

Justice
Mark 11:12-20
Pastor Marianne Cotter
First United Methodist Church, Baraboo
March 25, 2018

During Lent we've been talking about virtues: qualities of God we want to reflect God to others. Today our focus is on justice.

Of all the virtues we're looking at in Lent, justice is probably the one I know the most about. Before I consciously believed in God, I believed in justice. My mother used to say "if there's an underdog, Marianne is on their side." The graduate school and seminary I attended -- Boston University -- had a strong social justice tradition. It was in seminary, during graduate school that I became a Christian. I came to know Jesus as my Lord, my savior, and friend. But I think the reason I really fell in love with Jesus is because he loved justice too.

Jesus came to bring about the reign -- the kingdom -- of God. God is just. The world belongs to God. So when the kingdom comes, people will worship God and there will be justice; there will be shalom -- right relationships between people and between nations: just like God intended at creation. Jesus ran into conflicts because then and today, people tend to prefer the status quo. Even if the status quo "the way things are" involves injustice our tendency is to want things to stay the same. When Jesus lived out his mission he often made people uncomfortable. For Jesus, injustice meant there was sin and that had to change. When God sent Jesus as messiah God sent a prophet.

The prophets -- people like Amos, Hosea, Jeremiah and Isaiah -- point out ways justice is lacking. Prophets warn what will happen if people don't change. Today we heard one of the key stories in the gospels about Jesus protesting injustice. "The cleansing of the temple" it's called. To understand what he was doing, we need to understand who Jeremiah was.

Jeremiah was a 7th-6th Century BCE prophet who said things the good people of Judah didn't like. At the time there were military threats to Judah from Assyria and later from Babylon too. There was great wealth inequality. Few people had a lot and many had next to nothing. But the faithful temple goers didn't seem to care much about that. They cared about their sacrifices and their other religious duties. They thought the temple in Jerusalem would keep them safe from enemies. "We're God's people! God loves Israel! So we're secure" they thought. No Harm would come to God's temple,could it? In Mark 11: 17 when Jesus says you've made my house "a den of robbers" Jesus is quoting Jeremiah. Listen to what it says in Jeremiah 7:5-7, 11 says (Jeremiah is speaking to the people of Judah here): "For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, ⁶if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own

hurt, ⁷then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors for ever and ever.....Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? You know, I too am watching, says the LORD.”

Jeremiah called the temple “a den of robbers.” Let’s think about what a den is for a minute . A den is comfy; a place of safety. Jeremiah was saying the temple has become a refuge for the people who ignored the needs of the poor. Jeremiah was saying “Do you think all God wants from you is worship at the temple? Wrong! God wants justice!” Jeremiah warned God is not above destroying the temple if there is no justice for the poor. That’s what happened. The Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in 583 BCE. And Jeremiah told them “God let that happen.”

So let’s go back now to this story of Jesus cleansing the temple. This happens in the last week of his life. Centuries after Jeremiah, the temple has been rebuilt. It is again the center of Israelite life and worship. But all is not well. The religious leaders are cooperating with Romans. The temple priests were helping Rome keep the peace. “Just let the temple worship go ahead and everything will be all right” was their motto. When Jesus turns over the tables of the money changers, he’s challenging the leadership and the way the temple work was being done. The chief priests and scribes see this. So they plot to end Jesus’ life. They want to get rid of this threat to the status quo.

This story from Mark 11 is a story about injustice. Jesus is angry about worship divorced from justice –he’s mad that the religious leaders seem to have no concern for the oppressive practices of the Romans. This is also a story about what has happened in the year 70 A.D. This was was the recent past for the community which first heard Mark’s gospel read. By the time Mark was written, the temple and Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Romans. Do you remember in the story that before entering the temple grounds, Jesus sees a fig tree? He gets mad that there’s no fruit on it (even though it’s not the right time of year) and he curses the fig tree. “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” The next morning passing that way again the fig tree has withered away to its roots. The fig tree symbolized Israel and the whole temple worship system. The tree died. That’s what happens when there’s no fruit; when people are just going to worship without caring about justice.

To connect Mark 11 to the story of our lives, I’d like to tell you another story. It’s about a time in American life when some Christians were reflecting the virtue of justice in a remarkable way. This is a story told by Paul Nixon in his book “Finding Jesus on the Metro.” Paul Nixon is a pastor who started a new church in Washington D.C., worked at a big church in Florida and now helps churches thrive amidst the change going on in the culture. You’ve probably noticed the church is changing. Over the past thirty years, the church has changed a lot. Things church leaders used to do that routinely kept churches healthy, strong don’t work the same way any more. Pastors and churches looking for a “work around” to all this -- churches that want to thrive amidst these changes are the kind Paul works with. Paul Nixon wrote

a classic of church growth called “I Refuse to Lead a Dying Church.” The ministry coach our design team is working with – Beth Estock – is a colleague of Paul Nixon.

In consulting with churches Paul Nixon is careful to say churches need to grow not for the sake of just getting more people in the building. What’s important is that churches grow so they can be world changers. Just like what happened in the 1800’s, when slavery in America was the status quo. Lots of Christians knew slavery was wrong but they benefitted from it. So they just didn’t rock the boat. They accepted injustice. But in time good Christian people started breaking the law to help fugitive slaves; started working for justice. The Underground Railway started up and people were inspired by their devotion to Jesus Christ to work to transport slaves to freedom. More and more Christians got on board the Underground Railway. They joined the abolitionist movement. The church ended up fueling the anti-slavery movement.

Paul Nixon He calls the anti-slavery/abolitionist movement the crowning achievement of the 19th C, American church. It was, he says, one of the nation’s finest hours: when the kingdom of God came near. It’s true that one in eight Americans belonged to church in 1800. By 1900 it was one in three. Says Paul Nixon “If we’ had packed our houses of worship twice as full but had failed to proclaim liberty to the captives the church would have been less successful. Sometimes the biggest victories don’t show up on annual reports.”

Paul Nixon writes how own father, also a pastor, missed the civil rights movement because he had been fixated on building a bigger building and increasing membership at the time. Later Paul Nixon’s father cried looking back that he missed the opportunity to share in the civil rights movement. Even now forty years later, there’s no place on denominational forms – statistical reports -- to say where and how our congregation discerned the reign of God breaking in and what we did to get behind it. Paul Nixon’s church consulting is not to get more people in the pews. He’d rather have 60 committed world changers than a church of 600 who are simply committed to attending worship services. Just making more church people is not going to help the world very much, he says.

Nixon says the church needs to give the world something better than just more church people. The church needs to bring the kingdom of God closer. It all goes back to Jesus, where we started today. And his desire to bring about that time when people will worship God alone, and there will be shalom/justice. Jesus is our Lord, our savior, our friend. He is the suffering servant and he was a great and mighty prophet. He was a world changer. If Jesus were here today I believe he’d agree with a recent Face Book post I read which said: “We will never change the world by just going to church. We will only change it by being the church.” Being the church means we both are devoted to God and we are pursuing justice. For Jesus that’s what it meant for the kingdom of God to come on earth as it is in heaven. Wherever, whenever that is happening, that is a cause for celebration indeed. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.