the context of society.

Biblical justice has far more of a relational flavor to it. It is concerned with what goes on between people and nations. Righteousness is connected with biblical justice. "But the Lord of hosts shall be exalted in judgment and God who is holy shall be hallowed in righteousness." (Is. 5:16)

Righteousness focuses on the power of God that sets things right and heals relationships, communities, nations and the world. Hear what Isaiah

says once again. “Thus says the Lord, ‘Keep justice, and do righteousness, for my salvation is about to come and my righteousness to be revealed.’” (Is. 56:1) Righteousness not only has to do with justice, which is social in nature, but it’s also personal, having to do with *our* relationship with God.

So there is both *personal* righteousness and *social* righteousness, and that’s what makes up biblical justice. It has to do with being in right relationship with God and right relationship with our neighbor. It means a whole lot more than simply being nice to other people; it means making sure that life is lived fairly in the society in which we live.

In secular society we talk about “getting justice,” but the Bible speaks about “doing” justice. Proverbs 21:3 says, “To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice.” Micah 6:8 says, “He has shown you, o man (or mortal one) what does the Lord require; but to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with the Lord.”

We “do justice” when we work to set things right or to maintain what is already right. This involves our personal lives as well as our communal lives. At its very core, justice refers to love made manifest in spirit and in action.

We are acting justly, and we show the love of God, by service to others. And by that, I do not mean merely charity. Charity is important, that is - to help relieve the suffering of other people. But justice goes further and asks the question “*Why* are the people suffering and what can we do to change the circumstances which are causing this suffering?”

When we love God, we can’t sit by and watch other people suffer and simply tsk, tsk the situation. Love demands that we respond somehow, to help overcome that pain, that hurt, that suffering, that oppression. In the letter of 1 John, we are told that our love should be more than mere words

and talk. True love shows itself in action. To me, that means more than an occasional mission trip, or food drive. Those are good, but that is not justice. A homeless shelter is not a legitimate replacement for affordable housing. A bonus check during a pandemic is not a replacement for a living wage, affordable healthcare and access to opportunity.

The prophet Amos says, “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (Amos 5:24) Our Christian love needs to go beyond charity. Amos was talking about an ever-flowing stream, not short spurts or trickles here and there.

What does that ever-flowing stream of justice look like? It is justice that is blind to color or gender. It is protection for the weak, fairness in the courts, the opportunity for honest work that provides a sustainable wage for those who want it. It is removing the barriers that keep people from having a decent standard of living while others live in excess and extravagance.

Some people may think that sounds like a political platform. It is not. It is what biblical justice looks like. However, justice does have to do with the political policies of a country that establish the rules by which all people live. Those policies can benefit a few, or they can create a more just society so that all have equal opportunity. And that, my friends is political.

We must remember however, that we must first be right with God and not seek a personal agenda. Nor should we allow our zeal to lead us to harshness. Justice is love in action, and if we have not love, we are not acting in the spirit of the Lord.

But when we commit ourselves to personal righteousness and strive to “do justice” in our society, God’s righteous power will become more evident, and justice *will indeed* roll down like waters to refresh and renew our barren lives and land. May it be so. Amen.

This sermon borrows heavily from *The Workbook on Virtues and the Fruit of the Spirit*, by Maxie Dunnam and Kimberly Dunnam Reisman, Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998, pp. 56-66.