

## “WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS NOW IS... JUSTICE”

Isaiah 42:1-4; Acts 16:16-24

June 19, 2016 – Rev. Jerry Duggins

Some things that trouble me: the influence of money in our political system; the failure of the criminal justice system to act impartially; an educational system that demands more from our children without providing the necessary resources for all to succeed. I am troubled that contributions from the gun lobby prevent sensible firearm regulation from being enacted; troubled that a judge, a supposed administrator of justice, delivers a light sentence to a young white man convicted of raping an unconscious woman because “prison would ruin his life.” I am troubled that we expect our children to succeed while we reduce funding to our schools, increase class sizes, and decrease essential services. I wonder why we haven’t done more about the fact that women on average continue to earn less than men for the same job. What are we to say about the reality that the prison population has a disproportionate percentage of African American males, that being white or having money makes it easier to avoid a jail sentence?

I wonder why people who are laid off “for cause” receive no unemployment compensation even though they paid into the system too. I marvel that we think deregulation of industry and restricting the power of unions are both good things. I am amazed that we need movements like *Black Lives Matter* in a country where citizens pledge themselves to “justice for all.”

Those are some of the things on my list of injustices. Some of these are not on your list. You may see some of these things differently, but you’ve got your list too; list of things that trouble you about the world. I’ve yet to meet a person who thought the world was just perfect. Even if we can’t agree on the same list of injustices, it seems obvious that the world does need justice.

But justice is complicated. People want it, especially for themselves, but we don’t have the same idea about what it looks like. We can agree, in an abstract way, that justice is about “doing the right thing,” and that it has something to do with a sense of “fairness.” But in a world of competing interests, people often disagree about the right thing. Is it fair, for instance, that the owners of this slave girl should be making money off her talent? Should we be put off from this story because it fails to challenge the institution of slavery? Is it right for Paul, simply because he’s annoyed, to take away this source of income from the slave-owners? Those who are passionate about economic justice are certainly unhappy that a stronger statement isn’t made against profiting from the labor of another person. The town officials will be concerned later that Paul and his companions had been detained, beaten and imprisoned without the due process to which Roman citizens were entitled. Paul is so angry about this that he refuses to leave the prison until the officials responsible come and publicly acknowledge this violation of justice.

It’s clear that there are injustices committed in this story, but it’s not clear that anyone acts from a passion for justice, or even what justice for all would look like for everyone. In this country’s history with slavery, there was conversation about compensating slave-owners for the loss of their “property,” and about how best to equip the newly freed slaves for their new lives. Hard political battles were fought between forces that wanted to fully empower the former slaves and those that wanted to limit their new found freedom. We still struggle to establish

justice between different races and genders. We still disagree about what the injustices actually are and about what justice would look like. But everyone is looking for justice, at least their version of it. Justice is clearly needed, but it remains complicated.

I had originally hoped to use this story from Acts to say a few things about justice from a faith perspective, but the more I looked at it, the more I realized that it's not helpful for that. It does help us understand that justice is complex, but I think we all knew that. There is at least one place where justice happens, but it's hard to see without a different lens to look at it; and I think the instance of justice is actually not intentional.

We don't know whether these slave owners are compensated or whether justice even calls for it. I tend to think not, but I can imagine circumstances and people who could speak eloquently on behalf of the owners, but whether these speakers were working in the cause of justice or not would itself be a point for debate.

Paul and his party are eventually released, but the only compensation they receive for their troubles is an apology from the city officials. Hardly seems fair given not only the violence committed on their bodies, but also the violation of their civil rights. On the other hand if we compared Paul's action with the violation of the fugitive slave laws of the 1850's which imposed criminal and civil penalties on those who assisted in a slave's escape... well, that version of justice would claim that Paul received only as he deserved. I'd like to think that most of us don't hold to this version of justice, but we are very serious in our legal code about protecting the rights of property and ownership. People have had their lives ruined over inadvertent violations of copyright or patents.

Well, fortunately, we read two scriptures today, and the other speaks clearly and concisely about justice from a faith perspective. This is one of four "servant songs" in the latter part of Isaiah. These songs speak of the servant whom God will send to deliver God's people from oppression. Some Jews believe that the servant refers to the messiah, while others believe that it refers to the nation of Israel. Some Christians believe it refers to Jesus, while others see it as a model for any who would follow God. In either case, God clearly sends a person or persons to establish justice.

So the first thing we can say about justice from a faith perspective is that not only do we sense a need for justice in the world, but so does God. God wants justice for the world. That may seem obvious, but how many times have you said or heard said that "life is not fair?" We say it as if we believed that God made the world unfair, and just expected us to deal with it.

Sometimes the "list" is so long that we despair for the world. We are ready to give up on the world, and we think perhaps God already has. Sometimes the list strikes us so deeply that we get angry and we accuse God of being cruel, unfair, unjust. But when faith takes hold, a faith the world really needs, we remember that God didn't make the world unjust; no, God made a world where justice is a possibility. God sends the servant who will establish justice and not just anywhere, but in the least likely place... *among the nations*. Faith tells us that God not only wants justice, but has made a world where justice is possible.

Third, Isaiah tells us this about the servant: "a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench..." The first point reminds us that God also cares about

justice. The second activates hope by telling us that justice is possible, and this third point gives us a clue about how to go about it.

We are used to thinking about justice movements as powerful. People died in the American war for independence, a justice movement. We honor the martyrs for the cause of justice, whether we're talking about civil rights, women's rights or gay rights. Leaders of advocacy movements warn you to count the cost before you begin. Justice is a struggle. It is hard. All this is true enough, but justice will only be accomplished if we hold the victims of injustice before us. Justice never forgets to attend the bruised reed and the dimly burning wick.

There are sacrifices to be made in the struggle for justice, but it is the sacrifice of those with power on behalf of the powerless, the sacrifice of those with a voice on behalf of the silenced, the sacrifice of the blessed on behalf of the marginalized. Liberation theologians refer to this as God's preferential option for the poor. It's often misunderstood as suggesting that God likes poor people better than rich people. It's not that God is partial to the poor, but that the poor stand more in need of God's protection. And it's not that the rich have no role to play in liberation movements, in the work of justice. God wants it. God has made it possible. And God calls all people of faith to work for justice. But justice is always justice for something, for someone. We seek justice for the oppressed, justice for the abused, justice for the bruised reed. And if we break the reed, we fail in the struggle for justice.

The world needs justice and people of faith have something to bring to the struggle. We bring the conviction that God cares and that God empowers, and we bring the truth that justice is not about a cause, but about *people*, not about the coalition of powerful forces gathered together, but about the victims, the oppressed, the dimly burning wick.

When I go back to my list, it reminds me that when I think about the influence of money in politics, that's really about the poor who have lost their voice in the halls of Congress; when I think about a broken criminal justice system, it is really about those wrongly incarcerated; when I think about education, it is really about the children; when I think about our failure to enact laws that protect the public, it is really about the victims of gun violence. What it comes down to is this: seeing in those who have suffered injustice the truth that they are children of God, understanding that God wants the bruised to heal, not break, wants their candles to burn bright, not go out.

I don't know whether justice happened in the story in Acts. Paul recovered from his injuries and moved on. I expect the owners recovered from their losses. But I suspect that if you really want to know whether justice happened, you'd have to ask the slave girl. It's quite sad really that no one speaks up for her in the story. As soon as her usefulness to her owners is gone, she is forgotten. Wonderful that Paul released her from that obnoxious spirit, even if only because he was annoyed; but sad that for us, her story ends there, sad that we don't know whether this bruised reed healed or broke. If the work of justice is to succeed, we will need to remember her and others who are like her. This we should do because it is clear that God desires justice ... and the world has need. Amen.