

August 26, 2018

Exodus 2:23, 3:7-8; Romans 12:17; Isaiah 1:17;
Isaiah 58:3, 6-7; Ephesians 6:12

My 24-year-old daughter Emily was in Guatemala for several months earlier this year; she was an intern at a police archive where she worked with documents that indicated human rights abuses in Guatemala, human rights abuses perpetrated by people in official positions of power. One day I was telling a friend of mine about this work that she was doing; he was so fascinated by it that he suggested having a pot-luck supper gathering, so that Emily could talk about her work with a handful of people who would be interested in learning more about it. So, sure enough, we did. Some weeks later, over a delicious supper, Emily shared with the group stories from Guatemala's history over the past 75 years or so, stories of official corruption, political intrigue, unchecked power, rampant violence perpetrated by the very people who were charged with public safety, and the genocide of indigenous people. And we learned that, over the years, the US has participated in much of this activity in Guatemala. As the conversation went on, we all felt burdened by the weight of all this injustice. Somehow, one dinner guest shifted the focus of the conversation by asking Emily how she is going to take care of herself as she works with these difficult issues day in and day out, and that question shifted the whole conversation: we all began asking each other what we do for self care and delight, in the midst of the difficulties of life. The evening ended with the enthusiastic sharing of healthy pleasures: hiking, reading, cycling, traveling, cooking.

Over the weeks since that dinner gathering, I've found myself pondering these questions: what do we as Christians do in the face of injustice? How do we react when we experience injustice ourselves, and how do we act when we witness someone else experiencing injustice? How do we engage with these issues without giving in to despair and fear? How do we take care of ourselves in the midst of all of it?

So today, I'm going to preach a different kind of sermon. Instead of focusing on one passage from the Bible, I'm going to look at several different passages and what they say to us as we ponder these questions.

So... Maybe you're homeless, and someone steals your backpack. That's not right. And that's one definition of injustice - something that is not right. Or, maybe at work, you see how the people in charge take advantage of other people, maybe including you, and that's not right; that's injustice. Maybe you're a teacher, and you see children in your classroom experiencing homelessness or hunger or neglect; and that's not right. That's injustice. Or maybe you simply listen to the news, and learn of corrupt politicians or of people in other positions of power who abuse their power; you learn of people who can never seem to amass too much money, even at the expense of other peoples' basic well-being. All of that is injustice. So, whether it's a stolen backpack or large, systemic forces at work, it's injustice either way.

So, what do we as Christians do in the face of all this? First of all, we cry out to God. We express our sense of outrage that things are not right; things are not the way God intended them to be. When the Hebrew people were suffering great injustice, when they were in bondage in Egypt, they cried out to God. Exodus 2:23 reads, “The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites and God took notice of them.” And a few verses later, in Exodus 3:7-8, God calls Moses to go to Pharaoh, to lead the people out of bondage: “Then the Lord said to Moses: ‘I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians’...” God heard the cries of the Hebrew people, God cared, and God acted to address the injustice. Today, too, God hears our cries. God cares about our troubles. And God responds with faithfulness and steadfast love.

A second thing we as Christians can do in the face of injustice is to remember what our mothers told us when we were children: that two wrongs do not make a right. In the book of Romans (12:17), Paul writes: “Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.” If someone steals your backpack, you do not get to retaliate with violence against another person. If someone pays you less than someone else for the exact same job, you do not get to retaliate with violence. If someone treats you with contempt because of the color of your skin or your sexual orientation or the country you were born in, you do not get to retaliate with violence. This is tough; our human inclination is to lash out in justified anger and to seek revenge. But God calls us to a higher standard, of returning to no one evil for evil. This may well be beyond our capacity for self-control, so we look to God for the wisdom and the strength to restrain ourselves.

Thirdly, we notice that throughout Scripture, justice is one of the characteristics of God; justice is part of who God is. Deuteronomy 32:4 says, “All God’s ways are just. A faithful God, without deceit, just and upright is he.” Psalm 145:17 says, “The Lord is just in all his ways, and kind in all his doings.” Because justice is at the heart of who God is, justice is also at the heart of what God does in the world. And the justice that God does is a lot bigger than our notions of criminal justice; when God acts on behalf of justice, that means that God is about the work of setting things right, of addressing exploitation and oppression wherever it is found, as we saw in the passages I just read from Exodus. And as we saw in those passages, a primary way that God acts to set things right is through calling humans to be part of this divine activity: notice that God called Moses to take a major role. Elsewhere in Scripture, God makes it clear that this divine activity of justice is intended to be a human activity as well. In Isaiah 1:17, the Lord says: “cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, (and then he defines that justice:) rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” Later on in the book of Isaiah, the prophet expresses God’s disgust with religious practices that mask injustice and oppression: chapter 58:3, 6-7 reads: “Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. Will you

call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?" In this text, we see that fasting and worship bring no delight to God when those same worshippers oppress workers, perpetrate violence, and look the other way when the poor go hungry. Through Isaiah and all the other Old Testament prophets, God clearly calls the people to address injustice wherever it is found. A man named Chris Marshall wrote a book entitled *The Little Book of Biblical Justice*. In it, he writes, "Present injustices must never simply be tolerated or accepted as inevitable. We are not meant to resign ourselves to the evils of the world, while waiting passively for God's coming to sweep them away. Instead, we are to work tirelessly in partnership with God for the greater attainment of justice here and now, knowing that God shall ultimately bring our efforts to fruition in the renewal of creation." (page 29) So, justice is part of who God is; justice is what God does in the world; and justice is what God calls us to do with God.

As we look around, we see that injustice is a whole lot bigger than just the bad actors we can see, whether a petty thief or a corrupt politician or an exploitative employer. As the Apostle Paul writes in Ephesians 6:12, "For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." Our struggle against injustice is a cosmic, spiritual struggle, a strenuous task that is complex and multi-layered, an effort that is never finished. The same writer I quoted a minute ago, Chris Marshall, also writes this: "Justice is always an effort. It doesn't just happen. It doesn't spontaneously spring into existence. Nor is it the automatic or accidental by-product of something else, such as the operation of market forces or the spread of Western democracy. Justice requires commitment and struggle. Like peace, it has to be pursued with dedication, for there are powerful forces at work in every society with vested interest in maintaining structures of exploitation and oppression." (page 29)

As we ponder the extent of injustice in our world, and as we engage in this mighty struggle, we may well become overwhelmed, or cynical, or afraid; it can be all too easy to withdraw and throw up our hands, and give up. But God gives us a powerful gift to counteract all this: the gift of community. We can find support and encouragement to remain in the struggle, by gathering together to worship, to pray, and to sing. We can tell each other, yet again, the stories of God's faithfulness in the midst of adversity in every time and place, and we can be inspired by learning about people in other times and places who engaged in the struggle for justice with faith and wisdom and courage.

And one more thing: we are called to take care of ourselves in the midst of the struggle. We can do things that renew us and rejuvenate us, whether that is hiking or gardening or zumba or art or music... These healthy pleasures remind us that, even in the midst of the injustice and exploitation all around us, life is a gift from God, a holy gift containing blessings and delight. Even as we engage in the demanding work of

justice, we can celebrate the goodness of life, and the goodness of God. For it is only God's goodness and faithfulness that sustain us and give us strength and courage for the living of our days. Thanks be to God! Amen.