

January 7, 2024

---

## Speak...Justice

Pastor Paul Dean

---

We've all heard many phrases over our lifetimes. Little phrases that are quick, easy to recite and help us make sense of the world. Phrases that try to orient ourselves in in disorienting times.

I can't remember the exact moment that I heard what might be in the all-time top 5 phrases that attempt to reorient us in this disorienting life. It's the phrase "Life isn't fair"... We've all heard it... and many of us have said it. Especially to our kids who as they grow up the experience the disorienting reality of injustice. The phrase... life isn't fair is offered as a reason... used as an all-encompassing reason to the injustice of life... life isn't fair... an answer that needs no explanation right... life isn't fair... there's nothing else to explain... life isn't fair... that's just the way it is... life isn't fair... nothing else to say...

Is that true though? Is that is all there is to say? One of my greatest joys of my life is to see my kids care deeply about justice – equality. They are way tuned in... much, much more than I was at their age. But they've been that way since they were young. We were at store when my son was around 6 and my daughter was 3 and the store had this little play area... with a slide, couple bouncy things... you know... just enough to keep your kids occupied while you shop but not enough to hold their attention long enough so that you could really shop. So as my wife was off picking out some stuff, I watched my kids up and down the slide until another kid... a big kid... 10 or 11 jumped in the mix and cut to the head of the line... uh oh... some of the other little kids looked confused but hey... life isn't fair right? Is that all there is to say? Not a chance... but before I could say anything I heard my son speak these words... "hey... you can't do that". The big kid looked a bit shocked, guilty even, as if no one had ever told him that... he got back in line and life was fair. Speak justice my son.

My daughter had a similar experience, and yes, it was at another slide... we need to do something about all the drama at slides... she was about to slide down and a kid pushed her from behind and at the bottom she stood up... waited for the kid... looked in right in the eye and said "that was not very nice"... yes life isn't fair, but that is not all there is to say. Speak justice my daughter.

Now these are two small examples but I bet all of you have examples like those to share... and there is reason... because... sure... life isn't fair but that's not all there is to say... because that's not all God has to say... God is a God of justice... a God of freedom... a God who takes a group of slaves and frees them.

I still am amazed that slave owners in this country converted their slaves to Christianity, and in that attempt to civilize and educate, they gave their slaves God's word. Did they not know what is in this book of justice? Yes, there were attempts to omit parts of the bible – there was even a "Slave Bible" that took out sections of the bible including the story of God freeing the Israelite slaves in Egypt. But no matter how hard and how sickening their methods... put in the hands of slaves a book of freedom, that speaks justice? God's word of justice will not be suppressed.

Legend is that as Harriet Tubman was leading slaves to freedom, she would sing this song to warn the slaves to get in the water to throw off the scent of the hounds of the slavers.

*Wade in the water  
Wade in the water, children  
Wade in the water  
God's gonna trouble the water*

Where else did slaves wade in the water to throw off their scent from the hounds of slavers? Where else did God trouble the water?

God freeing the Israelite slaves in Egypt, parting the Red Sea. Troubling the water, way back then, freeing the Israelites from slavery. God speaks justice. And as God leads the people from slavery God tried and is trying to do a remarkable thing... working through people. People willing to speak for justice.

Because God calls for us to speak justice, too. That is what we see in the story of Tirzah and her sisters in the book of Numbers. One of the main topics that the book of Numbers deals with is justice... specifically justice when it would come to land ownership. Israel was a group of tribes and Moses was tasked with making sure, according to the "number" of the people in each tribe, that land would be distributed equally.

But the system they used to pass on land and possessions was through male children. Yes... to us seems terribly unjust to us today... but the justice focus was not on the gender but on land... land was the deal... and the best way to pass on land and possessions were through the male.

Here is how the logic went. If you were a son, with land and possessions, and you married someone outside your tribe, you still stayed in your tribe and the land and possessions stayed with your tribe. But if you were a daughter, with land and possessions, and you married outside the tribe then that land, those possessions would leave the original tribe and go with the daughter to the other tribe, creating an unequal balance of land and possessions. When you live in tribes, that is a really, really big deal.

But what happens when a father doesn't have any sons? Then the male relatives of that tribe would then take the land and possessions ensuring justice among the tribes... but it doesn't bring about justice within the tribe, especially for the daughters who would be left with no family name and no land or possessions.

Now... while we are hearing about this story for the first time this cannot have been the first time in history where this happened. God's call for the tribes to take care of the widows and orphans had to be one remedy for wives and daughters to have some way to survive after their husband or father died. It is a strong call from God, repeated over and over again but it's not the same as justice. Justice is very different than taking a handout. And there are some daughters who know this.

*Then the daughters of Zelophehad came forward. Zelophehad was son of Hopher son of Gilead son of Machir son of Manasseh son of Joseph, a member of the Manassite clans. The names of his daughters were: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. They stood before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the leaders, and all the congregation, at the entrance of the tent of meeting, and they said, "Our father died in the wilderness; he was not among the company of those who gathered themselves together against the LORD in the company of Korah, but died for his own sin; and he had no sons. Why should the name of our father be taken away from his clan because he had no son? Give to us a possession among our father's brothers." Moses brought their case before the LORD. And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: The daughters of Zelophehad are right in what they are saying; you shall indeed let them possess an inheritance among their father's brothers and pass the inheritance of their father on to them. You shall also say to the Israelites, "If a man dies, and has no son, then you shall pass his inheritance on to his daughter."*

*Numbers 27:1-8*

And out of their disorientation of losing their father... knowing the harsh reality facing them... they speak. Tirzah and her sisters do it... they ask for what would have been almost impossible... an audience with Moses... and they get it... can you imagine the bravery? Because everyone would have been against them. They would have been told over and over again that "life isn't fair" just like so many women would have been told before them... because the expectation, the norm, was that they would be quiet... take their handout and be obedient... their own family – uncles and aunts would have spoken against them because they, and not the daughters would be the ones to benefit.

They speak to Moses... and God, not Moses speaks back... and while later in Numbers we read that in order to keep the land and possessions in the tribe the daughters have to marry someone in their father's tribe – keeping things equal in that regard – so the people aren't ready yet for justice when it comes to marriage rights, and I hope there were some good-looking guys in the tribe – they are granted ownership of their father's land and possessions.

This was a massive movement ... a cosmic shift... because while life isn't fair, they didn't believe that was all there was to say. Tirzah and her sisters speak for justice... because God speaks justice... they waded in the water – inspiring Harriet Tubman some 3000 years later – trusting that God would trouble the water and bring them out on the other side. Speak justice our Tirzah.

There is a lot of injustice in our world that disorients us. The phrase... "Life isn't fair" ... can be so easy to say... but God, who speaks justice tells us that that is not all there is to say. We too are called to speak justice. In your day to day... in your interactions... when you are in line waiting for your turn to go down the slide... where can you wade in the water... trusting that God will do the troubling... and to speak justice might be as simple as two little phrases "you can't do that" or "that's not nice".