

Seeking Justice In An Unjust World

Texts: Micah 6: 1-8, Amos 5: 18-24, Robert Kennedy, *Justice From A Million Centers*
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America has just gone through a second week of protests against injustice, and I suspect that we are about to start a third one today, in the wake of the killing of Rayshard Brooks in Atlanta on Friday. Initial reports say Mr. Brooks was sleeping in his car in a Wendy's parking lot when the police woke him up to charge him with DUI. It got out of hand from there. Yesterday, the police officer who started it and ended up killing Brooks was fired, and last night the Wendy's where it happened went up in flames.

In a further injustice which is sure to inflame passions, on Friday, the fourth anniversary of the Pulse Night Club shooting, the Trump Administration rolled back an Obama era rule that made it "illegal for doctors, hospitals, and other health care workers to deny care to someone whose sexual orientation or gender identity they disapprove of", according to Vox. Now, if, say, a doctor doesn't like that you're a trans person, they can deny you care, and there's nothing illegal about that.

We might say that the trouble all started with the murder of George Floyd at the hands of the Minneapolis Police Department, but that would be to forget about the hunting and murder of Ahmaud Arbery the week before, and the killing of Breonna Taylor, asleep in her apartment when police broke in without knocking, their guns blazing, back in March, and many others in between.

The protests may have started two weeks ago, but the injustices didn't. Injustice has been an issue for a long time, and not just in the United States.

Back in Ancient Greece, the Philosopher Plato tried to work out what a just society would look like, and he ended up with a society run by Philosopher Kings who would set the rules and watch over society to make sure everything was fair.

Perhaps the most famous critique of Plato's plan came from the Roman satirist, Juvenal, who asked, "But who will watch over the watchers?" In other words, it's fine to have guardians of justice, but it's foolish to believe we don't have to keep an eye on them, too.

We see the force of Juvenal's critique in the question of police brutality today: who watches over the police, to make sure they aren't committing crimes? Who do you call when it's the police attacking the citizens with truncheons and pushing over old men in the street? Who watches the watchers?

Why, the law itself can be unjust, even if it purports to be fair. As the wonderful Anatole France once said, "The law, in its majestic equality, forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets, and to steal bread."

Equal treatment indeed! I think it's fair to say that there are different standards for rich and poor even when the offense is the same. You may remember when actress Lindsay Lohan crashed her car into a curb, and had blood alcohol at twice the legal limit, plus traces of cocaine in her system? It was off to rehab for her.

But a poor person caught using crack cocaine is off to jail for half their life. Why is it so different? Because the law against using expensive, purified cocaine, like Lindsay and other wealthy people use, is very forgiving, but the law against using the much cheaper crack cocaine, that poor people have access to, is harsh and unforgiving.

Fortunately, the reaction of the kids today to the experiment about sharing 100 dollars shows that a sense of justice is built in to us, and that many are willing to make sacrifices to end an injustice.

The Bible itself is very concerned with injustice. It starts off with the premise that, if there are rules, people will break them. That's pretty much the Adam and Eve story. One simple rule, still broken almost immediately. This is the human condition.

And the next bit tells us that we are quite likely to blame someone else for what we ourselves have done. Adam ate, but Eve got blamed. Then Eve blamed the snake, then they both more or less agreed that it was God's fault for setting the world up in a way where it could be unjust.

There's a kind of progression going through the Bible about how justice is to be achieved. We see it in the coming of the Law, where God uses the 10 commandments and other rules to guide in the administration of justice in Israel. There are penalties for breaking the rules.

At first the penalties seem to have been enforced by the individuals involved, or their relatives, but this often led to even more injustice. If someone was struck and lost an eye, they or their relatives would hunt down the person responsible and kill them. Same with the loss of a tooth. Death for an eye, death for a tooth.

The earliest attempt to bring this excessive revenge under control was the simple rule, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. In other words, if you lost a tooth, you couldn't kill someone; you could only demand one of their teeth be put out. If you lost an eye, you couldn't blind both eyes of the person who did it. Just one eye.

An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth was originally meant to *limit* the amount of punishment that a person could receive. It was considered much fairer than the earlier system, where it was a free for all of punishment for any alleged offense.

We can see in the instructions that Moses gave that they realized very early on that individuals and relatives taking the law into their own hands was a bad idea. Moses declared sanctuary cities where a person accused of a crime could flee and where revenge could not be taken until an independent third party had heard the case.

The idea was that in the heat of passion, after a friend or relative had been killed, say, it was very likely that someone would go overboard in seeking revenge without stopping to ask about the circumstances of the death. They realized that sticking a spear through someone to kill them was very different than cutting down a tree that happened to fall on someone and killed them.

In our very individualistic society, it's very hard for us to understand how much the system itself can be unjust. One example I read about recently was about David Bowie. Back in the early 80's, Bowie was being interviewed on MTV, and he turned the questioning back on the interviewer: why wasn't MTV playing videos by black artists. The interviewer assured Bowie that he personally wasn't racist, nor were the programmers at MTV. However, he said, there was a certain demographic in the United States where they felt they couldn't play music by black artists and still be included in the local cable offerings.

So this was a situation where no one admitted to being racist, and no one had yet demanded that MTV not play black artist videos, but the fear that someone might object had meant that there was this actual discrimination against black artists.

A few weeks later MTV played a video by Michael Jackson, and the rest is history. But until then, it was the larger society itself that was preventing equal playing time for black artists, while everyone in the system could claim that they weren't racist and had made no racist demands. Just a fear that someone might object had been enough to mean that black artists had fewer opportunities for success than white artists.

Back in ancient Israel, they were able to see how a community can go astray just as easily as an individual.

Our passage from Micah begins as a lawsuit of God against the whole community of Israel for breaking the covenant with God and with each other. The mountains and hills are to be the judges. "Rise," God says, "plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice."

The whole community is charged with acting unjustly, but in this case the solution is individual. The case ends with the question of what the Lord requires. And the answer comes in an injunction to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God.

Each individual must be concerned with justice in their personal life, but not a cruel, inhumane justice. Instead it's a justice that is characterized by kindness and humility.

Over in Amos, the prophet is also calling out the community for its injustice. They are eagerly awaiting the Day of the Lord, which they think will vindicate them and condemn their enemies. But God brings them up short by saying that it's a day that will be darkness for them, too, because they aren't acting justly as a community.

Their initial solution was just to have more festivals for God, more assemblies, extra church services, bigger offerings. But God doesn't want hymns and harps. God tells them that the only way out is a communal response: let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Their community has to be a just one. The image is a little obscure for us. In Israel there are many streams which are just seasonal streams. They don't flow all the time, only when the rains come up in the mountains, and then a torrent of water flows down them. They can be very dangerous, as the waters rise quickly and can suddenly bring a flood..

God is telling them that putting justice on hold until God comes to make it all right isn't a safe plan. That's like waiting for the waters to rush down the dry stream beds all at once, like a flood. That's a dark day, not a day of light, even though the water brings life to a barren land.

Instead, God says, it's much better to have justice like an ever-flowing stream, like one of the rivers that always flows through Israel, and which is always available to everyone who needs water.

In both cases, God is calling for a more just community, both through individual action, and through communal action.

In thinking about how we can act to bring about justice, I believe a distinction that Ibarra X. Kendi makes between a protest and a demonstration is very important. He writes, "We use the terms 'demonstration' and 'protest' interchangeably, at our own peril, like we interchangeably use the terms 'mobilizing' and 'organizing'. A protest is organizing people for a prolonged campaign that forces ...power to change a policy. A demonstration is mobilizing people momentarily to publicize a problem."

The powers that be typically ignore demonstrations, but often give in to protests. It's been reported that it requires about 3.5% of a population protesting against a policy for that protest to bring about the change that is desired. It has been done in the past, and it will be done in the future.

As a church, it's important for us to act both individually as Micah requires, and corporately as Amos commends us. And it's important that we be people who continue to protest against injustice in all its forms, and not just demonstrate our opposition to it.

As we think about how to act moving forward, remember that God has put a dislike of injustice in our hearts, and calls us forth to act both individually and as a community. Only then will there be a chance for justice to roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.

Amen