

“Justice Can’t Wait”

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Epiphany 3C

Isaiah 61

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favour,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.
They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.

Luke 4:14-21

14 Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country.¹⁵ He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

16 When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read,¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’

²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the

synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’

We preachers take a lot of classes in how to write sermons and we sit at the feet of a lot of great preachers but, after awhile, after having heard the Tom Longs, the Fred Craddicks, the Barbara Brown-Taylor, and the Jo Hudsons I begin to wonder, “How would Jesus distill a message from scripture?”

In today’s passage we actually get some insight into that and sometimes Jesus wouldn’t pass the best exegetical method tests but, then again, he’s Jesus!. In Luke, Jesus is quoting Isaiah 61 but only the first couple of verses. He actually leaves out the parts of the passage that speak of God’s wrath against the unrighteous. Like Thomas Jefferson did, he leaves out the verses that are less representative of the character of God as he knows it. And thus we have our clue to Jesus’ understanding of true justice. What was formally an eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth worldview has been emphasized a little differently by Jesus. Jesus was born of an unwed teenage mother and that didn’t fly near as well then as it does today and it doesn’t fly well in our culture even still. Jesus knew what it was like to be judged unfairly and what it was like to be not get a second chance. So in this passage, he advocates for the plain sense of grace. What is fair and just for Jesus is the benefit of the doubt, unmerited favor, a second, third, and fourth chance. This is what the Calvinists among us might call Irresistible Grace and what the Methodists might call Prevenient Grace. It is the ideal that God’s justice isn’t defined by what is fair or deserved or what we do. It is defined by a deep and abiding love that God has for all of creation no matter what. No matter what.

Today is Criminal Justice Sunday in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Prisons are big business in this state.

- Texas incarcerates the greatest number of persons in the U.S. but is dead last in the percentage of persons who graduate from high school.
- Texas has 75,000 inmates incarcerated for nonviolent offenses, a number that exceeds the prison populations of all but one state.
- Texas prisons hold more people with mental illness than our state mental health institutions have patients.
- Texas continues to incarcerate almost twice as many African-American males as are enrolled in the state’s public universities.¹

The dehumanized facts are startling enough but let’s not forget the families broken up by placing someone behind bars. Children, spouses, and parents are separated for the purpose of justice. When I did my student teaching in the small Highland Park ISD (not the one in Dallas but the one in Amarillo, Texas), I dealt with many children of inmates at the Clements Unit in Amarillo. They were wandering in the wilderness with their parent within view but never within reach. It was sad how their families had to hover around these prisons and just hope for the next permitted visit.

But let’s be clear that this is a retributive form of justice and we worship a God who is about something different...something called restorative justice. We may be interested in a

¹ <http://gritsforbreakfast.blogspot.com/2012/10/texas-prison-system-could-use-real.html>

punishment to fit the crime but our God is clearly interested in doing whatever it takes to restore people in relationship.

In 2005, I traveled to South Africa with Dr. Marcia Riggs of Columbia Seminary to study the Truth and Reconciliation process there. Incidentally, my friend and former executive director of More Light Presbyterians, Michael Adey, is there right now studying the same thing. In South Africa after the National Party finally walked away from the apartheid philosophy, gave up its monopoly on power, and transitioned into a democratic style government, there was a need for justice. The government had a choice between clogging up the system with literally thousands of court cases, filling jails with those of various sentences, or doing something different. That something different was a form of restorative justice where people could come forward and confess what they had done publicly and receive amnesty or go through a traditional retributive judicial process. No side was exempt from this policy. Today, South Africa remains a successful experiment in restorative justice.

But what if the crime is too heinous. Not that the ones in South Africa weren't but what if it was someone that was really close to you. What if your loved one is killed. Is such a notion of restorative justice even possible concerning those we are closest too. This example is uncomfortably grace-filled but it is true and was published in the January 6 New York Times.

On March 28, 2010, 19 year old Conor McBride walked into the Tallahassee police department and ask them to arrest him. He had shot his fiancée Ann Margaret Grosmaire and believing he had killed her, he turned himself in. They had been arguing for two days and two nights and as the arguing got more and more intense, one reached for the available gun.

As it turns out after authorities went to the house Ann was still alive but barely so she was taken to the hospital where her father Andy, a devout Catholic, prayed and could hear his daughter saying to him even in her unconscious state “forgive him”. “Four days later, Ann’s condition had not improved, and her parents decided to remove her from life support. Andy says he was in the hospital room praying when he felt a connection between his daughter and Christ; like Jesus on the cross, she had wounds on her head and hand. (Ann had instinctually reached to block the gunshot, and lost fingers.) Ann’s parents strive to model their lives on those of Jesus and St. Augustine, and forgiveness is deep in their creed. “I realized it was not just Ann asking me to forgive Conor, it was Jesus Christ,” Andy recalls. “And I hadn’t said no to him before, and I wasn’t going to start then. It was just a wave of joy, and I told Ann: ‘I will. I will.’” Jesus or no Jesus, he says, “what father can say no to his daughter?”²

Meanwhile Michael McBride, Conor’s father, did a courageous thing and went to the hospital where he was shocked after throwing up multiple times on the way there to receive a hug from Ann’s father Andy. “Thank you for being here,” Andy told Michael, “but I might hate you by the end of the week.”

Flip over to Conor in jail where he could name 5 people allowed to visit him. To that list Conor added Kate, Ann’s mother. At first she didn’t want to see him at all, but that feeling turned to willingness and then to a need. “Before this happened, I loved Conor,” she says. “I knew that if I defined Conor by that one moment — as a murderer — I was defining my

² http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/06/magazine/can-forgiveness-play-a-role-in-criminal-justice.html?pagewanted=2&_r=0&smid=fb-share

daughter as a murder victim. And I could not allow that to happen.” She asked her husband if he had a message for Conor. “Tell him I love him, and I forgive him,” he answered. Kate told me: “I wanted to be able to give him the same message. Conor owed us a debt he could never repay. And releasing him from that debt would release us from expecting that anything in this world could satisfy us.”

I will let you go to the Times to read this full story but even the prosecuting state attorney puts his career on the line to help Ann’s parents seek a lesser sentence for Conor. They were not going to let this situation define them. Rather they were going to define the situation in a way that is grace filled according to their firmly held theological beliefs.

Look no further than the gun debate in this country to know that our culture has very little faith in the kind of restorative justice we are talking about and that our God and Jesus are calling us to. Narratives like the ones I have shared with you are dismissed, mocked, and labeled as naïve and impractical.

Our world is on a collision course with its own cynicism and fear if you believe what it says about itself. Will you join me in making a difference? Will you join me in some acts of defying our world’s notion of justice? Jesus does not say it can wait. Jesus does not tell us we just need to wait for the train to glory. Jesus does not mean it is fulfilled in only his believing in his being but also in our replicating his character and ways in the world. He reads these words and says they are fulfilled: ¹⁸ ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon [us], because he has anointed [us] to bring good news to the poor. He has sent [us] to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’

In a Franciscan Benediction which is attributed to St. Francis but probably developed later in that monastic order we hear these words:

May God bless us with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that we may live deep within our hearts.

May God bless us with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that we may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless us with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation and war, so that we may reach out our hands to comfort them and turn their pain into joy.

And may God bless us with enough foolishness to believe that we can make a difference in this world, so that we can do what others claim cannot be done.

Justice can’t wait and it is fulfilled today if we will but follow in the footsteps of Jesus. May it be so. Amen.