



Fix Your Focus: Do Justice

Jeremiah 22:1-5

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September 27, 2020

What would it take for us to hear a prophet today in the same way we believe Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the other prophets spoke to Israel before, during, and after the exile?

How bad do things have to be for us to actually equate our reality in America today to the kind of lament the prophets spoke against in the Near Ancient east?

A couple weeks ago, we looked at Micah's prophetic writing to the Israelites, and heard that, in the midst of a season where faithfulness was lacking, what God desired of the faithful was not greater acts of spirituality or worship ... but of greater morality and the care of creation. Micah's expression of faith is threefold: do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

These three words of instruction are echoed throughout the Biblical text. As Micah offers, "Have you not heard? The Lord has spoken to you." ... These are not new instructions. These words of guidance – these words of how to right our wrongs – these directives to be a more faithful people – they are reiterated time and time again in God's Holy Word.

Jeremiah, in today's text, offers the same guidance as Micah to Israel in the years leading up to the exile. In this text, he's addressing the question of the kingly leadership for Israel. There was a known desire among the Israelites to have a king of the line of David sit on the throne. There was a belief among the Israelites that, if only the right king were sitting on the throne, the Israelites would be protected from exterior enemies. If God would just provide for them a king of David's lineage, they would no longer need to fear the impending exile. In this text, Jeremiah is rejecting such a belief – the king won't save you.

Jeremiah begins in verse 2, "Hear the word of the Lord, O King of Judah sitting on the throne of David – you, and your servants, and your people who enter these gates." This is a word of guidance to the whole of the kingdom. Jeremiah continues, "Thus says the Lord: Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place."

These instructions are not far from Micah's – do justice ... act with justice. Jeremiah's explanation fits our Biblical view of justice from last week – to raise up those who are low. To deliver the robbed from their oppressor, and to care for the foreigner, and the orphan, and the widow – the staple examples in the Biblical text of those who are often financially and physically incapable of caring for themselves in society.

Jeremiah explains why this is necessary work. “If you indeed obey this word, then through the gates of this house shall enter kings who sit on the throne of David ...” If you do what I ask, and institute justice, you will receive the kingly leadership you are asking for. However, “if you will not heed these words, I swear by myself, says the Lord, that this house shall become a desolation.” (Who says you can’t swear on God’s name, even the Lord swears on God’s name.)

Again, I wonder, what has to happen – today – in our nation for us to hear these words of the prophet, and to acknowledge we are in the same dire situation as Israel. If we can obey the word of God, perhaps we shall see better days with better leaders. But if we will not heed these words, I swear on the name of the Lord, this house shall become a desolation. These are the words of the Lord.

Last week, we defined justice as making low that which is high, making high that which is low, and making flat that which is rough, such that all – everyone one of God’s created – might have an easy path to journey toward the glory of God. We saw these instructions of the Hebrew Scriptures echoed in the witness of Christ, as he lifted up the poor, the widow, and the outcast, and as he brought down the powerful and the wealthy. This is the justice God demands.

But Micah doesn’t say, nor does Jeremiah, that we should sit idly by as God works for justice on our behalf. The prophets don’t offer us a stadium seat, in which to witness God’s holy work being done from afar. No, the prophets offer that for us to be God’s faithful people, we must be active in this work. We are to *do* justice, to *act for* justice, to *administer* justice.

In the Biblical text, when speaking of *doing* justice, the reference is often made to the foreigner, the widow, and the orphan. These were contextual examples of those who were most susceptible to the negative effects of the power of the world around them. This was not an exhaustive list of those for whom justice was needed, but they were very clear examples that would have easily resonated with the Israelites. It was known that these groups faced great challenges, and needed the supportive and just work of others for their own well-being.

If you want to apply these texts in a direct way, you could say, that our call as the faithful today is still to ensure the well-being of the foreigner, the widow, and the orphan. These are still groups of God’s created who face inequality and oppression. In the world today, there are some 70 million refugees looking for a new country in which to live, having been forced to leave their native nation for fear of death. This is just a small number compared to the 240 million total migrants who have globally sought a new country in which to live. How well are we caring for the foreigner in our world today? In our nation today? Is there justice for those who have crossed our borders? ... There are over 250 million widows in the world today, with an estimated 10% of them living in extreme poverty. How well are we caring for the widows of the world today? Is there justice for widows, even in our own nation? ... There are around 440,000 orphans in the US today, and over 140 million around the world. I’d ask if there’s justice for the orphan, but I know that it can cost up to \$50,000 just to adopt a child. With such an outrageous expense, do we even need to ask how well we are caring for the orphan today?

But again, while these are each important groups of God's created, which need our focus and care even still today, these were named in the Biblical text as examples, not as a limiting criteria. The invitation of the text is not to see these as the *only* groups of people in need of our justice work, but as examples of those for whom justice is needed – for whom a leveling of the playing field is needed.

So, let's talk about *doing* justice today. Let's at least attempt to answer the question, what does God's justice look like if we are involved in its work today? What does it mean to raise up the low, and to lower the high, and to make level the earth so that we might each live into the glory of God's will for creation?

Let's start with the poor – an easy to name group of God's created who need for people to work for their justice – to help raise them up. The international poverty rate is set at \$1.90 per day. It's estimated that over 730 million people, or roughly 8.5% of our global population lives on less than \$2.00 a day. And yet, while they suffer from hunger and often have no consistent place to sleep at night, the wealthiest 42 individuals (not percent, individual people) in the world own as much wealth as the lower 50% of the global community.ⁱ 42 people globally own as much wealth as nearly 4 billion people. In our own nation, the wealthiest 1% of our own population holds over 30% of our nation's wealth. The wealthiest 1% of our nation is worth over \$36 trillion, which is a greater amount than the cumulative wealth of the bottom 90% ... NINETY PERCENT ... which has a cumulative wealth of around \$33 trillion. So, 33 people in our nation own as much in total wealth as nearly 300 million people.

If we are really doing the work of justice, if we are responding in faith to God's desire for humanity, we must follow the guidance of God in Jesus Christ who calls us to advocate on behalf of the poor, to support the poor, to ensure the poor don't go hungry, or houseless, or jobless. And this doesn't just mean giving a meal to those who are hungry. It doesn't just mean providing another shelter for the houseless to sleep in. "Charities of the past and many charities and services today often only seek to rectify the symptoms of poverty rather than acknowledging the root cause."ⁱⁱ The call of true Biblical justice isn't just to give a temporary reprieve to the poor, it's not just about raising up the poor ... it's also about lowering the high, bringing down the wealthy so that the poor and the wealthy might live in greater equality with one another. It's about a more just society, a more just creation, a more equitable world that embodies God's will for humanity.

The work of justice today also requires a deeper look at how poverty affects the nation in a more compartmentalized way. Though they make up only 0.7% of our total population in America, the poverty rate among Indigenous persons is over 27%. The poverty rate of the Black population is over 26%. The poverty rate of the Hispanic population is over 23%. And the poverty rate of the white population is just over 10%. No demographic grouping is exempt from the challenges of poverty, and yet, our systems and structures over the past 400 years as a forming and formed nation have been more detrimental to the minority population groups than the majority white population.

To faithfully *do justice* today requires an honest admission of the sin of racism in our nation, and to be intentional about our work to end its devastating effect on communities and individuals of color. “Racism expands more widely than an individual’s feelings toward a group of people. There are also structures in place that contribute to people groups failing in society. They can be found in the education system, health care systems, the court system, the job market, and more. If we ever want to understand the realities of racism in this country, we must be willing to look at history and how it affects our systems and structures today.”ⁱⁱⁱ This is the work of justice, of being honest about the policies and procedures, systems and structures, organizations and leaders who continue to tear down and vilify black and brown siblings of God’s created humanity.

To administer justice ... to act for justice ... we must speak up and act out when necessary to advocate on behalf of those whose lives are seen as expendable. It is not just when state authorized public servants are given a license to unaccountably kill members of God’s created humanity. There is no justification that can justify such heinous acts, for this is not justice. And what happens when we do not do justice – when justice does not prevail? Jeremiah says, by God’s own doing, we will fall into desolation. Have you seen our streets lately?

But it’s not just poverty, and it’s not just racism ... the work of doing justice requires an advocating on behalf of all who are torn down and treated as if their voice, their gifts, and their personhood is unwanted or expendable. It’s speaking up for women who are abused, and silenced. It’s calling for justice for those who are told they deserved their abuse, or that their own actions and choices of clothing incited their abuse. There is a reason Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg was so beloved, because she acted on the side of justice. She spoke up on behalf of the voices of women who were, in a patriarchal society, unwelcomed and rejected. She brought high those who were low, and she brought low those who were high. This is the work of *doing* justice.

The work of *doing justice* means advocating for the equality of the LGBTQ community. It means seeing the created image of God in each person, and lifting up those who are torn down. It means speaking on behalf of those who are not given a voice, or centering their voice to ensure their voice is heard. It means lifting up those who are low, and taking down those who, in high positions, are dismissing and ignoring the oppression of any of God’s created.

And since the Bible is clear about welcoming and advocating on behalf of the foreigner, we cannot ignore the injustice of the American immigration system. “The gospel compels us in our culture to decry any and all forms of oppression, exploitation, bigotry or harassment of immigrants, regardless of their legal status. These are men and women [sic] for whom Christ died, and their dignity is no greater or lesser than our own.”^{iv}

There are more forms of injustice present in our nation and our world than just these. And no, I don’t name these in length to highlight just how much work we have to do – though we have a lot of work to do. I name such a broad range of injustices, because the reality is, we have no

excuse to be inactive. There are more than enough arenas in which to work, such that we can each find a space where our God-given passion connects with a desire to act for, to administer, and to do justice.

What we cannot do, is fail to hear the words of the prophet. Jeremiah is quite clear, and I think his words ring as true today as they did 2500 years ago: “if you will not heed these words, I swear by myself, says the Lord, that this house shall become a desolation.”

Justice is the desire of God, maintained throughout the Biblical text – both the Old and New Testament stories proclaim this as the will of God. God desires that we all, that each and everyone one of the created humanity might be seen as the child of God they are. As God’s created, as God’s beloved creation, the will of God is that we shall all share in the abundant joy, love, and life of Christ – enjoined in the full abundance of all creation has to offer. For this will to be known, for us to really claim a desire to see God’s will to be made known on earth as it is in heaven, we have been tasked, gifted, invited, and called to share in God’s work. To *do* justice.

So may the Spirit of God empower you, and sustain you, for this is work we have been called to **do**. For the glory of God, may God lead us in this work. Amen.

ⁱ Mae Elise Cannon. *Beyond Hashtag Activism: Comprehensive Justice in a Complicated Age*. Downers Grove, IL; InterVarsity Press, 2020.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.