

July 5, 2020

Won't You Be My Neighbor: Liberty and Justice for All Isaiah 65:17-24

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When I was a kid, every school day started the same way: the Pledge of Allegiance. “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” There was something about that last line ... “with liberty and justice for all.” Those words were poured into me so many times. I had no idea what they meant. I had no idea what they looked like in my life. I didn't know what they didn't look like in the lives of other people. I was growing up insulated. I had no idea what it meant to be black, brown, indigenous, latinx or a person of color. And because I never had to question what it meant to have liberty and justice for all, I never gave it a second thought. Until my dad came home from an Elks Club meeting.

I was in the 5th grade; I was about 11 years old when my dad came home from an Elks Club meeting and he was visibly irritated. A friend of our family, a member of our church, a good friend of my dad's, wasn't able to join the Elks Club. My dad could join but my dad's friend wasn't able to join. And I remember when I asked my dad why he wasn't able to join, my dad's response was so odd. He said, “Because he's black.” I don't remember much else from that conversation, but I do remember the anger and frustration on my dad's face. And I do remember the confusion I felt about because he's black would be a reason for anyone, anywhere not to be a part of anything. As an 11 year old kid, it was kind of like saying you couldn't be part of my tree fort club because your shoes weren't the right brand. Wait, what?

We are wrapping up our four-week worship series that we've called “Won't You Be My Neighbor?” Pastor Jeff began by challenging us to think about “neighbor” the way Jesus thought about “neighbor;” not in geographical terms, but in relational terms, so that neighbor is the person before us in need, and to be a neighbor is to meet the needs of those who have them. Jason Kramme was next and he talked about how seeking justice for our neighbors doesn't mean just confronting the issues that keep us apart, but actively dismantling the systems

that favor whites, that hinder people of color, and then going a step further in creating a new world where liberty and justice for all is for all people. And then last week, Pastor Sandy gave us some great insight into the hard work, the long-haul work of reconciliation.

On this July 4th weekend, we're celebrating our nation's independence, we're celebrating our freedom. This is the 244th birthday of our country that was built on truths that we hold to be self-evident, that all people are created equal, and that we are endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable rights. Among them: life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Having escaped oppression, the framers of the Constitution, including Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence, who was deeply flawed when it came to matters of race, nevertheless, cast a stunning vision for this new nation. A vision of which we have fallen short. But friends, on this July 4th weekend, we acknowledge that the 244-year old vision for this nation is eclipsed by a far more ancient, more compelling vision for this entire planet. It's a vision that God has called the human family to embrace; a vision of a world where liberty and justice for all means liberty and justice for all. On this Independence weekend, we come together as a community of faith to commit ourselves to making the vision of “liberty and justice for all” a reality “on earth as it is in heaven.”

In Isaiah 65, the prophet Isaiah speaks the words of God to a nation of people who have lost the plot. They have gone their own way. They have done their own thing. They have not been faithful to God's dream of liberty and justice for all people. However, there is a remnant. There is a small neighborhood, a neighborhood of faithful followers who do desire to live into God's original dream and to actively work toward that vision of liberty and justice for all people—no exceptions. And so through Isaiah, God calls all people to this vision for a new world and invites all people to become part of that neighborhood. [Read Isaiah 65:17-24.]

I have to tell you, when I read this passage in the context of this weekend, it suddenly dawned on me that this is God's Pledge of Allegiance to the entire human family! This is God's pledge, God's promise to make all things new. This is God's pledge, God's promise to those who do not experience justice or live in freedom that justice and freedom will prevail. This is God's pledge, God's promise to those whose dreams of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness have been stolen by some other vision.

Just days after George Floyd was killed in this very place, in this very intersection of 38th and Chicago in Minneapolis, Nancy Lee and I spent some time there, trying to come to grips with the profound tragedy of what happened right here on the evening of May 25, 2020. But not only what happened here, on a particular spot, on a particular date, to a particular man, but really what has taken place in countless places, countless times, to countless numbers of people of color throughout our history. Standing in this intersection reminds me that all of us together as one human family, are standing in the intersection between where we've been and where we're going. And the real power of Isaiah 65 is that it reminds us that God is always up to something new, something bold, something different, something life giving for all people everywhere. That's the very heart and core of the gospel. But friends, the question is simply this: Are we willing to partner with God; are we willing to stand with our brothers and sisters of every tribe and nation to make God's new vision for a new world a new reality? Or aren't we?

Whenever we encounter a passage like the one from Isaiah 65, we ask two questions. The first question is "What does it say?" We know what it is saying. I just read it a few moments ago. It says that God is creating new heavens and a new earth: *"All the earlier troubles, chaos, and pain will be forgotten. No more sounds of weeping in the city, no cries of anguish..."* That's what it says. The second question is far more compelling and powerful: The second question is "What is it saying?" How is this passage still speaking? More specifically, "What are these words saying to us in this current moment in time?"

Friends, Isaiah 65 is saying that we're standing in the intersection between the old world of oppression and injustice and the new world where there is liberty and justice for all. What does that new world look like? Isaiah gives us a picture of the new world where all people can expect justice, equality, equity, fairness, peace, safety, and dignity. God's vision is of a community where, as it says in verse 20: *"one-hundredth birthdays will be considered normal—anything less will seem like a cheat."* I imagined God's heart breaking as George Floyd cried out: *"I can't breathe. I can't breathe. My stomach hurts. My neck hurts. Everything hurts. They're going to kill me."* The heartbreaking truth, friends, is that George Floyd was cheated out of his 47th birthday and every birthday after that. God says "No more, not in my new world."

"Liberty and justice for all..." is part of the "new heavens and new earth" that God announces in Isaiah 65. God is calling us into the intersection between the old world

of oppression and injustice and the new world where there is liberty and justice for all. What does that new world look like? It looks like the young white woman, who, protesting systemic injustice and racism, holds the sign which reads, *"I see you! I hear you! I see the injustice you face. I mourn with you. I may never understand 100%, but I will stand with you always."*

"Liberty and justice for all..." is part of the "new heavens and the new earth" that God announces in Isaiah 65. God is calling us into the intersection between the old world of injustice and oppression and the new world where there is liberty and justice for all. What does that look like? It looks like the little girl holding the sign which reads, *"We said 'Black Lives Matter.' We never said 'Only Black Lives Matter.' We know all lives matter. We just need your help with 'Black Lives Matter' because black lives are in danger."*

God's new world is a place of joy and delight, where there are no more sounds of weeping in the city, no more sounds of anguish in the night. And that world begins to come into focus, it begins to be birthed among us when we stop arguing about whose lives matter most, which is an exercise in missing the point. Because all lives matter – every man, woman and child created in the image of God – all lives can't matter until black lives matter. Because for far too long we've all lived like they haven't mattered.

God's new world looks like the kind of community that steps into the intersection of liberty and justice for all and says that no mother, no father, no grandma, no grandpa, no son or daughter, no spouse or loved one will ever have to worry if their loved one will make it home safely tonight.

God's new world looks like the kind of community that walks into the intersection of liberty and justice for all and says no one will ever be denied anything based on the color of their skin, but instead be a blessing to the world around them, based on the content of their character, and where all people agree to stand together and pledge allegiance to liberty and justice for all people, no exceptions.

Well friends, I want to step into that intersection and I'm wondering if you'll step into that intersection with me. Will you step into the intersection where we join our hearts and our hands together as we sing that spiritual, "We shall overcome someday." Will you step into the intersection with me as together we join our hands and we sing with all our hearts, "We shall overcome someday." Will you join your hearts and hands and your lives together with me so that together we can sing that song of God's justice, God's mercy, God's love where there is liberty and justice for all.