

# “Justice”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – July 28, 2019*

7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Amos 5:12-15, 24

Rev. John Wahl

2 Corinthians 5:17-21

You may recall that several weeks ago, we looked at the words of the Serenity Prayer, which is attributed to theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, but is associated with many recovery groups and some version of which is often repeated at meetings: *God, give us with grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things which should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.*

What Western religions sometimes call wisdom, Eastern religions refer to as ‘skillful means’ – in other words, the best, most practical and most effective way to get the job done.

Jesus was, above almost all other things, a wise man; a master teacher of skillful means. Among those things that he taught about most often was justice: he announced his presence in the synagogue by reading from the prophet Isaiah that he came to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. Many of his parables focused on the forgiveness of debts; repairing the damage and reconciling that which is owed. Jesus taught that we need not only to think wisely, but to also act that way: to be judicious in our pursuit of justice.

We are well along in our examination of the spiritual principles that stand behind the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous and other addiction recovery programs. While these steps are to be taken in order – building upon one another like the two sides of an arch, eventually forming a doorway through which we can walk through into a new future – sometimes certain of the steps need to be revisited or repeated. No-one is, or should expect to be, perfect; everyone stumbles. But unless we have built a strong foundation, the new layer we add on top is sure to fall.

In Step 8, we discussed making a list of the people we had wronged, and considered the harm we had brought to each person on it, and we became entirely willing to make amends to *all* these people and to make restitution whenever we could. In Step 9, we put the intentions into action: *We make direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.*

Amends are intended to be specific, concrete and personal. If you owe someone money, then to make amends you must try to pay them back. If you owe multiple people, the repayment will be different for each. But if your repayment might hurt someone else – if, for instance, the truth would be too difficult not for you, but for them – then it may be best to say you are sorry and leave it at that. Not everything needs to be told, all the time, and in full detail. Doing so may only cause more harm; or make forgiveness more unlikely.

Walking the 12 Steps does not just require a change in our thinking, belief and attitude, but also in our actions. Doing Step 9 is about making amends, as well as keeping us from wounding one another further.<sup>1</sup>

The prophet Amos came onto the scene during one of the most prosperous periods in Jewish history. Israel was free of hostile enemies and their economy was sound and stable. But Amos – whose name means ‘burden bearer’ – can’t help but see that, within this outward peace, there is a creeping rottenness at the core of society that will hasten their destruction. He sees that judges are being bribed, the poor are being mistreated, and that religious practice has grown shallow and meaningless. He sees that people have grown soft and self-indulgent, while the leaders are growing increasingly more corrupt. This prompts Amos to speak up and urge the Jewish people to return to the foundations of their faith, and to practice – not only speak about – justice.<sup>2</sup>

What do we mean by justice? In modern-day America, we think that justice is when the good get rewarded and the bad are punished. But in the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for justice, *mishpat*, means that the neediest in our midst are cared for.<sup>3</sup> A just society is one that takes care of those who are in need. An unjust society does not want to take care of those who are in need. A just society is one that would not only give food to fight hunger at Thanksgiving and Christmas, but also in July. A just society is one that has grocery stores with fresh produce in the suburbs, but also in the inner cities. A just society not only has doctors and hospitals in cities, but in rural areas as well. A just society not only welcomes people who look like me, or practice the same religion as me, or speak the same language as me but recognizes justice for what it is. Jesus, the wise teacher of skillful means, make clear what it means to be a good neighbor.

And so, we are called to be wise and practice justice. One of the reasons that participants felt good about yesterday’s Food Fight is that it was a specific and concrete practice of faith: it made the clear statement of our desire that justice roll

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Rohr, *Breathing Under Water*

<sup>2</sup> Kathlyn James, “That You May Live” from *Day1.org*

<sup>3</sup> James Howell, “Yours Are the Hands” from *Day1.org*

down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream; that hunger is not confined to only certain zip codes, and that giving does not have a specific season.

And so, in the same way that we wish to live in a just society – rather than shield our eyes to the type of corrosion that Amos could see – we also wish to live as just people; those who both recognize and then take action on behalf of others. This might mean recognizing the ways that we are blessed to be able to give while others are in need. But it also might mean that we need to make amends for what we have done in order to repay a debt or take steps to reconcile a broken or fractured relationship.

The Apostle Paul describes this willingness to take care of the needs of others – whether because of a desire for justice or to repay a debt that we owe – as like being a new creation. It is not something we can accomplish ourselves, but is a gift from God; an opportunity to believe and act in a different way. The old – the selfish, the foolish, maybe even the addicted and self-destructive way of life – has passed away, replaced by the new.

And so, having been extended grace, we can offer grace. Having been forgiven, we can offer forgiveness. Having experienced compassion, we can show compassion to others. Having received a gift from God, we can – as new creations – give to others with no strings attached.

Of course, that can be difficult to do. We might at first be filled with fear, but then the courage to act emerges as a result of faith which grows in place of that fear. By first resolving to make amends to those whom we have harmed, seeking to exercise the same reconciliation that God has extended to us: a neighborliness that we can only learn by imitating Christ, who gave of himself fully and willingly, without fearing what might be lost. When we seek to make amends through an offer – either material or immaterial – it is not a barter for something else, but instead in the hope that we will become debt-free, stepping onto a whole new plane where there are no lingering regrets or resentments: a new creation, indeed!<sup>4</sup>

But the earliest adherents to the 12 Steps must have learned to how best to do Step 9 by sometimes getting it wrong: for we are warned to make our amends to all, *except when to do so would injure them or others*. We know all too well how we might use a position of power or authority to do harm to others; how we can sometimes idly gossip and bring injury to others; how we can shun or discriminate against others in violation of Christ's command to love one another. Our words, and our attitudes, and our beliefs all matter – not just our actions. It is not enough,

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<sup>4</sup> David Frederickson from *WorkingPreacher.org*

Amos says also in chapter 5, to perform rituals and offer sacrifices, for what God desires most is justice.

And so, even if making amends would injure someone else, then at least being willing to make them is a positive step<sup>5</sup>: it means that we are building upwards in our recovery, which – according to the hypothesis we have been testing throughout this sermon series – is another way of talking about salvation. Sometimes, the wrong we need to let go of may be so old that there is no longer any way to make personal or proper amends, but it is important to claim that, in Christ, God has made us a new creation: no longer need those old habits or resentments rule over us; for as we have been forgiven, we can become free to forgive – even ourselves.

And as new creations in Christ, we can become agents of reconciliation and imitators of Jesus: a wise teacher of skillful means, showing us what it means to truly be a neighbor. While each of us has individual limits to our resources, time, and energy, there are ways that we proclaim justice in its true biblical sense: taking care of those with needs. For instance, if you are interested in making amends, it might make sense to focus not on the person you called a name in fifth grade, but the person you offended last week. Or maybe you need to choose what issue you are most passionate about: the environment, educational access, structural racism, or another that truly speaks to your heart.

In the words of Teresa of Avila, from the 16th century: "Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which the compassion of Christ looks out on a hurting world. Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which he is to bless now."<sup>6</sup> AMEN.

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<sup>5</sup> Joe McQ, *The Steps We Took*

<sup>6</sup> James Howell, "Yours Are the Hands" from *Day1.org*