



“Do the Right Thing”

Amos 5:18-24

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Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost

As I walked toward P.S. 8 to vote Tuesday, I couldn't help think I was participating in something historic. The closer I got the more people joined me on the sidewalk – people streaming down the street to exercise our right to choose our leaders and determine the course of our history. Young and old, black, white, Asian, we packed the room waiting – some for hours – waiting to vote.

It turned out the moment was larger than historic; many are using the word “transcendent” to describe the election of 2008. The people have spoken, and an African American man will be our President.

It is difficult for me to express what I felt Tuesday night at 11:00 when Barack Obama was declared the new President elect. I never thought I'd live to see the day.

In 1961, the year President Obama was born, we stopped for gas near Richmond, Virginia, and I saw signs over a drinking fountain and on a restroom door, “Whites Only.” A few years later, an African American was on my college basketball team. During warm ups before a game the insults and racial slurs got so intense, he began to weep and walked off the floor.

During those college days the Civil Rights Movement gathered national attention. Martin Luther King came to nearby Dayton, Ohio, and was greeted with banners and jeers that said “Martin Lucifer Coon.” In the mid 1970s, I was a pastor in an Indiana county that boasted that no black person – the N word was the usual noun – had spent the night in the county. Tuesday night, an African American candidate won Ohio and Indiana. I never thought I'd see the day.

I know younger Americans are weary of old stories about the '60s, but bear with me. There is another one worth repeating. In 1968 I was a seminary student in Chicago. The Democratic National Convention was in Chicago that summer. The convention was as much a riot outside the hall as a political meeting inside. Grant Park was one of the battlegrounds between young activists and the Chicago police.

Radicals provoked the Chicago police who overreacted. Both guilty and innocent were felled by tear gas and billy clubs. I was too close for comfort. Some of us thought the nation was coming apart, that violent revolution was inevitable.

Tuesday night a vast, joyous, and peaceful multitude gathered in Grant Park to celebrate the election of an African American as President of the United States. Where forty years ago, people fell to their knees weeping from tear gas, on this night Americans, black and white, fell to their knees in sheer joy. Americans, black and white, wept. I joined them. Forty years after that momentous convention, on the same spot, perhaps our nation's healing began.

Americans of every political persuasion have reason to be proud. Michael Gerson, former speechwriter for President Bush, wrote this in the *Washington Post*:

This presidency in particular should be a source of pride even for those who do not share its priorities. An African American will take the oath of office blocks from where slaves were once housed in pens and sold for profit. He will sleep in a house built in part by slave labor, near the room where Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation with firm hand. He will host dinners where Teddy Roosevelt in 1901 entertained the first African American to be a formal dinner guest in the White House; command a military that was not officially integrated until 1948. Every event, every act, will complete a cycle of history. It will be the most dramatic possible demonstration that the promise of America – so long deferred – is not a lie.... Today I have only one message for Barack Obama, who will be our president, my president: Hail to the chief.

I would add a further word. A woman who is the descendent of slaves will live in that house as first lady of the land. Your children will grow up in a world where an African American family in the White House is ordinary. I never thought I'd see the day. This is a much larger moment than mere American politics. We are experiencing a transcendent moment in history.

We are experiencing substantial healing of our nation's deep and festering racial wounds. Our terrible racial injustice born of slavery and nurtured for centuries by racism met partial atonement last Tuesday.

Reinhold Niebuhr, the great American public theologian of the last generation, said: "The human capacity for justice makes democracy possible...." Deep inside us we know what is right and occasionally a nation can at least begin to reverse an ancient wrong.

However, let our self-congratulation be brief. We must with humility confess that much yet needs to be done. Niebuhr's quote has a second half that makes equal sense. Together the quote is potent. "The human capacity for justice makes democracy possible; the human capacity for injustice makes democracy necessary."

The election of Barack Obama will not in itself teach one inner city child to read, will not lift the crushing burden of poverty from one poor family, or lift a growing underclass into the middle class, and certainly will not turn back the powerful vestiges of racism still lurking in us all and beneath the surface of our culture.

The new president will not have a magic wand that will solve our deep economic crisis, nor can he provide sufficient jobs to remove the fear of working class Americans that they have been abandoned by the centers of power and are despised by the so-called elite.

All of us, the entire nation, need to rekindle a passion larger than we've known for a while. Our nation needs a passion for justice larger than our own selfish interests and capable of making the sacrifices that may be necessary for the health of the common good. Can we do the right things, the thing necessary to make the ideals of the great American experiment a reality?

At least that's what the prophets, apostles, and Jesus Christ believed and taught. Our Old Testament Lesson is a powerful and passionate call for God's people in particular to do the right thing. Amos cries out, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream." The prophet Micah, a contemporary of Amos, summed up what God requires simply, "do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God." Jesus said we need to focus on the "weightier matters of the law, justice, mercy, and faith."

God requires all nations and people be driven by a passion for justice. Justice is doing what is right, fair, and equitable. Deep inside us we know what that means. Justice also redresses things that are wrong, unfair, and inequitable. Justice is the mission of the people of God and a requirement for every nation. Justice is always God's will in every place and every time. Injustice is always wrong everywhere and always. Justice is our business.

God's longing for justice and a people who embody justice is a story as old as the Bible. The charter of the people of Israel centers in justice for all. The logic is simple. God is just. God requires justice.

The Old Testament law is more than a boring recital of strange customs. At its heart the law is a radical vision of national life arranged around the experience of justice. It is a simple vision with profound consequences. (See the book of Deuteronomy for a summary.)

Over and over, the law declares that no one in the community is to be in need. Those who have are required to open their hearts and their hands and to give liberally and ungrudgingly. In fact, property rights are subject to human need. The poor in Israel have a right to food. Farmers and orchardists are required to leave grain in the fields and olives on the trees for the poor of the land. Beyond that, everyone is required to give alms for the support of the poor – so that no one has need.

Merchants and business people must act fairly. Weights and measures must be authentic so that no one is either enriched by shady dealings or cheated by unjust prices.

The law is filled with passionate calls for a fair judicial system. "Do not pervert justice," is a repeated command. There are to be no bribes and no special favors in the courts. The poor and the aliens in the land are to receive equal justice in the courts.

Even the king must have an eye for fairness. The king should not be rich or enrich himself by his rule. He must keep a fair eye out for the weak and needy. In fact, the special concern of the king is the care for the poor and the outcasts – to ensure they receive a fair share of food, housing, jobs, and justice.

Midpoint in the law comes a summary of national life: "Justice and only justice shall you pursue." Justice for all is more important than national power, economic success, or creation of wealth. State and church are called to serve the common good.

Beneath the call for justice is a theological commitment. God is just. But not just ordinary justice characterizes God. Sheer justice can be cruel survival of the fittest, a heartless every man, woman, and child for him or herself. God's justice is tempered by God's mercy. God's people are to be people who do the right thing, who are just in all of life. It's a special kind of justice. Micah says, "Do justice, love mercy." Jesus taught that justice tempered by mercy is a weightier matter of the law.

However – there's always a however when humans are involved – however, Israel, like all human communities, failed to live up to its own ideals.

Amos 5, our Old Testament Lesson, is a classic call for justice to a people who've forgotten their first principles. It was a time of unprecedented peace and prosperity and as is often the case, the people were smug, self-congratulatory and self-interested. Consequently, they forgot the priority of justice in the nation's life.

Before Amos points his prophetic finger at Israel, he reminds the surrounding nations that justice is God's will for every people, and that God is not happy with injustice. The prophet accuses Syria of war atrocities and post-war occupation injustices. Gaza and Tyre have participated in slave trade – unjust by any human or divine accounting – and it is just

wrong. Edom and Ammon are also guilty of war atrocities and national cruelty. They stand under the judgment of God.

Finally, Amos turns to Israel and a series of domestic injustices. Mistreatment of the poor heads the list as it usually does in the Bible. The nation has not been generous to the poor and justice is distorted or denied to those out of power. Those who know better have turned a blind eye. Next Amos decries sexual abuse of women and the violence by some men toward women. It's wrong, and God is not pleased.

The credit system is crushing the poor and enriching the powerful, Amos cries. That's wrong. It is not just. Worse, religious professionals have turned a blind eye to these abuses even taking bribes to keep quiet.

(I'm not making this up! It's in this ancient prophetic book of the 8th century B.C.!)

A just God cannot keep silent in the face of such injustice, and God will act in judgment. It reminds me of the famous statement of Thomas Jefferson about slavery, "I tremble when I consider that God is just, and that God's justice cannot sleep forever."

What God wants, according to Amos, is an end to injustice. God's desire is not pious songs and solemn assemblies. Rather, Amos writes, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream."

At this transcendent moment in history, all Americans, and especially God's people in America, must redouble our passion to set things right. We will differ on the means to do what is right for all people, but with one voice we must agree on the ends of our national experiment: liberty and justice for all.

God's people of all people must care deeply about what God cares for. The health and prosperity of all people, especially those denied health and prosperity, is a divine mission worth sacrifice, labor and prayer.

We now know for certain that we fallible humans can bend history in the right direction. There can be no doubt why. God is committed to justice, and God's people must focus like a laser on God's will, a will larger than any of us.

Amen.

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