



# “The Challenges of Being the Church: 3. Being a Justice-Centered Church”

Texts: Psalm 37:10-11, 27-30 and Amos 5:14-24

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

We are in the third week of a six-week summer series of sermons that is intended to spark conversation around this congregation on what it means to be the church. We began by saying that part of our challenge is claiming and reclaiming what it means to be a church in the heart of the city. God has put us in this place for a reason and we need to rediscover that reason and reimagine what that means.

Last week, we said that the church is called to be compassionate. Perhaps the best summary of that sermon is found in the quote from Henri Nouwen:

Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into the places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion into the condition of being human.

The church must always be seen as being compassionate, for God is compassionate and God calls God's people to practice compassion in all that we do. We were reminded that compassion is the basis of all morality and righteousness.

This week, we pick up the subject of justice. In order to begin thinking about justice, I asked people on Facebook to tell me what they would preach to me about justice. I received some great comments and ideas. One of my responders offered me a description of a cartoon they had seen.

Three children of varying heights were standing, trying to look over a fence. One child was tall enough to see over the fence, but the other two were not.

In the second frame of the cartoon, all three children were standing on the same sized box. The tall child's box was completely unnecessary, the second child's box allowed a clear view over the fence, and the third child's box was not tall enough to afford a view over the fence. The frame was entitled, "equality."

In the third frame, the tall child had no box because no box was needed. The second child had an appropriately sized box, allowing a view over the fence. The third child's box was a little taller than the other box, allowing a clear view over the fence. The frame was entitled, "justice."

At the heart of the Biblical understanding of justice is the idea that everyone has what they need. Biblical justice means that God's people bring the fullness of God's care for all people to all people. Biblical justice carries with it, not just an awareness of injustice or an ascent to the various propositions to addressing injustice. Biblical justice requires God's people to be actively involved in seeing that all people are treated with fairness and honesty and acknowledged as being as created in the image of God as anyone else.

Dr. Cornell West, of Union Theological Seminary, in New York City, gives it to us in a sentence that is deceptively simple, but offers us guidance. Dr. West says, "Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public." Justice is compassion being practiced in ways that are visible to all. Justice is making sure that everyone can see over the fence, even when that means some need little or no help and others need more help than some.

When you go into the scriptures – Old and New Testaments – the concept of justice is present. Nowhere in Scripture is that more true than in the writings of the prophets. Let's clear up a common misunderstanding: prophets were not given to the people to predict the future. Prophets were given to the people to call them back to God's way – to get the people back on the right track.

And what did the prophets say a lot about? Justice. Why? Because God is just and God calls God's people to be just and to do justice. Here are just a few reminders:

But you must return to your God; maintain love and justice,  
and wait for your God always.<sup>1</sup>

Turn from evil and do good; then you will dwell in the land  
forever.

For the Lord loves the just and will not forsake his faithful ones.

Wrongdoers will be completely destroyed; the offspring of the wicked will perish.

The righteous will inherit the land and dwell in it forever.<sup>2</sup>

Follow justice and justice alone,

so that you may live and possess the land the Lord your God is giving you.<sup>3</sup>

The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern.<sup>4</sup>

But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.<sup>5</sup>

These are only five citations. I could offer you many, many more.

God's people have always been called to be people of justice. God's people have always been called to make the practice of justice part of their life – individually and as a community. God's people are called to be just because God is just.

The challenge before us is the ancient challenge of doing justice, even when the world around us would prefer that we didn't. Too often, doing justice upsets the apple cart of the everyday normalcy we've come to expect. Doing justice often requires that we depart from our politically partisan practice. Doing justice may ask us to speak to those who are in a position to make our lives difficult.

Very often, when doing the hard work of justice, there will be accusations that those who work for justice are unpatriotic and treacherous. In a nation that was founded on the principle of "justice for all," when injustice is seen, or heard, or experienced, there can be no more patriotic or loyal cause than the cause of righting a wrong. Benjamin Franklin reminded us, "Justice will not be served until those who are unaffected are as outraged as those who are." Injustice is injustice – and when it is being committed or permitted in our name, we have a God-given responsibility to challenge and rectify the wrong.

When congregations take up the work of doing justice, they are – very often – criticized by some within the Christian family. Very often, some in the Christian family foist labels on those who do justice, calling them "unchristian," "God haters," and worse. Some in the Christian family believe that challenging the systems that preserve, protect, and defend injustice, is to challenge God. Nothing could be further from the truth.

In our time, the lure to do nothing in the face of injustice is strong. But those who are still willing to give the church a chance are watching to see what God's people will do in the face of injustice, for they know that the church – and that means God's people – are to be alert and active and constantly calling for wrong to be set right and to work for that day when "justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness flows like a mighty stream."

If we – as God’s people – fail to speak and act for justice, we will earn the well deserved label “hypocrite.” If we – as God’s people – fail to call on the powers and authorities to ensure that the children and young people in the poorest schools in our city and county are given the same opportunities as the wealthiest schools, we are ignoring injustice. If we – as God’s people – fail to speak and act on behalf of the poor and the homeless and the hungry – we present ourselves as frauds and make our God seem a sham and a fake. If we – as God’s people – fail to stand with those the world stands against and mocks and decries and ridicules and bullies – then we bring dishonor upon our God and upon ourselves.

Amos the prophet called out to his people and calls out to us:  
Seek good and not evil, that you may live;  
so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said.

Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate...  
The work of doing justice is holy work, given by God to the people of God, in order to exhibit the Kingdom of heaven to the world.

Martin Luther King, Jr., perhaps the most recognized prophet of God in recent times, reminded us, “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Justice was not fully established in King’s time. It may not be fully established in ours. But if the church is to be the church – and that means, if we are to be God’s people – then the God-given work of justice must be our work regardless of the cost. In a day and time when right and wrong are so easily made indistinguishable, we must be God’s people of justice.

So, let us take up the work, even when it is hard and dangerous. For we are God’s people – God’s people of justice. For now and evermore. Amen.

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- 1) Hosea 12:6
  - 2) Psalm 37:27-29
  - 3) Deuteronomy 16:20
  - 4) Proverbs 29:7
  - 5) Amos 5:24



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