

SERMON: “Justice: *Not just for us.*”

Rev. Geoff Ross, Sunday, August 22, 2021, St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church

“*But; **she** hit me first! It’s not fair!*” Harrison would complain when I caught him in the act of retaliating against one of his sisters. Often my response to his protests was the same: I would tell him what Don Cherry once said when asked “*What’s the dumbest penalty in hockey?*” The answer? “*The retaliation penalty!*” Why? “*Well,*” he went on, “*first, you always get caught. The ref’s might have missed them slash you, but they won’t miss you hacking at them. He goes free but you get the penalty/pay the price!*” But retaliation is not just a ‘hockey’ thing.

As we heard with our faith in ACT!ON series in May, Micah 6:8 (“*What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your god?*”) gives with absolute clarity about what God expects of us/distills God’s commandments for how we are to live. Jesus quoted Micah’s source as the first half of what He called the greatest commandment: “*To love God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind and strength.*” (Mark 12:30; Deut 10:12) And, as if to underscore the importance of justice, Jesus added the second phrase from a warning that “*you shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself.*” (Lev 19:18) Clearly God’s understanding of how to respond to issues of justice is different than ours. Clearly, too, is that in a faithful life, there is no room for retaliation. (2nd/Reading: Romans 2:1-16)

“*Revenge*”/“*Vengeance*”/“*Retaliation*”/“*Justice*” are words that have been getting a lot of air time lately: but so much of what we hear these days – “*justice being served*” – isn’t about justice. As people of faith, this misuse of the concept of “*justice*” should bother us since this action isn’t usually justice: it’s more about retaliation/retribution/vengeance – which God says is His. (Deut 32:35) This retaliation reveals how far we have strayed from what God requires of us: in short justice is not about/for just us. And it’s our inability to control ourselves that result/choosing to take the matter of judgment/vengeance into our own hands/choice to retaliate is part of our fallen nature; but this isn’t how God/Jesus longs for us to live. In our 1st reading, Paul – like Don Cherry – is calling out the early Christians in/around Rome to straighten up/fly right: he’s reminding them the Law/list of how we’re to live up to God’s requirements.

In 13 verses Paul lists off 30 new ‘rules’ for how we’re to live faithfully/in community/justly. Appealing to those who already belong to/committed to worshipping God (You/Me/Us!), Paul is giving a refresher/reboot where we need it – and kicks our need to shape up up a notch: if this is a list of what it means to worship God/be a Christian/live justly.... then, a lot of us, aren’t. To be clear: we’re not loving justice. Serving the Lord is not watching the clock during worship/meting out our ‘grace’ parsimoniously in thimble-sized portions/holding off avenging ourselves enough to keep up appearances/waiting-wondering when it’ll be our turn again.

Paul's list is not some simple "To Do"/check list:it proscribes/requires us to do something every minute/day/no matter where we are/whom we are with. It's a list of practices/rituals/customs/habits – not for us, but for us to do for others – as you would do it to/for Jesus. It is a recipe list/litany of the many/simple/small/seemingly inconsequential ways we're to show our love of/for God in/through our love for our neighbours. Friends, for love (any love) to be genuine it has to be focused outward/on someone/thing other. This is the "*sacrifice*"/"*Justice*" God/Paul is calling us to live out. God's justice is about thinking less about ourselves/losing ourselves/giving ourselves away/becoming more like Christ – everyday/everyway.

God knows that living a life of faith is hard but He still calls us to live our lives in pursuit of justice/kindness/humility/. Sure, it would be easier if God just made us do it – but that's not how we're to serve the penalty we've committed: While God longs for us to grow/become who we were created to be/by Him, God knows that it He cannot force love. So, instead, God/Jesus calls us to let go and trust in Him, practice faith (faith in action/rituals/habits), and live out our lives daily embodying the love we've each experienced from Him/God. Micah 6:8 tells us what God requires of us; Paul's list reminds us that the type of genuine love we long for comes from having been loved by God. God's justice is revealed by His love: we're to love one another as we've been loved/do for others what God has done for us because it's not just for us. Amen.