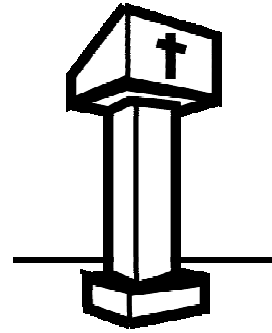


**Sermon Synopsis –  
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost  
Preached by The Rev. Chris McManus  
June 27, 2010**



“Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.” This quote from the book of Amos comes during a long diatribe by God against the Hebrew people for their greed, their unscrupulous business practices, and their oppression of the poor and needy. And I chose it today because I want to talk about the concept of justice.

Justice is one of the words in our draft vision statement that is generating some comment. The last line of the draft currently says that we are people “working for love and justice.” And some of the feedback is that people are unclear as to what that means. As one parishioner said to me, “I know what love is but I’m not sure what justice is.” So let’s look at justice.

One definition from an article reviewing many theories of justice put it this way: Justice is the concept of moral rightness based on ethics, rationality, law, natural law, religion, fairness or equity, along with the punishment of the breach of said ethics.

There are different sub-categories of justice. Distributive justice has to do with the proper allocation of wealth, power, reward, etc. among people. This is what Amos was talking about. And there are lots of different theories of what the “proper” allocation of such things is all the way from Communism to Capitalism, but also other ideas—meritocracy vs. equality of pay, or efficiency vs. equity.

Then there is retributive justice, which is about the punishment of wrongdoing, and again, there are a multitude of theories about the appropriate punishment. Look at the debates in this country over capital punishment. And finally, there is restorative justice, which is more about making the victims of a wrong whole to the extent possible, and reintegrating the offender back into society. This is probably the area we do least well.

And justice questions are not easy questions. Because they are questions about whether and how our most basic needs for sustenance and safety will be met. So they tend to become very emotionally fraught. But in all these areas and all these theories, the concept of fairness, being treated fairly, is one that repeats over and over.

There is quite a bit of brain research coming out now showing that we are in part wired to prefer equity or fairness. Using fMRI, researchers have found such things as being treated fairly in a laboratory game lights up the reward centers in the brain. These are the same centers that are activated when someone gives us chocolate or money. When I say “light up” I mean those areas of the brain become more active and through various neurotransmitters actually change our internal chemical state to one we find “rewarding.” They are also the centers involved in reinforcing new learnings.

Research also shows that being treated unfairly lights up areas that register disgust. Other research has shown that when people experienced social rejection, being “dissed” in the laboratory games, the brain showed the same pattern of activity as with physical injury. We like to be treated fairly and we don’t like to be treated unfairly. We like to be treated politely and respectfully. We don’t like to be insulted or rejected.

But the research also shows that receiving restitution for a former wrong also lights up the reward centers in the brain. And punishment of wrongdoers and getting revenge also light up those reward centers. So you can see where this is going. We like to be treated fairly. We don’t like to be treated unfairly or to be insulted. If we are treated unfairly or insulted, we like to punish the perpetrator. This is exactly the state James and John find themselves in today’s Gospel, where they want to call down lightning from heaven because they perceive that people have insulted Jesus! And so these natural states can lead to a vicious circle of ever escalating violence, such as we see in many places in the world.

The other day I was listening to journalist Lawrence Wright who recently wrote an in-depth article about Gaza for the New Yorker, and he was talking about how both sides have become so entrenched and how everyone thinks the other guy is getting exactly what he deserves and really, they’re destroying themselves and each other. That is exactly the kind of entrenched situation into which groups of people can descend.

In the Clergy Leadership Project, I’ve had the privilege of working with Donna Hicks. She is at the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard and has done extensive work around the world convening dialogs between warring parties. She calls behavior that we feel is unfair or insulting violations of dignity. And she found that the emotional reactions associated with these violations of dignity, and sometimes memories of past violations in past generations would come to dominate the negotiations. Even when parties could find solutions that they all could agree would be positive they could not sign on.

And indeed, some of the fMRI research shows the same thing. When people were offered a sum of money in the laboratory game that they thought was insultingly low, they turned down the money rather than accept the insult. And if they did accept the insulting sum, the areas of the brain that tamp down on angry or irresponsible behavior light up.

But as Donna says, “Our instincts for self-preservation may be hardwired—they are not our fault—but it is our responsibility to control them.” And so she has come up with a series of things we can do in our interactions that promote healthy human relations by honoring the dignity of others. Unless we learn to treat each other with dignity, we cannot move forward to solve other justice problems in society.

Donna sounds a lot like St. Paul in today’s reading from Galatians. Instead of “biting and devouring” each other, instead of strife, enmity, quarrels, jealousy, Paul says, “By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires,” including our desire for vengeance. “If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.”

If we practice being loving, patient, kind, generous, if we exercise self-control, if we treat each other with dignity, we will be working for justice. And as Christians we have

another tool with which to address the complex problems of establishing a reign of justice here on earth, and that is forgiveness. Most religions deal with forgiveness to some extent but it was a major emphasis for Jesus, and not just God forgiving but that we—WE—can and should and will forgive sins.

Now we often have the mistaken notion that forgiving means forgetting and/or excusing, but that is not the case. Forgetting that someone injured you is not forgiveness. Either you have amnesia or it wasn't a very big deal to begin with. Neither does forgiveness mean that there is no punishment or restitution. There are legitimate reasons for punishment such as deterrence or the protection of society. But it does mean giving up revenge.

Donna Hicks participated in a project with Desmond Tutu and the BBC in England and Ireland. And a number of British and Irish who had been involved in violence against each other volunteered to work with them to achieve reconciliation. I saw one of the pairs—a British police officer and a former IRA member who had shot and wounded him in an altercation years earlier.

And it was fascinating to me that neither of them ever apologized to the other. And neither ever formally said he forgave the other. They certainly never agreed on how to solve the problems of Northern Ireland. But they had empathy for one another. Neither held anything against the other. The British police officer said that if he'd had the Belfast upbringing that the other man had, he would probably have done the same things. And they continue to see each other, to visit in each other's homes and eat together. And they tour and talk about their experiences in an effort to forestall future violence.

Donald Shriver, who is the former president of Union Theological Seminary in New York, a Presbyterian and also involved in peace and reconciliation work around the world talks about forgiveness in this way:

Forgiveness . . . is an act that joins moral truth, forbearance, empathy and commitment to repair a fractured human relationship. Such a combination calls for a collective turning from the past that neither ignores past evil nor excuses it, that neither overlooks justice nor reduces justice to revenge, that insists on the humanity of enemies even in their commission of dehumanizing deeds, and that values the justice that restores political community above the justice that destroys. . . .

So defined, political forgiveness links realism to hope. It aims at delivering the human future from repetitions of the atrocities of the past. Given the scale of politically engineered atrocity in the twentieth century, nothing could be a more practical or more urgent gift to our neighbors of the twenty-first.

It may be difficult to come up with all the practical answers to the many questions of justice around the world. But we do have tools for how to live given to us by our faith. If each of us becomes more gentle, more kind, more patient. If each of us treats our fellows with dignity. If each of us forgives someone with whom we've been unhappy for a long time we will be working for justice. We will change the world. Amen.