

February 12, 2023
Matthew 25:31-40
Amos 5:24

Love and Justice

But let justice roll
on like a river,
righteousness like a
never-failing stream!

AMOS 5 : 24

Last Sunday I mentioned that I might not be done with the series of messages about *Faith, Hope and Love*. I offered six messages in that series, which came from I Corinthians 13:13 – *and now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love*. We had two messages on faith, two on hope, and two on love. As I thought about the two messages on the topic of *love*, I realized there are some unanswered questions that need to be taken into consideration, so I am going to offer today, and next Sunday, two more messages on the topic of love.

The reason for this is, when we talk about *love*, there are questions that arise, particularly when we talk about, or read, the words of Jesus that call us to *turn the other cheek*, and to *love our enemies* (Matthew 5:39, 43-44). Those words often set off alarm bells in our minds, leading some people to say, *well, I don't believe Jesus wants me to be a doormat!* I have long puzzled over that response. Jesus could be described in many ways, but certainly not as a doormat. In my reading of the gospels, I find nothing in the words or the actions of Jesus that indicate we are called to be doormats, or that we should allow people to take advantage of us. Likewise, I find nothing that leads me to believe that Jesus is saying we are automatically required to leave ourselves open to behaviors by others that could, or would, cause us harm in a

spiritual, physical, emotional, or psychological manner. In far too many instances, people who have been victims of abuse, for example, have been told they need to forgive the perpetrator. Forgiveness is never a wrong suggestion. It is, however, wrong, and potentially harmful, if we imply that forgiveness means there will not be a call to justice, as this would tragically allow the perpetrator to continue abusive behavior and also fail to bring justice to the person who has been abused.

One of the great tragedies in our society is that of abuse, particularly, what we might call institutionalized abuse. This is abuse that takes place in institutional settings – in athletics, in colleges and universities, and in churches. It is a tragedy that is taking place in every institution in our society. And, unfortunately, some well-meaning people, looking at the idea of love and grace and forgiveness, will tell people, *you need to forgive the perpetrator*. What this means, in an institutional setting especially, is, *don't say anything about this because we don't want this to be revealed. It might hurt the institution*. This leads to a “sweeping under the rug,” which ignores the need for justice. There are people who will use love, grace, and forgiveness in a way that Jesus never intended for them to be used, such as allowing the perpetrators of abuse to continue to inflict their abuse on others. This creates a culture of silence and protectionism that has too often been created, and which has been incredibly harmful to so many.

One of the difficulties in speaking of love, particularly the kind of love demonstrated by and taught by Jesus, is the fact that we layer many assumptions onto what Jesus said and did. We hear Jesus saying what he didn't necessarily say, and that leads us to many questions, such as, *what does it mean to offer forgiveness to someone who has not only hurt us, but hurt us deeply? Does that forgiveness mean that we are overlooking the hurt we have suffered? Does love mean that we must accept any kind of behavior that is directed towards us, even harmful or abusive behavior? Does love and forgiveness mean we are left without protection for what people might decide to do to us?* And the questions go on and on.

So how do we, then, understand love in the way we are commanded to love by Jesus? How do we avoid the mistake of misinterpreting his words? How do we avoid ignoring his words? How do we avoid the temptation to find a way to blunt the hard truth of what he said?

The love of Jesus is difficult – very difficult. There are many beautiful and uplifting elements in the love of Jesus, but there are those that are difficult as well. The love of Jesus reminds us of grace, mercy, forgiveness, and other elements of love that raise many questions about how we live with and interact with people in this world. This morning, I am offering a message titled *Love and Justice*, with the hope and prayer that it answers some of the questions brought to mind by the call to love.

Our Scripture reading comes from Matthew 25:31-40 and Amos 5:24, and I invite you to follow along as I read that passage –

Matthew 25:31-40; Amos 5:24 –

³¹ *“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne.*

³² *All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.*

³³ *He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.*

³⁴ *“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.*

³⁵ *For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in,*

³⁶ *I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’*

³⁷ *“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?*

³⁸ *When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you?*

³⁹ *When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’*

⁴⁰ *“The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’*

²⁴ *But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!*

The topic of *Love and Justice* is a really large topic, and I’m not sure I’m doing the topic justice by devoting about 20 minutes to it. It’s a complicated subject, with many intertwined questions. It’s a bit like trying to untangle a bunch of Christmas tree lights. One question leads to another question, which leads to another question, and on and on, as we try to unravel quite a few intertwined questions. So, understand please, that in attempting to answer some of the questions related to this topic in such a short amount of time, I am probably raising as many questions as I am answering, and perhaps more.

What I will offer first is this point –

1. Injustice is institutional unfairness.

We all know that life is, at times, unjust and unfair, and we learn that early on. Every child, for instance, will protest at some point, *that’s not fair!* But not everything we say is unfair is actually unfair. When I was a child, one of my perceived unfairnesses was that I couldn’t have candy for every meal. My mom told me that when I was living on my own, I could eat whatever I wanted to eat, but as long as I was...what? *Living in her house, I would eat what I was told.* That’s right. I thought she was acting unfairly, but she was not. It was actually good for me to eat what was put in front of me. Not all that seems unfair is actually unfair. Some of what we call unfairness is what we would call *perceived unfairness*. But there is much that is unfair in life. Unfairness is treating a person or a group as less than others, or as less equal, or as less important. Unfairness is not allowing a person or a group the same opportunities that others have. The umbrella of unfairness includes a number of different ways of treating a person or persons, well, unfairly.

And then there is injustice. As harmful as unfairness can be, injustice is far more serious. I thought a long time about this definition, and here is the definition I came up with for injustice – *injustice is institutionalized unfairness*. How's that for a simple, 4-word definition?

You or I can be unfair to other people in the way we treat them and in the ways in which we act towards them. We can consider a person less important or not equal to us and then treat them unfairly because of those beliefs. That is unfair, and it is wrong. It moves to injustice, however, when you or I have the power to create laws and structures that prevent a person, or persons, from being treated fairly or equally. That is when unfairness becomes injustice, because it becomes institutionalized and there is the power of law and government and other powers that are able to enforce that unfairness. If I say, for instance, *you shouldn't do that*, or *you shouldn't say that*, I am expressing an opinion, which may not be accurate or fair. But if I have the power to say, *you will not do that*, or *you will not say that*, and I have the power to dictate what you can and cannot say, and the power to dictate what you can and cannot do, then we are speaking of injustice. The history of our country, and every country, and every kingdom throughout history, reveals the reality of unfair practices and policies that have limited opportunity for others and have made those lives difficult because of policies put in place by people with power, and they have perpetuated institutional injustice, and that is unjust.

When we read Scripture, we find that people knew injustice very well, unfortunately. The Hebrew people were kept in bondage by Egypt for more than 400 years. The prophets railed against the injustices that people faced. For centuries, it was a succession of empires who ruled over the people – the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and the Mesopotamians. In the time of Jesus, and in the time of the early church, the Roman Empire had their iron fist on the people, treating them unfairly and unjustly.

2. *The unfairnesses and injustices of life often lead to a desire for revenge, rather than justice. Jesus rejected revenge, and calls upon his followers to reject revenge.*

Back in the 1980s, when I was serving as an Associate Minister, I worked with a group of six high school students who had a singing group. I was their manager, sound tech, driver, booking agent, and adviser. One summer, over the 4th of July holiday, we went to a church in Mercer County. The group had been invited to sing at a revival service. The church was full, and the group did really well. After they finished with their songs, the evangelist stepped up to preach. He was, shall we say, energetic and fiery. It was the 4th of July weekend and the message was on the theme of turning America back to God. But mostly, his message was about politics and what seemed, to me, his version of politics. One of the political issues he spoke about was capital punishment. As he talked about capital punishment, he said, very dramatically – and I am not nearly as animated he was, and I won't try to be, but I'll invite you to use your imagination – *people ask me*, he said, *do you believe in the electric chair?* Based on what he had already said in his message, I was surprised when he answered that question by saying, *no sir, I do not. I do not believe in the electric chair!* But then he said, even more dramatically, *what I believe in is the electric couch – line them up 3 and 4 at a time!* I kid you not. That was a shocking statement, and even more shocking was the reaction of the congregation. They jumped up, shouting, cheering, and applauding as though UK had just won a national championship. In every sport. It was more than a bit disconcerting to see people so energetically applauding the execution of people. The evangelist went on to say that Jesus did not create us to be, or want us to be, doormats, and we were to defend ourselves against lawbreakers and criminals and that lining them up on an electric couch not only would be exactly what God would have us to do, but the execution of people would solve many, if not most, of our society's problems.

Now, it is very, very rare that I will share a political opinion in a sermon, and that is because I do not want anyone to think that on such

matters I am speaking for the church, or that my opinion represents an official church position. We do not have official church positions on political matters, but I will share one of my opinions today, and I share it as more of a spiritual opinion than a political one, although it does touch on a political issue, and one that can be quite divisive. I do not believe in capital punishment; I am very much opposed to it. I do not have the time to get into a detailed defense or explanation of my position on that issue this morning, but I will share the primary reason for why I hold that point of view. I hold that position because I believe it to be in line with the teachings of Jesus. Now, I know and understand the arguments against my position, so you don't have to tell them to me after the service. I have heard all the rebuttals, such as, *so Dave, if someone harmed your family you would not be interested in that person getting what they deserve? And you wouldn't want to stop them from harming someone else?* Let me simply say that my position on capital punishment does not mean those questions at all represent what I believe, or what I believe should happen.

What really bothered me in that sermon those many years ago was the enthusiasm for executing people. I am not opposed to justice, and I believe people are obligated to face the consequences of their actions, and I certainly believe that Jesus was one who worked for justice, but to cheer with such gusto over putting people to death does not in any way seem to me to be in the spirit of Jesus. To cheer for the execution of people, to me, seems to move from a spirit of justice to one of seeking revenge. That is my opinion and my take on what happened in that service all those years ago.

In the Sermon On the Mount, in Matthew 5:38-39, Jesus said, *you have heard that it was said, "Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth." But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.* One of the points Jesus is making is to turn away from revenge. The command of *eye for eye, and tooth for tooth* was a way, centuries ago, of limiting retribution and revenge. It was a way to guarantee justice while at the same time, limiting revenge – *you can go this far, but no further.* When Jesus says we are to *turn the*

other cheek, those words raises many questions, such as the question of being a doormat – *am I supposed to let people do to me whatever they want to do to me? Am I not allowed to protect myself, or my family?* That is not what I am saying, and I do not believe that is what Jesus said.

One of the ways in which Jesus demonstrated love was to oppose the wrongs inflicted on people, particularly the wrongs inflicted by people in power. But while Jesus was very much an advocate for justice, he was also very specific in rejecting revenge. Justice is an essential ingredient to all societies and to all human relationships, and its action of restoring and repairing what people have suffered makes for a healthy society. Revenge, however, tears down and destroys both societies and relationships. Sometimes, what people call justice is, in actuality, a desire to exact revenge. It's more of a desire to *get even* than a desire to make things right, and when there is a desire to get even, there is very little chance that any wrong that has been suffered will be made right. Revenge, rather than righting wrongs, only perpetuates the violence that has been with us since the beginning and that has become a plague on the world. To love our enemies, and to pray for those who would persecute us, becomes a way of saying, *I will not seek revenge, and I will not be a part of the perpetuation of violence that never ends, and which goes on generation after generation after generation.* Justice seeks to create an orderly society, where people are protected rather than abused, while vengeance tears apart the fabric of society. We see this over and over again, played out in our world in such tragic ways.

I don't believe Jesus is saying justice will not be done, but I certainly do believe he is warning of the tragic results of revenge, and the way in which revenge continues a cycle of violence that never ends. Jesus sought to stop the cycle of violence and abuse that had gone on for centuries, not only between families but also between tribes and groups and nations. His words are not at all about being a doormat, or worse, as much as he is saying, *I'm not going to be part of furthering this cycle of revenge and violence.*

3. *Justice not only acknowledges and seeks to right the wrongs we have experienced; it also acknowledges and seeks to right the wrongs that others have experienced.*

In the passage from Matthew chapter 25, we read the powerful words of what people had done on behalf of others, how they had fed the hungry, given the thirsty something to drink, invited in the stranger, given clothes to those who needed clothes, took care of the sick, and visited those in prison (verses 35-35). What is so interesting is they didn't even realize they were doing the justice work of God. ³⁸ *When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?* they said. And the reply of God is, ⁴⁰ *“The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’* It was second nature to them to do such things. They just did it. They weren't out only to take care of themselves, or to seek justice only for themselves, but for others. This is what Jesus calls us to do, and it is the example Jesus offered, as Paul says in Philippians 2:3-5, *do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus.* When you seek justice for those who have been the victims of institutional unfairness. When you seek to right the wrongs others have suffered. When you show mercy on those who have not received mercy. When you become a voice for those who do not have a voice for themselves. These are ways in which we seek justice for others.

And when we do that, it will have repercussions. It certainly had serious repercussions for Jesus. Jesus suffered and died at the hands of those who did not like what he had to say, who did not like what he did, and did not like who he was. Not everyone liked what Jesus said. Not everyone liked what Jesus did. Not everyone liked who Jesus loved. Jesus was crucified, in part, because he treated others with fairness and justice. And Jesus could have kept quiet and avoided being treated in the way he was treated. Sometimes, the action of speaking up and speaking

out will result in actions taken against us. Modern examples of this would be the civil rights marches. Some of us remember watching the news reports of that time, when the participants were intimidated, and had dogs released up them, and firehouses turned on them, and the clubs of police officers turned on them, and were imprisoned, and when a person suffers such repercussions, no one could accuse them of being a doormat. Not everyone will like when we stand up for fairness and justice. It will challenge those who are in power and who benefit from the ways in which society is structured. In fact, when a person stands up and speaks up against injustice, that is one of the most courageous actions a person can take, because you make yourself vulnerable to the powers that will take action against you and will seek to quiet you. And that is why unfairness and injustice is so easily perpetuated in society, because the fear of the repercussions keeps people from standing up and speaking out.

4. Instead of seeking revenge, the love that Jesus models will lead us to work for justice, as well as mercy, grace, and forgiveness.

It is very important that we understand that love, forgiveness, mercy – all the great Christian values – do not disqualify or do away with a call to justice. It is the call to mercy, grace, and forgiveness, however, that is very troubling to us. Does it mean, when we forgive someone, that there is no call to justice for what has been suffered? Does it mean the person who has victimized us, or someone else, is free to continue to harm other? No, not at all. Forgiveness and grace and love do not in any way preclude the call to justice. I want to read something that expresses this truth in a very helpful manner.

Rachel Denhollander is a name you may recognize. She was a member of the U.S. Women's Gymnastic team and was the first person to publicly reveal that she had been abused by the team doctor, Larry Nassar. Ms. Denhollander and her family live in Louisville, where she is an attorney and an advocate for those who have suffered abuse. In one of many interviews she has given, she made a really great distinction between forgiveness and justice, which I would like to share with you –

with the call for justice and with what I have done to couple forgiveness and justice, it should not be misunderstood. But I have found it very interesting, to be honest, that every single Christian publication or speaker that has mentioned my statement has only ever focused on the aspect of forgiveness. Very few, if any of them, have recognized what else came with that statement, which was a swift and intentional pursuit of God's justice. Both of those are biblical concepts. Both of those represent Christ. We do not do well when we focus on only one of them...God is the God of justice, these things are evil, and it is biblical, right, and godly to pursue justice. I had to make a decision to do what was right no matter what the cost was...the suffering here on earth is very real, and it does not go away simply because you forgive and release bitterness...It means that I trust in God's justice and I release bitterness and anger and a desire for personal vengeance. It does not mean that I minimize or mitigate or excuse what he has done. It does not mean that I pursue justice on earth any less zealously. It simply means that I release personal vengeance against him, and I trust God's justice, whether he chooses to mete that out purely eternally, or both in heaven and on earth.

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/january-web-only/rachael-denholander-larry-nassar-forgiveness-gospel.html>

I think she expresses that very well. It is a tricky balance, offering forgiveness, because we can believe that if we forgive someone, the hurt that was inflicted upon us is washed away as though it does not matter and as though nothing happened. That is not what Jesus is talking about. Justice seeks to make right. Justice seeks to protect people. Justice seeks to guarantee that people are treated fairly. Forgiveness does not in any way mean that one does not believe in justice or that one does not pursue justice. What forgiveness does is to release ourselves from the bitterness and desire for revenge that can destroy our heart and our soul. What it does not do is overlook the injustice that has taken place or allow a person to freely commit other acts of harm or injustice.

I think we all have a story to tell about a time when we have been hurt, and hurt in a very deep way. When I was reading that interview

with Ms. Denhollander it made me think about something that has occupied my mind for a number of years. When I share from my own experience in sermons, I wonder, *is this something I should share? Is this something I really want to share?* I won't give all the details, but there was an experience some years ago that was deeply hurtful to me, and to my family. I will confess that for a long time I had very strong feelings of anger, bitterness, and a desire for those who caused that hurt to be hurt in some way. I am sorry to say that I wanted revenge more than I wanted to demonstrate love. I wanted them to hurt, as I was hurt. I am not proud in saying this, but it is the truth, and I want to be truthful. Some of those feelings still remain, as I have yet to fully recover from what happened. But I am grateful those feelings are not like they were. I remember the day when I finally admitted to God that I knew I needed to forgive, and that was a very difficult admission for me to make. It took me a long time to get to that point. It took a lot of work, and a lot of prayer. I was walking early one morning, and it was weighing very heavily upon me that day that I needed to finally take the step of forgiveness. I remember where I was the moment that I said to God *I need to do this*, meaning that I need to forgive. I couldn't, though, bring myself to say the words, and I knew I needed to be more specific in what I was saying to God. Even though I had arrived at the point of forgiving, I didn't really want to, which is why I was vague in my prayer. One of the reasons it took me a long time to get to the point of forgiveness is because I mistakenly believed that if I forgave, I was saying that what happened didn't matter. Over time, I have come to understand that the call to forgiveness does not at all mean I have to overlook what had happened or to overlook that hurt had taken place. It still hurts, and I am still in the process of letting go of that hurt, as well as the anger and bitterness that it caused. But I will also say – and it is not easy for me to say this – that at some point I need to say those words, *I forgive*, in person. I say this to you because I suspect that some of you are in a similar place that I am with a hurt. When it comes to forgiveness, you aren't quite there yet. You've walked through that desire for revenge, and you've thought more about revenge and hurting that other person

than you have about justice, and maybe you've even wondered, *what is justice in my situation?* I agree with Ms. Denhollander that I can't hold onto the anger forever. I can't be bitter forever. But I can let it go and have a spirit of forgiveness and grace and not allow my life to be controlled in a way in which it has been for too many years, and I can also say that because of what I have experienced that I will work to help protect others.

My parents sought to instill in my siblings and me a sense of fairness and justice. Their rule was that if you came to our house, you treated everyone fairly and equally. You didn't mistreat anyone. I saw my mom, who can be intimidating even though she is not an imposing person physically, send my big, tall friends packing up our driveway after being told they could come back when they learned to treat people fairly. That's an important and necessary lesson, but it gets really tough when you've been hurt, and you want to get back at someone.

Love and justice are like a hand and a glove; they go together. It doesn't excuse the abuse or the hurt that others will inflict upon us, and it does ask us to seek to make things right. Making things right will mean that we will have to, at times, speak up in defense of others and to work to make sure that a person will not hurt others.

Love and justice are very, very difficult. Remember, it's love and not vengeance. It's grace and not bitterness. It's forgiveness and not anger. And justice will make right.