



Glendive/Wibaux United Methodist Church
November 3, 2019

Scriptures: Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-14 2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12 Luke 19:1-10

Sermon Topic: Lady Justice

According to one blog post I read, “The concept of Lady Justice is very old, dating back to ancient Greek and Egyptian times. Themis, the Greek goddess, represented the law, order, and justice, while the Egyptians had Ma’at, who stood for order and carried both a sword and the Feather of Truth. The most direct comparison, however, is with the Roman goddess of justice, Justitia.” <https://heatherandlittle.com/blog/restoration/the-meaning-behind-the-lady-of-justice-statue/> October 31, 2019 (1)

Let us Pray:

Creator of all, three-in-one, in whose image we are all created so none of us is more special nor more privileged in your kingdom than another, guide us on our journey in the next few minutes to discover how we might be purveyors of justice that is truly for all. Amen.

Let’s talk a bit about the ideas and more history of lady justice. A little background on the symbols of justice.

Balance Scales: These represent impartiality and the obligation of the law (through its representatives) to weigh the evidence presented to the court. Each side of a legal case needs to be looked at and comparisons made as justice is done.

Sword: This item symbolizes enforcement and respect and means that justice stands by its decision and ruling and is able to take action. The fact that the sword is unsheathed and very visible is a sign that justice is transparent and is not an implement of fear. A double-edged blade signifies that justice can rule against either of the parties once the evidence has been perused, and it is bound to enforce the ruling as well as protect or defend the innocent party.

Blindfold: Apparently, its original significance was that the judicial system was tolerating abuse or ignorance of aspects of the law. However, in modern times, the blindfold represents the

impartiality and objectivity of the law and that it doesn't let outside factors, such as politics, wealth or fame, influence its decisions.”(1)

In today's world, we see too many examples of the imbalance of judicial *scales*; unbalanced justice. African Americans and other racial and ethnic minorities inordinately incarcerated for crimes for which whites are not. Like in most of the rest of the world, poor in the US cannot afford the same justice that whites and the privileged receive. Is it just that 1 percent of the American population holds the vast majority of the wealth? Is it just and balanced that women are paid less than men; that the wealthy pay a smaller percentage of their gross income on taxes? Is it justice that separates families at our borders for the administrative violation of crossing into our country without papers or authority?

By the way, how many of you have heard of the United Methodist immigration ministry, JFON, Justice for Our Neighbors? According to their website, Justice for Our Neighbors is a network of immigration legal sites around the country connected to The United Methodist Church. These sites, each with their own staff attorneys, provide immigration legal services to low-income immigrants, advocate, and educate communities about our immigration system.

The work of JFON enables families to remain together, ensures that immigrants can live in the U.S. safely and permanently, and helps eligible immigrants obtain authorization to work. They carry out our mission in a welcoming environment, providing free or low-cost services to our most at-risk immigrant neighbors. And last month they celebrated 20 years of ministry. <https://www.umcjustice.org/news-and-stories/celebrating-jfon-s-20th-anniversary-925> October 31, 2019

Back to what I was talking about. Some folks might see the *sword* only in terms of its power, lethality and control. But it's openness also shows a willingness to negotiate. Often, we use the expression, “double-edged sword” to mean that there is a good and bad side to an idea or argument. Yet today it seems we see that one side is more sharpened and more powerful than the other. Someone does get ahead while the other is left behind. And by-the-way, the cut from a dull blade is more painful than one that is well-honed. Perhaps this is one reason when the weak or unsharpened justice system fails for a person or group, the pain lingers.

What about that *blindfold*. Some might say it represents transparency as well as impartiality. If you cannot see who is in front of you: their clothes, their raggedness, their impoverished status, then they should be treated as fairly as a clean and nice smelling middle class or wealthy person. Does this happen? Sometimes it seems even to me that justice is blind and doesn't see the hurt inflicted by decisions.

A case in point is the United Methodist Church's ‘eyes-wide’ open’ yet, unfair, unbalanced and unjust approach to the treatment of openly gay, serving and loving clergy, and church members. Separate but equal never works. If we as United Methodists espouse an open table in communion with our Lord, how can we denounce any clergy from offering that sacrament or denying the equality and love represented by this Sacrament?

Now to that persistent Habakkuk (Habakkuk). The book of Habakkuk, written by the prophet is a conversation with God. One man's dialogue trying to find reasons for the injustices in a world of wicked people. He's only speaking for himself, by the way. And his words can mirror our own when we lament the state of the world and wonder why God doesn't intervene in all the injustice. And like Habakkuk we can get pretty self-righteous and stand and put our hands on our hips, and rail, "Hey God, what about this?"

Because Habakkuk is a righteous and faithful man, he is blessed with a vision that warns him that those who trust in their own power and might will eventually be lost and those who are righteous, will receive justice. What a bold and courageous person he was. Getting right in God's face, as we might say today.

Pamela Cooper-White, in her commentary to explain how this righteous man could show such defiance and anger even towards God in his lamenting the world, wrote, "The paradox of lament is that there is no lament without a foundation of faith. Grief, sorrow, despair can all exist alongside a void of faith, but argumentative lament presupposes that Someone is listening." (Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol 4, page 243-244) (2)

Aha moment! Without hope and expectation of final justice, maybe we would not feel the injustice and cruelty in the world. If we weren't people of hope against an unjust world, we wouldn't be making disciples of Jesus Christ to transform this world. We wouldn't have folks out here on Wednesday asking for our communities to end gun violence and racism. Without hope in a better future here in this kingdom, we wouldn't be working to end climate change and children wouldn't need to leave school to protest. Without hope, we wouldn't have so many hard-working volunteers put on the annual roast beef dinner whose primary goal should be making disciples of Jesus Christ to transform the world. Without hope that things can change, with the help of God and guidance of the Holy Spirit, in the name of Jesus Christ, we wouldn't be Christians.

Habakkuk is concerned about the lack of justice in the world in which he lived. He continually cried out to God, asking when God is going to put things right—to end the cycle of violence, to heal the deep divisions in the society, to push back the wicked who prey on the righteous. And he gets an answer! "Abide"—which is like "wait" or "hold on." But (and this is important) abiding doesn't mean "cooling your heels"; it doesn't mean "sitting back and keeping your nose clean." <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/abiding-in-the-reign/twenty-first-sunday-after-pentecost-year-c-planning-notes/twenty-first-sunday-after-pentecost-year-c-preaching-notes>

Like Habakkuk, Zecchaeus (Zakeeus) wanted a change in his life and perhaps even his negative standing in the community as an unjust tax collector. He desired, as our sermon series is about, to abide with Jesus. Habakkuk abided with God and his faith and it soothed his anxieties. We're like Zakeeus. We want to know the whys and wherefores of following Jesus. The prophet Hosea wrote, "but you must return to your God; maintain love and justice and wait for your God always." Hosea 12:6. This is what Jesus tells this little tax collector who risked life

and yes, limb just to have a word from the Master. And Jesus didn't disappoint; doesn't disappoint us either. "For the Son of man came to seek out and to save the lost."

Folks, the vision of Lady Justice resounds throughout the world. We see it and recognize it. Now we also know what the symbols means. The ideas of justice in a cruel environment and under oppression and unfairness and persecution also resounds throughout the world. Our answer to it, must be like the little man Zach, to risk ourselves moving towards Jesus. To forget our status in our neighborhoods and do the right thing. To get out from the comfort of our lives and seek out, as Jesus does, those who are seeking and who may have lost their hope.

We are hopeful people. But that doesn't mean we stand aside and let others or God take care of things. God is our comfort and our joy. But we are His handmaidens, his Lady Justice. It won't be easy, but when we are abiding in the Son of God, we can make the change.

Amen and Selah