

Build A Bridge: Doing Justice

Micah 6:3-8, James 2:14-17

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I was sick the day my seventh-grade algebra class took the mid-term exam. On the day that I returned to school to take the make-up exam I ran into a classmate and I asked how the test was. He said it was tough, especially the last question. But he knew that he'd gotten it right because he went home and he checked his work. And then he told me what the right answer was. I didn't like algebra, mainly because I didn't understand it. More than anything, I hated feeling stupid. So, when I came to that question on the exam, I scribbled down some numbers to make it look like I'd done the work, and then I wrote the answer that my friend had given me and circled it as my answer.

A few days later my algebra teacher, Mrs. Wellington, asked me to stay for a moment after class. She handed me back my mid-term exam and I had passed, in part because I'd gotten that last question right. Then Mrs. Wellington said, "I couldn't quite figure out how you came to the answer that you did on that last question, so I'd like you to solve the problem on the board for me." I could feel the heat rise in my face. I picked up the piece of chalk, put it to the board and I froze. I didn't have the foggiest idea how to solve that problem.

After what felt like an eternity Mrs. Wellington said, "Someone gave you the answer before you took the test, didn't they?" I stared at the floor and nodded my head and waited for the axe to fall. Now, I would fail the test, maybe flunk the whole class. Mrs. Wellington would call my parents. I might even be suspended for cheating. That's what I deserved. But that isn't what happened. Mrs. Wellington said, "It's clear you're struggling with algebra, despite the fact that you're doing well in all your other classes. I'd be willing to meet with you after school for a week or two to give you some extra help, and then you can take the mid-term again."

And that's just what we did. She never called my parents. Never reported me to the principle. Instead,

she tutored me until I understood the concepts, and then I took that mid-term exam again. I still didn't ace it, but I did pass. Honestly, this time. And from that experience I learned a whole lot more than algebra. I learned an important lesson about the transformative power of justice. Hold onto that story for a moment.

Our scripture reading today comes from the prophet Micah. Before I read it, let me give you a little context. Micah lived at a time when corruption had infected the leaders of Israel. God had commanded the Israelites to care for the poor and the powerless; to protect the orphan, the widow and the alien in their midst. But the leaders of Israel, the rich and the powerful, created systems that took advantage of the poor and the powerless. And God, through the prophet Micah, confronted the leaders and their injustice, and called them to repent. That's the backdrop for our scripture reading today, so let's now listen to these powerful words from Micah 6:3-8:

[God says] "O my people, what have I done to you? What have I done to make you tired of me?"

Answer me! For I brought you out of Egypt and redeemed you from slavery. I sent Moses, Aaron, and Miriam to help you... And remember your journey from Acacia Grove to Gilgal, when I, the LORD, did everything I could to teach you about my faithfulness."

[And the people responded] "What can we bring to the LORD? Should we bring him burnt offerings? Should we bow before God Most High with offerings of yearling calves?"

Should we offer him thousands of rams and ten thousand rivers of olive oil? Should we sacrifice our firstborn children to pay for our sins?"

[The prophet Micah responded] "No, O people, the LORD has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you: to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God."

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

What does the Lord require? That we do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God. Today I'd like us to focus on what it means to "do justice" and how that's connected to the call of racial reconciliation.

There are two kinds of justice. Both are necessary, but it's important that we understand the difference so that we "do" the appropriate kind of justice in a

given circumstance. The kind of justice that you and I are most familiar with is sometimes called **retributive justice**. Retributive justice is giving people what they deserve. It's the balance of crime and punishment. Break the law and you suffer the consequences. This is the kind of justice that our court system is built upon. And again, in an ordered society, retributive justice is good and necessary.

But there's another kind of justice called **restorative justice**. Restorative justice is about giving people what they need to thrive. Let me say that again: restorative justice is about giving people what they need to thrive. More often than not, when Scripture talks about justice it is referring to restorative justice. Read the Bible and you'll discover that God's definition of justice is not "people getting what they deserve." God's definition of justice is people getting what they need to be whole in body, mind and spirit. It's not that God turns a blind eye to sin, but that God is more interested in restoration than in retribution. The story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection makes that abundantly clear. So, when God requires that we "do justice," God is primarily asking that we advocate for and provide for the powerless, the voiceless, the impoverished and oppressed people of this world.

Here is just one example from the prophet Isaiah:

"Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow." – Isaiah 1:16-17

Remember the story of Jesus and the woman caught in the act of adultery? The Pharisees wanted to stone her to death. They wanted retributive justice. But Jesus forgave her and set her free. Jesus practiced restorative justice.

Remember that story I told you a moment ago about my algebra mid-term. My algebra teacher, Mrs. Wellington, had a choice. She could practice retributive justice and punish me for cheating. That's what I deserved. But instead, she chose to practice restorative justice, to give me what I needed to thrive. That moment was a turning point in my education.

So, what does all of this have to do with our worship series on racial reconciliation? Everything. The more I've listened to people of color and read their stories, the more my eyes have been opened to how the injustice of systemic racism profoundly impacts people of color. Let me show you an example of what that looks like: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YrHIQIO_bdQ]

Stunning, isn't it? Restorative justice is about giving people what they need to thrive. If we long for racial harmony in our world we will need to do the hard work of restorative justice. If we want to be faithful to the call of the Gospel we will need to do the hard work of restorative justice. If we are going to love our neighbors of color we will need to do the hard work of restorative justice.

I'm reminded of these words from the book of James 2:14-17,

What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don't show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone? Suppose you see a brother or sister who has no food or clothing, and you say, "Good-bye and have a good day; stay warm and eat well"—but then you don't give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do? So you see, faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless.

In the context of racial reconciliation, the "good deed" we are called to is the hard work of restorative justice. So, what does that look like? At least three things.

First, the importance of seeing. Really seeing. It's so important that we become aware of the pervasiveness of racial injustice in our culture. To seeing the pervasiveness of systemic racism. And that's a challenge because, as I've learned, it's nearly invisible to those of us for whom the system tends to work.

I can't tell you how many times I've said over the past year, "I can't wait until things get back to normal." And then I read these profound, poetic and prophetic words from Sonya Renee Taylor,

"We will not go back to normal. Normal never was. Our pre-corona existence was not normal other than we normalized greed, inequity, exhaustion, depletion, extraction, disconnection, confusion, rage, hoarding, hate and lack. We should not long to return, my friends. We are being given the opportunity to stitch a new garment. One that fits all of humanity and nature."

What a powerful reminder that while the pre-Covid world worked well for me, it didn't work well for many others, especially my sisters and brothers of color. And it still doesn't. If we're going to be faithful to God's call to restorative justice, we are going to need to learn to see anew, to see the pervasiveness of racial injustice in our culture.

Second, the power of listening. Really listening. It's so important that we hear the voices of people of color

before we seek to jump in, change the world and save the day. We need to listen not only to how people of color describe the problem but also the solutions that they believe will help.

Just the other day I was listening to a news story about the Covid-19 vaccination effort. Statistics reveal that in many places people of color are being vaccinated at a much slower rate than whites. For instance, in North Carolina, black people make up 22% of the population and 26% of the health care workforce, but only 11% of the vaccine recipients so far are people of color. Upon further analysis researchers discovered that one of the reasons for this disparity is that the primary system for scheduling a vaccination is through the internet. Most impoverished people, or at least many of them who are disproportionately people of color, don't have internet access. Had they been welcomed around the table when vaccination systems were being created, they might have avoided that disparity entirely, and created a better solution that was equitable for all. Do you see how that works?

The book of James calls us to be *"quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to get angry."* Those wise words are especially important as we seek to do justice in the world. If the goal of racial justice is to create systems so that all people can thrive, then all voices must be part of the conversation.

Finally, once we're seeing clearly and listening more carefully, **it's essential to pray and to act in partnership.** We need the power of prayer to walk this journey. Remember what Micah said in today's Scripture reading? That we *"walk humbly with our God."* This work of restorative justice means doing battle with the power of human sin, and for that work we need God's power.

And then, in partnership with our sisters and brothers of color, we confront those systems that unjustly place barriers in the path of thriving for our neighbors. We advocate for justice. And at the end of this worship service, we'll provide some small, medium and large steps that you can take to faithfully respond to God's call to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

I recently completed work with a team at Prince of Peace, interviewing the growing number of people in America who consider themselves "spiritual but not religious," those who have no affiliation with the Church. And one of the primary reasons they cited for being not being interested in the Church is their perception that we are uninterested in the

pressing social issues of the day. They especially noted advocating for the rights of the LGBTQ community, preserving the planet, and confronting racism. In other words, they're longing for us to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God. They actually want us to be the people that God has called us to be.

So, Prince of Peace...what does the Lord require of us? To do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God. I believe that God is calling us to a deeper, more inclusive walk with Jesus...the One who loved and walked with all people, especially those who were marginalized. I believe that God is calling us to trust more deeply, to trust God enough to be vulnerable, to be willing to have the Spirit challenge our assumptions, reveal our biases, and help us to see more clearly. And I believe that God is calling us to pray, to pray for one another on this journey and to pray for the healing of our nation, that we might be reconciled and therefore reflect the reality that the Kingdom of God is at hand. I believe that is God's call for all of us. The question is, will we answer the call?

Let's pray now. Let's pray for one another, for ourselves, as we walk this road of racial reconciliation, that we might do justice for those who have been oppressed for far too long. Let's pray...

Gracious God, I confess that I feel so inadequate as I think about responding to Your call to do justice. The problems seem so big, and the wounds so deep that I confess that I'm tempted to despair. But I'm reminded of Jesus' words that we will do greater things. I'm reminded of Jesus' words that He will always be with us, never leave us. I'm reminded of the promise that You did not give us a spirit of timidity, but of power. And those words bring me comfort. And I choose to believe that wherever You call us and whatever You call us to, that You'll provide what we need. And I need to cling to that hope and that faith, we all do. So God, I pray that You'll give us boldness that we might not shy away from hard things. Give us courage, that we might not be overwhelmed by despair. Fill us with Your Spirit, that we might rise to meet the challenge of doing justice so that all people are going to have the opportunity to thrive. For You said that You have come to bring life, and life in the full for all people. All this we pray in the strong name of Christ. And together everyone said...Amen.