

January 18, 2014

## Doing Justice

### Isaiah 58: 1 – 14

Today is Sanctity of Human Life Sunday. And the reason we have such a day goes back to 1973 and a trial that opened the door to legal abortions. And the focus on these annual events are usually on the tragedy of abortion. And that is right and necessary that we publicly address this issue. Since 1973 the number of abortions has continued to increase worldwide. In the United States alone there are 1.1 million abortions performed each year. That amounts to around 4,000 every day, 3 every minute, 1 every 20 seconds. And in the United States, which has one of the highest abortion rates among developed countries, every fourth baby conceived is killed by abortion. Clearly, we have as a society gone down a path that says '**Human life in the womb is not sacred**'. But the larger issue is justice – or the lack of it. You cannot objectively view the taking of innocent human life as just under any circumstances. So when we talk about the sanctity of human life, inevitably it raises the question of justice – not just for babies but for all people.

We've been exploring the question of what is the church this month, and what I would like to do this morning is look at what we are called to do in response to injustice. That is, **what is the mission of the church in regards to doing justice in the world?** On one hand, the primary mission of the church is not to promote social justice but to warn people of divine justice. It is not to call society to be more righteous but to tell people of the righteousness of God in Christ. On the other hand, the people of God are called to be a seasoning, salty influence in a world that is corrupt to the core. We are called to be a just society in the midst of an unjust world. We are to be that city set on a hill that shines the light of truth and beauty in the world. And because all people are created in the image of God and therefore all human life is sacred, God calls His people to be engaged in doing justice for all people in the world. We are not only to proclaim the truth, but we are to do the truth. And we want to focus on the doing this morning.

I don't think any passage captures the essence of this doing more than that familiar passage in Micah chapter six. Look at what it says: *He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?* Micah 6:8 In confronting His people in this passage, God essentially tells them, 'Worship? You've been doing that. Following the sacrificial laws? You've been doing that. Giving? You've been doing that. Fasting? You've been doing that. I see thousands of rams and rivers of oil. But I haven't seen justice and kindness and humility. You haven't been doing that'. When you read the Bible from cover to cover, what you discover is that God puts a premium on something called justice. He calls His people to do justice. And what I'd like to look at this morning are three things: what is justice; why doing justice is important; and what does that look like in our lives.

What does the Bible mean when it talks about justice? What is the biblical meaning of justice? The Bible reveals something very startling about justice. When we think of justice, we almost always think of individual rights. Justice is freeing people to exercise their rights. It is righting wrongs so that people can be free to do what they want. When our rights are trampled we demand justice – for us. It is almost always seen in a very individual context. The biblical concept of justice is very different. It assumes a community need. It looks at the whole, not just the individual. It assumes a community interdependence of relationships. At the heart of the biblical concept of justice is the idea of shalom. Shalom of course means peace – but it means so much more than that. Underneath the concept of justice is the idea of an interwoven, interdependent set of relationships that work together in harmony – shalom. God created the world and everything in it to be a rich tapestry of interwoven, interdependent relationships that work together in beautiful harmony.

Neal Plantinga, a prominent theologian, puts it like this: "***The webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in equity, fulfillment, and delight is what the Hebrew prophets call shalom. We translate it peace, but it means a lot more than that. In the Bible, shalom means universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight, a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts are fruitfully employed all under the arc of God's love. Shalom, in other words, is the way things ought to be.*** **The biblical idea of justice is doing what is necessary to restore things to the way they ought to be.** That is one reason why sin is such a curse – it tears that fabric apart – it shatters shalom. For example, when everything in your body is working together, in harmony, in relationship, you experience health – shalom. But when something goes wrong, things unravel – shalom is broken – peace is destroyed. A doctor then, is doing justice when he treats your sickness to bring you back to shalom.

Or take it to another level. When people who have money and resources, take that money and those resources and invest them back into the community so the cultural life flourishes and parks, and schools and city services are great and the economy is humming, you experience social shalom. But if the haves ignore the have-nots, if they don't invest in the community, if they keep it all for themselves, things unravel. The best illustration is that movie *It's a Wonderful Life* with Jimmy Stewart that we watch every Christmas. Jimmy's family has been investing in the community, helping the poor and the immigrants in the town to build houses and start businesses – pouring out their resources into the community for years. And then Clarence the angel shows Jimmy what happens when that is taken out of the picture. And what you get is Pottersville and ruined lives. Selfishness and greed take over and there is social and economic and relational chaos – shalom is shattered. **Doing justice then, is working to restore the shattered shalom.**

You might ask, 'How do you know that is how the Bible views justice?' Look at the text. The Lord comes to His people and says: *"Cry aloud; do not hold back; lift up your voice like a trumpet; declare to My people their transgression [rebellion], to the house of Jacob their sins. Yet they seek Me daily and delight to know My ways, as if they were a nation that did righteousness [justice] and did not forsake the judgment of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments; they delight to draw near to God.* God is leveling an indictment against His people. He says that on the one hand they seem to want to know Him – but the real situation is that they are sinning rebels – as if they were a nation that did righteousness. Or a better translation – as if they were a nation that did justice. And then God goes on to describe what He means by doing justice. You see they are worshipping and fasting and seeking God and doing all the religious stuff, thinking that they're doing justice.

But God says no. *"Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?"* You've got four specific kinds of people in this verse, and one general description. You've got the oppressed, the hungry, the homeless poor or stranger and the naked. And then the Lord says that these are all your own flesh. That is staggering. And it was especially staggering to the people of that day. In those days family was everything. You wouldn't imagine your success and prosperity and happiness apart from the success and prosperity and happiness of your family. You wouldn't have any idea of individual prominence apart from your family prominence. Socially, economically, politically, if they were down, you were down, if they were up, you were up. And here is God coming and saying, that 'the stranger who is oppressed and hungry and poor and needs clothes in your neighborhood – they are your own flesh and blood – I'm holding you responsible'.

In other words, to do justice means that you see those places where the threads of shalom are unraveling, where the poorer, weaker, more disadvantaged members of society are falling through the holes and you do what is necessary to restore things to the way they ought to be. It means you take your time and your talent and your resources and invest them in those places. You take your stuff and you plunge it into the lives of other people through involvement. When this passage talks about sharing your food with the hungry, commentators point out that it literally means to serve or wait on the hungry. It is not just giving a few bucks to the soup kitchen. It is getting in there and doing something. In other words it is getting involved. This is why we have so many involved at CareNet; this is why we have a thriving boys club and girls club; this why there are those among us involved in prison ministries and bringing food and clothing to the homeless; this is the reason we are so involved in Kenya. It is not enough to pour money into the situation. There is a kind of restoration of shalom that can only come through your physical presence. This tapestry is woven in lives, not currency.

Why is justice so important? Pastor Tim Keller in his book, *Generous Justice*, says that **'The Bible is a book devoted to justice in the world from first to last. And the Bible gives us not just a naked call to care about justice, but gives us everything we need – motivation, guidance, inner joy, and power – to live a just life'**. The idea of justice is all over the pages of the Old Testament. One word is *mishpat*, and it is used over 400 times and it describes giving people what they are due, whether punishment, protection or care. And over and over again *mishpat* describes taking up the cause of the widow, the orphan, the stranger or immigrant and especially the poor – those who are least in society. It describes coming to the aid of the marginalized, the oppressed, the destitute. The other word is *tsadaquah* and it is used over 150 times and refers to a life of right or just relationships.

God Himself leads the way in doing justice: *"He executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love for the alien by giving him food and clothing."* *"For the LORD loves justice And does not forsake His godly ones"* And over and over again His people are commanded to do justice: *"You shall not pervert the justice due an alien or an orphan, nor take a widow's garment in pledge"* *"You shall not distort justice; you shall not be partial, and you shall not take a bribe"* God is continually instructing His people to take care of the downtrodden, the oppressed, the marginalized in society. To do justice. It is not enough to seek God. That seeking must be coupled with an active pursuit of something called justice. Because doing justice reflects the very character of God.

It also reflects an authentic faith. Look at the passage we read in Isaiah. *Yet they seek Me daily and delight to know My ways, as if they were a nation that did righteousness [justice] and did not forsake the judgment of their God; they ask of Me righteous judgments; they delight to draw near to God.* He describes a people who apparently are eager to know God. They act as if they did justice. They seek Him daily – they want His righteous judgments – they delight to draw near. But God first tells them their real situation – they are rebels. *"Cry aloud; do not hold back; lift up your voice like a trumpet; declare to My people their transgression [rebellion], to the house of Jacob their sins.* On the one hand they seem passionate to know God – on the other hand God calls them rebels. And they don't understand what's going on: *'Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?'* In other words, they've been diligent to do all the religious stuff, but God doesn't seem to be near. He's not answering their prayers. 'We've done all these good things and You haven't noticed. We've obeyed the rules and You don't seem to be listening to us. We've fasted and prayed and nothing'.

And God's response to them is rather staggering. You think you've been worshipping Me? You think you've been honoring Me? Let me tell you what worship is. Let me tell you what it really means to seek My face'. *Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?* This is echoed in the New Testament where Jesus talks about the day when all accounts are settled. On that day, everyone is standing in front of Him and He'll divide them into two groups – those who are saved on one side and those who are lost on the other. And He is going to say to the lost: *'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave Me no food, I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome Me, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.'* Matthew 25:41-43

And they will say 'Lord when did that happen? When did we see You in this condition?' And He'll reply, *'...as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.'* In other words, the Bible is saying, God is saying, 'If you're not doing justice to the poor, if you're not doing justice to the hungry, the naked, the sick – if you are not loving these people – you really don't love Me'. The way you treat the least of these is the measure of how deep your relationship with Me really is. A deep concern for doing justice in the world, a life poured out in service to others, especially the stranger, the poor, the outcast, the homeless, is the mark of an authentic faith and real relationship with God. This is the real index of our heart. This is at the heart of a real, authentic biblical faith. You see, God says *Yet they seek Me daily and delight to know My ways, as if they were a nation that did righteousness [justice]*. In other words, they were doing a lot of religious stuff – but they weren't doing justice. **Doing justice reflects the very character of God and authentic faith is confirmed by doing justice.**

Finally, what does that look like in our lives? First of all I don't want you to have the wrong motivation here. We can hear a message like this and get overwhelmed by guilt that we're not doing justice and look around to see where we can add that in. You see, you can read passages like this and get the impression that you simply need to add another component to your faith. God comes to His people and says, 'Religion, you're doing that well – sacrifices, you've got that – worship, you're on top of that – justice, you're not doing so well'. And we look at that and say, 'Oh I get it, my list was too short – if I start feeding the homeless, clothing the naked and visiting people in prison – then God will be pleased with me. Then He'll start answering my prayers. Then He'll give me that promotion. Then He'll start blessing my life. If that is your take away here, you've missed it. All you're doing then is trying to put pressure on God. You're pointing at your life and saying to God, 'I've been good – I'm doing all the stuff now – I'm baby stepping – You owe me!'

As Tim Keller says, what you've done is jury rig your heart. If you look at this and say 'I get it. If I worship God and do all the right stuff and really seek His face – AND give my money to the poor and feed the hungry – then I'll be blessed – then God will approve of me – then I'll go to heaven.....all you've done is hidden the basic self-centeredness and self-concern of your heart under a thin veneer of religion. If this is what you do, you've done it for you, not for God. You've done it to improve your standing with Him, not out of any real compassion and care and concern for the oppressed and poor and hungry in the world. That will never produce the kind of people that do real justice in the world. That will never lead to the kind of radical sacrifice and generous giving that begins to restore the shattered shalom.

What will? The answer is down there in verse 13: *"If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on My holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the LORD honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly; then you shall take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.* The way to be a people that do justice in the world, a people that undo the yoke and let the oppressed go free, a people that share their bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into their homes and clothe the naked, is to be a people that delight in God. Look at what God says, 'If you don't look to satisfy yourself and pleasure yourself but you are delighting in Me, in what I want then you'll ride on the heights of the earth – then you'll be a people that are really doing justice in the world.

You see, when God is our delight, then what He takes joy in, we take joy in. What He loves, we love. When Jesus says, 'If you love the stranger and take care of the poor, you love Me; if you trample on the oppressed and the poor, you trample on Me' what He is saying is that God identifies with the poor, the marginalized, the outcast. God came into the world among the poor. Jesus' first bed was a feed trough; his parents could only offer two pigeons, the offering given by those on the lowest rung of the economic ladder. During His ministry He lived a homeless life; He rode into Jerusalem to His execution on a borrowed donkey; He ate His last meal in a borrowed room. He was poor. God became poor – and oppressed – and the victim of the greatest injustice ever. Jesus knew what it meant to be under the lash.

Joanne Terrell, an African-American writer who had grown up very bitter over the injustice she experienced as a black person in this country wrote about the moment this became real to her: ***I was in a graduate course studying the teaching of Christianity and we were talking about the death of Jesus. And I suddenly realized that Jesus Christ did not just suffer for us, something that I've always been told in church growing up. But that He suffered with us. Suddenly, I, an African-America woman realized that Jesus Christ had been lynched. Jesus Christ had been lynched by a corrupt justice system. Jesus Christ knew what it was like to be under the lash of the whip.*** John Stott once wrote, ***"I could never myself believe in God if it were not for the Cross and the life of Jesus. In a real world of pain, how could anyone worship a God who was immune to it?"***

You see, Jesus broke the yoke for us. He poured His life into all of the injustice in the world to bring justice. He became one of the oppressed to let the oppressed go free. He became poor so that we might have the riches of His grace. He went hungry to feed the hungry the bread of life. He became a stranger to His own that all who are strangers might be taken in. He was condemned so that the condemned might be vindicated and pardoned. And it is when the revelation of that truth explodes in your heart that you begin to be a person who does justice in the world. Not out of duty but out of delight. Not out of a sense of guilt but a sense of gratitude. Not out of a selfish fear that God will not bless you but out of a selfless love that is big with compassion.

At this point you might find yourself overwhelmed with the task. Do justice in the world? This world is filled with so much injustice – where do I start? Every time I go to Kenya I am overwhelmed with the magnitude of a world in which shalom is shattered – where injustice confronts me at every step. But God has not called us as individuals but as the church, to do justice in the world. That means I'm not responsible for all of it – just for what God puts in my way. In the movie the Four Feathers, Harry Favershem travels to the Sudan to rescue his friends, and on the way he gets lost and is dying in the desert. As he is teetering on the brink of death, he is rescued by an African, Abou Fatma, who nurses him back to health. Stunned by the kindness of Abou to a stranger, Harry asks him why he bothered. Abou simply replies, 'Because God put you in my way'. Who has God put in your way?

*Father, we thank You, for granting to us what we need to do justice in this world. May the truth of what your Son did for us explode in our hearts that the wonder and grace of His love would break the chains of self-centered pre-occupation and free us to delight in You and make service to others a joy and not just another way to serve ourselves. Forgive us Father for doing worship and calling it service, and not extending our hearts and hands and resources to do justice in this world. Destroy the self-centeredness of our hearts with the gospel and let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everlasting stream, and let us be a people who pour ourselves out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted so that Your name is honored and feared and exalted in this earth, we pray in the precious name of Jesus Christ our Savior, Amen.*