

Pastor Kevin Garman

Theme: Seeking Justice

Scripture: Micah 6:1-8

March 14th, 2021

"Seeking Justice: For God so Loved the World"

Last week we looked at the chapter, *feeding others to starve our guilt*, and read the story of feeding the five thousand found in the Gospel of Mark. This week, in our fourth week of Lent, we turn to the theme of seeking justice and look to the prophet Micah for guidance and wisdom. In his fourth chapter of his book, *A World Worth Saving*, Rev. George helps us understand what Biblical justice looks like. I think most of us when we hear the word justice probably assume justice like in our judicial system of crimes and consequences or maybe due process for each person convicted of a crime. This can be an example of what justice looks like in our world, but when we speak about justice in the Bible, we speak about something more, something deeper than just a court of law or policies. Rev George says this, "seeking justice means we work for what God intends for the world. We seek God's dreams of wholeness for individuals and nations, and we work to establish systems in which all people receive equitable treatment and where oppression no longer rules" (Hovanness Donigian p 64). Whenever we talk about justice in the church, we are always talking about restorative justice because justice cannot fully be expressed without repentance and reconciliation. So, what is restorative justice?

Restorative justice requires a relationship between two people. Restorative justice means we remind people they are beautiful children of God. Restorative justice means we act out the gospel of Jesus Christ and forgive people for whatever crime they have committed because Jesus died on the cross for us to practice reconciliation and redemption in our lives just as he did on earth. Restorative justice allows us to see the humanity in our neighbor and helps them restore the image of God in themselves. None of us are solely defined of the sins and mistakes we have made in our lives, and restorative justice helps us see that. Thus, restorative justice is all about repairing relationships and this is the foundation of the gospel.

Rev. George, once again, asks some great questions that help us shape a more complete version of how restorative justice is understood in a biblical context. He asks the questions, "Do we call it justice when we feed people who are hungry? Or when we clothe those in need? Is justice visiting

people who are in prison? Is it justice when we do good deeds for others? Do we advance the cause of justice when we collect clothing for those whose lives have been disrupted by natural disasters?" (Hovanness Donigian p 63). Restorative justice is not just believing in equity and human rights, but it is living out the gospel that calls us to serve the needs of our neighbors in what way is necessary for their well-being.

Justice is not solely found in the New Testament or the teachings of Jesus. The prophet Isaiah calls on Israel to repent from their sinful ways when he states, "Wash! Be Clean! Remove your ugly deeds from my sight. Put an end to such evil; learn to do good. Seek justice: help the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow" (Isaiah 1:17 CEB). Justice is found in the calling of Abram when God says, "all the families of the earth will be blessed because of you!" (Genesis 12:3 CEB). The blessing of justice is the ability to empathize with another child of God and say, "You are good enough and you are forgiven because we are all forgiven by our God." Jesus didn't eat with the rich and the powerful, but he did eat with the despised and the sinners (Mark 2:15-22). Let us not forget the words of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark, "Healthy people don't need a doctor, but sick people do. I didn't come to call righteous people, but sinners" (Mark 2:17 CEB). The prophet Paul calls us to listen to the power of the gospel when he says, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith" (Romans 1:16-17 NRSV). We are all sinners in the eyes of our Lord and Savior and each of us require forgiveness, love, reconciliation, and justice.

Perhaps there is no better prophet to look to as we reclaim our understanding of restorative justice than the prophet, Micah. Not much is known about who Micah was, but he, like Jesus, came from a rural town that had been forgotten by the Assyrian Empire because it had served its purpose as a military outpost for the Assyrian invasion. Micah, like most Biblical prophets and evangelizers, would have gone to the marketplace or town square to proclaim the good news to those passing by perusing about as they bought food, trinkets, and clothes. Micah follows in the footsteps of the prophet Isaiah as they preach on similar themes of restorative justice and hope for the future. Micah would have seen the temple taken in 722 BCE by the Assyrian Empire as they made the Israelite kingdoms their vassals. Micah would witness his people being forced to change their ways to appease a new Empire and a new perspective of the world. However, Micah

would not be so easily thwarted against as he openly preached about the injustices and inequities of the Empire.

Micah 6:1-8

Hear what the Lord says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. ² Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the Lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the Lord has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel. ³ "O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! ⁴ For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. ⁵ O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the Lord." ⁶ "With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? ⁷ Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" ⁸ He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (NRSV).

As we can see here from the words of Micah, the appeal for justice is a defense for all of God's creation. Micah reminds the people God delivered them from Egypt, gave them freedom from the bondage of slavery, and delivered them through various calamities throughout their history. God is not pleased with our power or wealth. God is only pleased through our pursuit of justice, our empathy to others, and our journey of reconciliation with God. This is justice, but how does one seek justice?

The work of the Mennonite sociologist, John Paul Lederach helps us understand this journey of seeking justice although in a more dramatic example than the list of ways Rev. George provided us. John Paul is a peacebuilder who has lived in various countries working with various communities to build communities committed to peace and not violence. Make no mistake, John Paul has not always been well received in the communities he served, but he has always been committed to the work of restorative justice through his peacebuilding efforts. In what he describes as one of the most difficult moments of his life, the resistance leaders, the people he had been working with against the corrupt Central American government call to inform him they had intercepted information that the government aimed to kidnap his daughter. He was being accused of working for the CIA as a Sandinista plant to spy on the government, and later on, he

was nearly stoned to death for not leaving the country. In the preface of his book, *A Journey Toward Reconciliation*, Harold H. Saunders, who served under President Jimmy Carter as the assistant to the Secretary of the State, helping in the Tehran negotiations, Saunders says this about John Paul's restorative justice and peacebuilding work, "We commit ourselves to the journey toward reconciliation because we believe it is right-even when we are not sure, as John Paul says, how it will progress or end. We believe that walking down the path to peace offers a way better than violence and an instrument more powerful than force to conduct the affairs of humankind. We pray that others will join us."

The work of our founder John Wesley also leads us to a place of justice. John Wesley frequently visited prisoners to remind them of their humanity and even prayed with many people just before they were executed by the state. There is a point in Wesley's early career where he agitates the sheriffs of Newgate in Bristol to the point they forbade him to preach to the prisoners except for once a week (Manfred Marquadt *John Wesley's Social Ethics*). The alderman eventually refuses to allow Wesley to speak to the prisoners on death row albeit the prisoner's requests to speak with Wesley. Why was he refused to preach to the prisoners? Because according to Wesley's journal, "The content of Wesley's preaching consistently focused on texts proclaiming God's limitless love for all humanity" (Marquadt 82). Seeking justice leads us to reconciliation with one another, and reconciliation leads us to empathize and love our neighbor.

So, why do we need justice today? Because we drop bombs in Syria claiming it will bring stability to our peacemaking efforts. We need to seek justice today because the private prison system only seeks to make profit instead of the people's personal rehabilitation. We need to seek justice because we claim it is too radical to pay workers their well-earned wages to survive. We need to seek justice because CEO's make nearly 250 times more than their average employees. We seek justice because veterans sleep in the streets of our wealthiest cities and children go hungry in the forgotten rural towns of our country. We seek justice because it is the will of God and the world Jesus saw was a world worth saving.

Seeking justice means a lot of different things and is expressed in multiple ways as we spoke about at the beginning of today with serving the poor, clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, however, we should not fool ourselves in thinking justice is the path of least resistance. Seeking justice requires a deep amount of faith that God will be with us in the storms we face. Seeking justice requires us to look outside the needs of only ourselves

and our communities. Seeking justice requires a determination and will to bring about the kingdom of God even if we are not able to look out onto the Promised Land ourselves and see our land overflowing with milk and honey. Seeking justice requires us to work together as we proclaim the love of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Let us ponder on justice with the words of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr and Sister Dianna Ortiz, a Catholic nun from Guatemala. In his sermon, *Loving Your Enemies*, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness in a descending spiral of destruction. So when Jesus says, "Love your enemies," he is setting forth a profound and ultimately inescapable admonition. Have we not come to such an impasse in the modern world that we must love our enemies-or else? The chain reaction of evil—hate begetting hate, wars producing more wars—must be broken, or we shall be plunged into the dark abyss of annihilation" (King Jr. p 47). Sister Dianna Ortiz says this, "Sometimes you brush against a truth, feeling it before you can say it, and instead of theories or conclusions, tears are the evidence it leaves" (Dianna Ortiz).

Seeking justice is seeking the truth that we all the beautiful creations of God and we all deserve love, grace, hope, and a chance to make our lives the best they can possibly be. Our injustices cannot be mitigated through more injustice. Our inequities cannot be undone by more inequity. Only through our seeking justice may we truly find the peace of God by loving our neighbors and spreading the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Amen.