

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15
Hebrews 4:12-16

Establishing Justice
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October 11, 2009

As I thought about “justice” I realized that one of the first things we need to do is to define justice. Defining justice is not as easy as it may seem. I listened to a news interview this past week involving several people affected by the same crime. Each one had a slightly different view of what they would see as justice being done. One saw justice as an “eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth” type of justice. Another wanted to see justice done but wanted it tempered with some mercy and grace. All wanted justice but their definition of justice was not the same. Which one was right? What is justice?

As we look at Amos and the prophets we get an understanding of the “sins” of Israel. Amos is lamenting the situation in the land brought about by the sins of its people. What brought them to this place? Amos includes in his list: the lack of justice in the land (v. 11), judges can be bribed (v. 12) and there is a neglect of the poor (v.12). The NIV says that justice has been “turned to bitterness” and the NRSV says they have turned “justice into wormwood.” The people of the land are not being treated equally, the poor, the widows and the orphans are not being seen as people with any rights in the land. They are neglecting God’s call that all are to be treated with justice.

Amos is not alone in his judgment of Israel’s sins. Isaiah writes, “***Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow***” (1:16-17). Isaiah, along with the other prophets, is calling Israel back to its foundation. A people who stand together as equal before one another and God. A people who stand for justice, God’s justice, for all people. Listen to Ezekiel’s condemnation of Sodom, “***The sin of your sister Sodom was this: She lived with her daughters in the lap of luxury, gluttonous, and lazy. They ignored the oppressed and the poor***” (*The Message*). Justice, care for the poor should be one of the foundations of Israel’s life.

Now, how do we define justice? What words would you use to define justice? [Responses: fair (one of the dictionary definitions), equality, same, punishment] All of these are part of justice or at least a part of our definition of justice. We all want to be treated equally, we want justice. But yet we struggle with what it means to be just and to bring justice to our world. We each still define justice a bit differently.

As we move to our New Testament text we find the writer of Hebrews speaking of the power of the Word. Nothing is hid from our God. The Word of God is able to penetrate to the very depths of our being. God knows our thoughts and our hearts and yet God still loves us. Jesus often responds not by what was said but by the motive behind the thought or question. The power of the Word is its ability to penetrate and move us to justice.

We are all seen as equal in the sight of God. There is no pauper or prince. A number of years ago I went into the local funeral home and the funeral director was on the war path. He was angry with the local police. He had been trying to arrange some police coverage for an upcoming funeral and was being told that no one was available. All of the extra hours had been used up because of the funeral of a local judge a few weeks earlier. He said that for that service he had more police than he could use. He was lamenting that one with power garnered all the attention and now a simple citizen was being ignored. He asked where the justice was in this; both paid their taxes, etc. Why should one garner more attention than the other?

Power, prestige, honors, degrees do not impress God. We are all equal in God's sight. We all stand as sinners before God, guilty, deserving punishment. If we demand justice we may be in danger of getting it! Do we really want God's justice on our lives?

The Good News is that because of Christ, who stood in our place, we have experienced grace. We will not get the justice we deserve. Our salvation is not dependent on what we have done or what we are going to do to but on God's gift of Christ. It is not something that we have earned or deserve. It is the gift of God.

Thus, if we become one in Christ, we have become Christ's representatives of justice, mercy and peace. We therefore must welcome all who Christ welcomes (a Lectionary theme this fall). We must forgive as Christ forgives. All are given the same invitation. Whether we accept it or not is up to us. We all receive it as a gift, it is not something that we deserve or earn.

I thought of this yesterday as we celebrated with our Evergreen family in this place. As we gathered for a closing Communion service I looked at those who were gathered around me. As we stood around our Communion table beside me was Ken Curl (our new Chair and member of the Black Caucus); next to Ken was Marcia Patton (our Executive Minister, an ordained woman); next to Marcia was Dr. Wright-Riggins (the Executive Director of National Ministries, and black); next to him was Perla Bello (a Filipina); and next to Perla was our outgoing chair and member of the Euro caucus, Curtis Price. Then there was the rainbow congregation before us. As I looked out over those gathered in this place I thought about the struggle that took place in order for this to be a possibility. Not that many years ago any gathering with this diversity would not have been tolerated in many parts of this country and is still frowned upon in some. One of our tasks is to make sure that this type of gathering is still possible throughout our land and God's world. This is who we are in Christ. This is who we must be in Christ – a people called to establish justice for all.

Justice, mercy and grace then becomes who we are in Christ. When we accept Christ we accept those Christ accepts as brothers and sisters. We then must speak for the poor, the widow, the orphans and those in need. We must demand justice for all people. We must be working to establish justice in the land.

We are the voice of those who have no voice.

We are the hands of those who have no hands.

We are the feet of those who have no feet.

We are the eyes of those who have no eyes.

We are the hands and feet of Christ.

We are called to seek and establish justice in our land.

I should not listen to talk radio while driving. The other day there was an item about a conservative group that is seeking to rewrite the Bible. They don't like the way it has been translated. The story said that they want to write portions that deal with justice, compassion and forgiveness. Now for a while I thought this was some internet spoof being reported (and it may still be) but the show is very legitimate and the host had a multitude of examples that are being suggested to change certain portions of Scripture. They don't want a God of mercy, grace – they want a God of justice – their justice, which limits the people who are welcome in God's family.

Neither we nor Thomas Jefferson, who cut out portions of his Bible he did not agree with, have the right to rewrite the text. It is not our right or privilege to change the Sacred text to fit our own theology or ideology. We are not the ones who determine who gets justice, mercy or grace. We may not like God's mercy and grace but it is not up to us to decide who is in and who is out. That is entirely up to God.

We are not called to determine who has or does not have justice. We are not called to decide who has rights or who does not have rights. We are all equal before God. We ARE called to represent the living Christ in establishing justice for all. We ARE called to represent the living Christ in distributing grace to all. We then leave the rest in the hands of God.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quoted is from NRSV, NCCC/USA 1989
NIV, New International Bible Society, Zondervan, 1989
Peterson, Eugene, *The Message*, Zondervan, 2002