

Sermon 11-11-07

Job 19:23-27a

O that my words were written down! O that they were inscribed in a book! O that with an iron pen and with lead they were engraved on a rock forever! For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another."

Psalms 17:1-9

Hear a just cause, O Lord; attend to my cry; give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit.

From you let my vindication come; let your eyes see the right.

If you try my heart, if you visit me by night, if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me;

My mouth does not transgress.

As for what others do, by the word of your lips, I have avoided the ways of the violent.

My steps have held fast to your paths; my feet have not slipped.

I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God; incline your ear to me, hear my words.

Wondrously show your steadfast love, O savior of those who seek refuge from their adversaries at your right hand.

Guard me as the apple of the eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings,

From the wicked who despoil me, my deadly enemies who surround me.

Last Sunday we talked about peace-about God's call to being a people of peace, who spread the peace of Christ to all the world. This Sunday, we are focusing on a different virtue, one that has been closely linked to peace in Mennonite history. That virtue is of course, Justice.

Before we dive further into the question of Justice, I want to take a moment to define terms. This is an old debate habit-I used to do "Lincoln-Douglas Debate" back in High School, which was supposed to be an opportunity to think about larger moral questions rather than focus on governmental policy. Thus, we debated questions like "is civil disobedience morally justified?" or "can cloning be justified?" and the first thing that we always had to do at the beginning of the round was define our terms, in an attempt to set the parameters of the debate.

So, I thought I'd ask you to brainstorm with me how you would go about defining justice.

-prompts if necessary-

We've got at least one Lawyer in the house, Jim you should be used to this!

We've got at least a couple of people with English majors, you guys should be able to pull out some definitions.

These are good definitions-there are couple of things I notice about them-

Based on some notion of relationship-justice revolves around being treated rightly.

Based on some notion of equity-fairness, or equal treatment.

Based on some notion of rights-things that we deserve because of our actions or because of our innate qualities as human beings.

These are sort of the classic notions of justice, but what I'm most fascinated is the potential tension at the heart of our notion of justice.

An example may prove illustrative:

Children's sports are a fascinating example of this phenomenon. There are two schools of thought that I've seen in practice when teaching children to play games. 1) losing builds character: life is unfair, and kids should learn to lose and to accept both victory and defeat with good sportsmanship. That is justice.

On the other hand, there is the theory that everyone ought to have the opportunity to experience victory, and that no one should go home as a loser. I experienced this philosophy in horseback riding, when they continued to make up events for their horseback riding Olympics at the end of our summer of lessons until they finally found one that I could win (Simeon Says). That too is justice.

Is justice making sure that things are equally distributed to all people, or is justice making sure that the rules are the same for everyone?

Our criminal justice system is clearly most interested in rules. If you break the law, you are punished in a manner that is hopefully parallel with your crime. Obviously, it doesn't always work that way; if you happen to have skin that is several shades darker than mine, you are much more likely to have the full weight of the law come down around your shoulders for a crime equal in significance. Nevertheless, the goal is treating people as their behavior deserves.

You can see this notion of justice at work in today's Psalm reading-where the author of the psalm pleads with God for justice because of their correct behavior. Justice here is being treated as you deserve because of your behavior. The Bible is full of people

complaining that judges and human authorities frequently pervert justice by failing to treat people with equity according to what their behavior justifies.

But there is another biblical vision of justice, focused less on fair process than on right outcomes. Justice can also be defined as everyone having what they need to prosper. This theory suggests that even if all the rules are being followed, there is still injustice if people lose land or the ability to feed themselves. It is not just unethical to let widows and orphans suffer, it is unjust-because they deserve, as human beings, to have food, shelter, and love. The law in the old testament was clearly organized to make sure that this side of justice was also well represented. The Jubilee restrictions made it clear that every 50 years land was to be returned to the original land owner, people who had been enslaved because of their debts would be freed, and the economic foundations of the society would be returned to a level that was more equitable. Now, generally, we would call such behavior-the forgiving of debts, the manumission of slaves-mercy. When we give money to poor people, through MCC meat canning or Webster Rock Hill ministries, or however we serve those in need we call it charity. Charity for the poor, who need our assistance, because they have failed to succeed.

It seems to me that it is a significant change of vocabulary to talk about serving the poor, the widows, the orphans, children in need as an act of justice, and an act of justice not JUST because the situation of massive economic inequality in our world order means that people are making choices more or less under duress based on their need for day to day survival, but also because it is at its root unjust for our society to leave people behind, for whatever reason, but particularly because our social system does not value their input monetarily.

It is justice to provide support for these people who fall through the cracks, and it is justice to advocate for their needs.

This is what it means to be a redeemer, as Job in his misery cries out to us. "I know that my redeemer lives."

The classic story of how redeeming worked in ancient Israel is of course the story of Ruth and Naomi, where Boaz married Ruth, accepting the duty to care for her and her mother.

[Depending on the children's story] As you may remember, Naomi was a woman who with her husband and two sons went to a foreign country because of a drought in Israel. There her sons married foreign women. After a period of time, Naomi's husband and her two sons died, and without family to care for her she decided to return to Israel. One of her daughters-in-law, Ruth, insisted that she was going to come with her, to care for her mother through thick and thin.

Upon their arrival in Israel, Ruth took to gleaning at the edges of the fields of the wealthy, and she caught the eye of one particular landowner, Boaz. After an elaborate courtship, involving some positively suggestive moves on Ruth's part, Boaz serves as her 'kinsman redeemer' claiming as his responsibility the society's responsibility

to provide care and comfort to Naomi and Ruth. This is one of the better love stories in the Bible, because of Ruth's active participation in the story, but it is also a story about doing justice: Boaz obviously decided to marry Ruth for his own reasons, but the story suggests that Boaz is merciful-giving Ruth extra grain and some special perks most beggars would not have been given, but also just. His action to redeem Ruth and Naomi are only fair-because while the society in ancient Israel was carefully designed to leave women mainly powerless, it also recognized and attempted to mitigate this situation by providing laws to protect and encourage the rights of women.

This is what Job is calling out for-he feels powerless to change his situation, he feels that God has treated him unfairly, and yet he cannot argue with the creator and ruler of the universe-he is utterly impotent in the face of the divine, so he prays for a redeemer, an agent of redemption who might provide justice for him though he is powerless, who might provide him with the needs that the world would not provide.

We don't have anything that looks quite like a redeemer in our modern society. In some ways our government is designed to try and catch those people who fall through the cracks, through welfare, medicare, social security and the like. A congregation with as many social workers as ours knows the resources that our nation puts into providing for those in need. But the individual responsibility implied in redeeming someone is fascinating-the goal is for enough individuals to act in ways that are individually self sacrificing and individually merciful, so that society as a whole is marked by the creation of justice and equality. Rather than trying to draw out a few people whose job it is to care for those in need, the vision of justice is that all people might be involved in designing and supporting God's goals for a just society.

As we remember the call of those in need this Sunday, as we focus on the injustices in our society-based on economics, race, class, gender, and the like, I hope that we think of the tradition of Biblical redeemers, remembering God's call to us as individuals-to listen to those in need in our midst and to act for justice-acting as redeemers, doing God's will in the world, and receiving in turn the grace and justice of our brothers and sisters in the church and our God and savior Jesus of Nazareth.

Amen.