



“Do the Right Thing”

Isaiah 59:6-9a; Matthew 5:6

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Fourth Sunday in Lent

In the summer of my twelfth year, my family moved from sunny eastern Washington State to industrial Dayton, Ohio. The closer we got to Ohio, the more excited our conversation as we imagined our new home.

Those were the days before interstate highways that allow you to pass over or around a city. We entered Dayton on the west side, the poor, black side of town, and drove all the way across town on Third Street to our home on the east side. It was a dreary, rainy day and our excitement about our new home was snuffed out by what lay outside the windows of our car. We'd never seen anything like urban poverty in our lives, and it was shocking. The car became very quiet as we struggled with a new reality. I had no words for what I saw, but deep in my soul I knew something was not right, and it stirred my conscience.

A few years later, when I was a senior in high school, I participated in a study group that traveled to historic Williamsburg, Virginia. When we stopped in Richmond, Virginia, for gas, I looked for the restroom. I was stunned when I saw the sign on the door, "Whites." Then I saw a small, filthy drinking fountain with a sign, "Colored." I may have heard of such a thing, but I certainly had not experienced it. Deep in my soul I knew something was very, very wrong. This was not right.

My moral and spiritual development continued through college. From college I went to seminary in Chicago. I met larger realities face to face. On the one hand, there was urban Chicago, a city where the corrupt political Daley machine was a fact of life that resisted all attempts at reform. Racial tension divided the city while the Vietnam War polarized the entire nation. Social unrest was a fact of life. Nothing seemed right. The weekend after the assassination of Martin Luther King, the west side of Chicago was on fire. The pastor of the church where I was working and I stood in the parking lot of the church and watched the smoke rising into the sky. Pastor Langrock said, "It's not a matter of *if* there will be a revolution, it's a matter of *when*." Things were not right.

On the other hand, I was immersed in the study of Christian theology and Scripture. My moral and spiritual development was taking certain form. I reveled in the study of the Hebrew Scripture, especially the great prophets who seemed to be speaking directly to the modern world with their denunciation of war and corruption along with their passion for justice and righteousness.

I was deeply stirred by the prophets, especially that wonderful quote from the prophet Amos so beloved by Dr. King, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everlasting stream." I left seminary with a deep passion for justice and large hope for the

world, along with an equal moral and spiritual outrage at the resistance of the powers that be to do the right thing.

The tension between what ought to be and what we humans have created is built into the moral universe. It is the subtext of the biblical narrative. The prophet Isaiah is a case in point. He knew from harsh experience that things were not right. Israel, God's people, had been crushed by a pagan, godless Empire. Their towns and cities had become piles of rubble, and the nation was no more. The people were exiles in Babylon.

It wasn't right and everyone from the prophets to the simplest citizens knew it. A memory from that terrible exile is preserved in Psalm 137, a Psalm of lament. Their captors mocked their Jewish captives and their God who seemed weak and ineffective. "Sing us your holy songs," the Babylonians asked. "Come on, sing and dance for us." The Psalmist replies:

By the rivers of Babylon,
 there we sat down and wept
 when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there
 we hung up our harps...
How could we sing the Lord's song
 in a foreign land.

Isaiah was a prophet to the exiles, and even more appalling to the prophet than exile was the moral and spiritual corruption of God's people in that strange land. Things were not right and needed correcting. They were allowed to govern their own internal affairs and were making a mockery of God's law. The prophet complains:

No one brings suit justly,
 no one goes to law honestly;
 ...they rely on empty pleas, they speak lies....
Therefore justice is far from us,
 and righteousness does not reach us....
Justice is turned back,
 and righteousness stands at a distance;
for truth stumbles in the public square,
 and uprightness cannot enter.
Truth is lacking, and whoever turns from evil is despoiled
 (Isaiah 59:4, 9, 14)

They knew better. Their own scripture makes God's vision of a just society very clear. Leviticus 19, for example, declares that the heart of being a good society is doing the just and right thing for all people. They must have regard for the poor and, in fact, make sure there are no poor in the land. They must have regard for honesty in business—no false scales or gouging the poor. Employees must be paid a just wage and be paid on time. They must not give extra regard or favors to the rich. The courts must dispense justice equally and fairly, and last but not least, the aliens in the land must be given all the rights of citizens.

So Isaiah reminded the people of their own first principles. Our Old Testament Lesson speaks for God. The people were still "doing religion," fasting, praying, and attending services, but something was wrong. God cries out:

Is this not the fast that I choose:
 to unloose the bonds of injustice,
 to let the oppressed go free,

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 hide yourself from your own people.
(Isaiah 58:6-7)

I the Lord love justice. (Isaiah 61:8)

Jesus' life and speech are steeped in this part of the book of Isaiah. Early in his ministry, he gathered his new disciples around him and laid down the norms and values of God's kingdom. The Sermon on the Mount begins with the defining character of the Christian faith. We call them the Beatitudes, and they comprise the essential foundation of Christian spirituality. The fourth Beatitude is about doing the right thing. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled."

"But wait," someone says, "you changed the subject from social justice to righteousness." Not really! In the Bible, the words justice and righteousness are synonyms used interchangeably. Remember the prophet Amos? "Let justice roll down like rivers and righteousness like an everlasting stream." Or, take Isaiah 56:1, "Maintain justice and do what is right."

In its simplest terms, both justice and righteousness mean "do the right thing." And the right thing is not left to our imagination or to creativity. The right thing is always conformity to God's will for us and for the world.

Doing the right thing begins with a personal dimension. Being in a right relationship with our creator and Lord is fundamental. Faith means acknowledging God as the Lord, giving God our lives and bringing our life into conformity to God's will. Doing the right thing is being a moral and spiritual person and bringing our character and our conduct in line with God's character and conduct.

And, doing the right thing has a social dimension, a world and society reformed in the direction of God's will. According to the Law, the Prophets and Jesus Christ, justice and righteousness mean lives and institutions committed to: liberating the oppressed, changing the structures that promote poverty, establishing human and civil rights, ensuring equal justice in courts, integrity in business, and honor in home and family relationships.

That is God's dream for the world. It is the heart of Jesus' good news. It must be the character of the Church that bears God's name—and us! It is doing the right thing.

And, Jesus goes on, his people will have a passion for doing the right thing. Hunger and thirst are basic, primal urges. For the people of God, justice and righteousness are not ideas or even ideals. Doing the right thing is the warp and woof of the Christian faith.

Doing the right thing as God defines the right thing is the passion of the people of God. It's a gentle passion to be sure. After all, it is a passion that comes from the heart of God. But it is a primal motivation of the Christian Church. Jesus Christ thought doing the right thing was worth dying for.

But in a world that bends toward injustice and seems deaf to all cries for justice; in a nation that finds equality and justice difficult to translate from ideas into practice; in a political culture in which talk about the poor and oppressed is not politically viable (listen for such talk in the next election cycle); how can we create and nurture a passion for justice and righteousness?

Time and reality erode a passion for justice. Doing justice and loving mercy seem like lighting a candle in the wind. Modern culture seems much more interested in self-serving values. Doing the right thing for the poor, the aliens, the oppressed, or for that matter, curbing predatory greed, seems like a distant dream. We shrug, avert our gaze, or close off our hearts to those who need God's good news the most.

The church struggles to keep first things first. Jesus criticizes all religion when he says we tend to "omit the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy, and faithfulness."

Nevertheless, the call of Jesus still echoes in his church. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. They shall be filled."

Remember that although the world seems always to lean in the wrong direction, injustice always and finally collapses under its own weight. All corrupt empires and emperors, along with all robber barons and corrupt corporations, suffer the consequences of their own fatal flaws and are disposed in the ashbin of history. The kingdom of God and the good news proclaimed by Jesus Christ continue to transform lives, communities, even nations.

In the meantime, we gather here week after week and remind ourselves who the Lord is and what the Lord requires of us. This room is a place of sanctuary where we come to find God's healing and to regain a proper perspective. But Christian worship doesn't end there. The author of the book of Hebrews adds that a primary purpose of the community is "to provoke one another to love and good deeds." (Hebrews 10:24) Our common life includes a common passion for God to put things right in the world—and to take our place in that work.

God's passion for this world is on display every time we celebrate Holy Communion. The holy table holds symbols of that grand passion, the body and blood of the Son of God who died on behalf of the world. That passion should stir us each time we gather at the table—and provoke us to love and good deeds.

Until justice flows down like a river and righteousness like an everlasting stream—and someday it will—we live in the meantime. And in the meantime, as Micah the prophet puts it, "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

Amen.