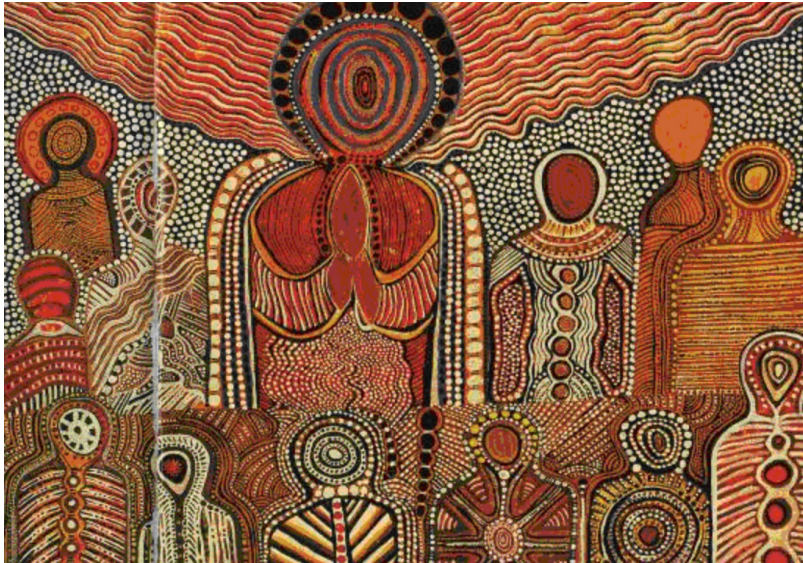


A Longing for Justice

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



"Last Supper" by Dorothy Tchumut (1992) (Aboriginal Christian art)

Prayer of Illumination

God of abundant life,
Your grace is our daily bread.
Nourish us by your Word
And fill us with your Spirit
So that we may grow in faith and love;
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Scripture: Isaiah 58:5-12 (NRSV)

⁵ Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the Lord?
⁶ Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

⁷ 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 them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
⁸ Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.
⁹ Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
¹⁰ if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.
¹¹ The Lord will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.
¹² Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – A Longing for Justice

Clint Smith in his moving book *How the Word is Passed* talks about some newly discovered historical information regarding the Statue of Liberty.

The Frenchman who conceived of the idea of the Statue of Liberty was a law professor who specialized in the US Constitution and was a passionate abolitionist in France in the late 1800s.

His motives were twofold for the gift of the statue:

1. to strengthen France's alliance with the United States
2. to celebrate the abolition of slavery at the end of the Civil War and the ratification of the 13th Amendment.

In an early model of the Statue of Liberty, Lady Liberty was holding in her left hand broken shackles that symbolized the end of slavery.

Kind of like the part of our passage where God says:

*Is not this the fast that I choose:
To loose the bonds of injustice,
To undo the thongs of the yoke,
To let the oppressed go free,
And to remove the chains that bind people?*

But in the final version of the statue we know today, Lady Liberty is holding not broken chains, but a tablet with the date July 4, 1776 on it. The broken chains were moved to the bottom of her feet. The chains can barely be seen. Lady Liberty's robes conceal them. There are a substantial number of historians who believe that too strong of a connection of The Statue of Liberty with Emancipation and the Abolition of Slavery was too controversial in the 1880s in America. Thus, the toned-down version of Lady Liberty that more Americans could accept. Lady Liberty became more about Independence, and less about Liberation.

We know there's justice, but there are so many competing interpretations of what it is. As a result, we can miss the signal in the midst of the noise. This is where our faith can help us crack the justice code. I really like how New Testament scholar NT Wright talks about justice in his book *"Simply Christian."* He asks this question:

*Have you ever had a powerful dream,
but upon waking couldn't quite remember
the details of it for the life of you?*

You know you had a dream and it was important, but you just couldn't recollect what the ultimate significance of it was? It's tantalizing because you know something's there, but you just can't quite access it. I think our passion for justice is often just like that. We dream the dream of justice. One of the most famous speeches is about a dream, right? MLK's *"I Have a Dream"* speech. We glimpse, for a moment, a world at peace, a broken world mended, a world where things work out, where societies function fairly and efficiently, people treat fellow human beings like humans, where we not only know what we ought to do, but we actually do it. And then we wake up and come back to reality. And we just can't get back to the dream. It escapes us. Those who are more jaded and cynical tell us we're being naive. It's not a dream, but a fantasy, an impossibility.

Yet that still small voice continues to whisper, calling and coaxing us back, that just maybe there's really such a thing as justice—but then it slips through our fingers again.

Kids intuitively know about this when they see a sibling get a bigger piece of cake and cry out, *"Hey, that's not fair!!!!"* We don't have to teach our kids this—they just know it. Yet one of the greatest questions philosophers have pondered and debated over the centuries is "What is justice?" We can fix broken legs, correct poor vision with glasses, but it seems we can't fix

injustice. Well, sometimes we do; but often we don't. The innocent get convicted; the guilty are let off. It seems the bullies, not the meek, inherit the earth. Atrocities and genocides happen. But good things really do happen, too:

- Slavery in America was abolished.
- Apartheid in South Africa was dismantled.
- Extreme poverty in the world has been cut in half in the last two decades—at least before the pandemic.

We don't always give ourselves enough credit.

We have to be fully honest. There are times we know deep inside of us what is right, and we still fail to do it. We don't love our neighbor, our spouse, our sibling, our enemy like we love ourselves.

NT Wright says there are three responses we can have to this faint echo of the divine voice:

1. We can say it's a childish fantasy that we need to grow out of and just face the real world.
2. We can seek to escape the nightmare of reality and just wish we could be in heaven right now as the world goes to hell in a handbasket.
3. Or we can say there is Someone speaking to us, a still small voice reminding us that we've been made for a world that does involve justice now, but ultimately our world will be rescued at last.

As Christians, we've received from the Jewish people the torch of the passion for justice. We carry it with them. And we also uniquely believe that Jesus embodied that passion, setting in motion God's plan to rescue the world and bring the healing we desperately need. This is the important thing, going to God's Word does not allow us to write off justice. It's a non-negotiable for the believer. Justice and righteousness are spiritual. They are required of us.

One of the most famous passages of Scripture is Micah 6:8—

What does the Lord require of you, O mortal, but to:

- to do justice,
- to love kindness,
- to walk humbly with your God.

The Scriptures teach that God is the God of justice. God is a just God, a merciful God. In fact, our passage in Isaiah clearly spells out God's thoughts on it: Your worship is not complete if you have sung a powerful hymn or worship song. Your worship is not done if you have prayed passionately. Been moved to tears. Given generously. Worshipped on Sunday morning. Practiced the spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, and meditation. Don't get me wrong. We need these. I'm really glad we're here this morning. I do them. I want you to do them. I want to do them more. But here's what Isaiah is saying: There can't be a mismatch between our spiritual practice and the rest of our lives. You have not fully worshipped until your faith has been translated into your relationships—personally and in societal systems and structures. If you're treating people like garbage or property, or you're seeing the poor crushed and staying quiet about it. If you're

merely serving your own interests, neglecting your family, Jesus is not at work in you in these areas. If you're not doing justice, Isaiah says you have an "as if" faith. It's "as if" you're being righteous—when you're not. The fancy word for it is hypocrisy.

The word "want" recurs in our passage. People want to acknowledge God's ways and want to draw near to God. They're saying this with their lips, but their actions speak otherwise. There was a disconnect between their words and actions. That's injustice. It's our will, not God's will. It's manipulative. It means nothing to God. You can't be truly spiritual and socially indifferent simultaneously. How we relate to God is how we relate to others.

Here's the hard part. You can't save the world, but Jesus can. We can't have a messiah complex. It will kill us or make us hopeless. The needs are just too overwhelming. But Christ in us—Jesus in your heart individually, and we, the Body of Christ collectively—can and must do justice because Jesus does justice. Jesus does justice through us. So, we put our drop in the bucket.

- We sing and we feed the hungry.
- We pray and we destroy the yoke of bondage.
- We fast and we clothe the naked and help shelter the homeless.
- We take care of our family members—that's a justice issue, too.
- We don't abuse or harm or neglect family.

This is what the people of God do. We can't pick and choose. Jews and Christians are people who care about widows, orphans, and immigrants. Why? Because God does, Jesus does. We may differ on how we do these, but you can't get around it. True religion isn't just a private affair. We don't walk by the individual person in need. But we also don't walk by a people-group in need. Both your walk, my walk, and our walk matters. We become more prone, individually and corporately, to walk by the needs around us when we're busy. Our natural inclination is to not want to be bothered. It's the deadly sin of sloth really. We don't want to take the time and effort to take a closer look, to slow down and stop and see if help is needed, to really learn about what's going on, what we can do. Doing justice makes us uncomfortable. It's risky, inconvenient. It stretches us—and we like our comfort.

As a pastor, I get nervous sometimes about justice because politics have become so intertwined with it. It seems like every one of them are lightning rod issues. One group says it's a problem, another says it isn't. One says you've gone too far, another not far enough. People get angry. They walk away. Some matters of justice are clearly wrong. Others are a little more complicated and divided.

It can be tempting to create defense mechanisms to shield us from the needs around us. We can get lulled into tuning out and distancing ourselves. Refusing to see it. Becoming indifferent. It's kind of like our response to this question:

What's the difference between ignorance and apathy?

Answer: I don't know and I don't care.

We can't tolerate an unholy alliance of the appearance of spirituality and social callousness. This is what Isaiah was warning us about. As hard as it is, we can't shy away from seeking God's will

about it. Faith isn't about our comfort and preferences. In other words, the cries of the oppressed cannot be drowned out with the noise of our hymns.

I like how Rabbi Abraham Heschl puts it:

"Justice and righteousness are God's part in human life, God's stake in human history.
...Justice is just as necessary as breathing and it is to be our constant occupation."

For God, justice is an expression of his compassion. God condemns injustice because it hurts people. Justice is like a trumpet call— "Shout aloud," says Isaiah, "without restraint." Declare to my people their sins. Speak truth.

Musicians interpret the world through sound. Sculptors express the world through shape. Chefs create through taste. Prophets see the world with the eyes of God— And they see the world in terms of justice and injustice. Prophets comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. They can feel extreme and alarmist at times. We want to say, "just get over it, will you?" Not everyone is a prophet, but the church needs prophets to protect our faith from becoming mere outward show, lip service. To live a just and righteous life is to be open. To listen to others. Cease to speak evil. To hear others out—rather than just being angry or defensive. To bring people together and find out what's not working, what's hurting people.

We also pray:

*God what are you trying to tell me?
What do you want me to do?
How can I respond compassionately with the resources I have?
How can we help create a more caring and compassionate society?
How can we alleviate inhuman conditions where people are treated like animals?
How can we not enable systems of corruption and exploitation?*

Or as Isaiah puts it: Be repairers of the breach, restorers of streets. God says that you will not only bless others with your justice, but you will be blessed in your blessing. When we care for the hurting, we'll find healing for our wounds, too. God will guide us in front and from behind. When we call to God, he'll answer. Isaiah tells us we'll be like a well-watered garden, a spring whose waters never run dry. Justice is good not only for others, but for ourselves.

Tapping into our passion for justice humanizes us and makes us more godly. It draws us closer to others and to God.

Amen.

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