

I Kings 21: 1-7

Principles of Justice

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The Congregational Church of Needham

This week we begin a new series of sermons on Justice. Justice is a key principle of our life together in this country. When you recite the Pledge of Allegiance you pledge your loyalty to the flag, to the republic that it represents and to the shared value we place in our country on liberty and justice for all people. It was that notion of justice which propelled people to journey from Europe almost 400 years ago to practice their faith and to create communities based on Biblical principles of justice. The War of Independence was fought to gain justice for the colonies. The Civil War was fought to bring justice to slaves. Every populist debate and wave of new immigrants challenged our nation to make our constitution refine the notion of justice for all.

Justice is a current topic today. Last week as the jurors were being selected for the trial of the suspect in the Marathon bombing case, the public debated who to choose and how to set things up so that justice was served. All fall as news came out about the Grand Juries in the cases of black men shot in Ferguson MO and on Staten Island the real debate underneath everything was whether black people are treated justly by our police officers, and what does justice require of our legal system. This week a new video of the way police responded in Cleveland to a child with a toy gun and how they treated him after they shot him in the stomach, raises questions of justice again. People are asking whether there are subtle but powerful patterns of injustice that run along racial lines in our nation.

First of all I want to be clear that if we did not cherish a fundamental faith in our justice system, no one would care, and cynicism would rise like swamp water around us. But this turmoil –riots and demonstrations all fall and into the holidays – is oddly a healthy sign that we still believe we need to get things right so that this land is truly a place that lives up to our expectations of liberty and justice for all.

As a church we take this topic so seriously that we are hoping to start a church-wide conversation about justice which will extend beyond the month of January. I have been working with Heike this week as she begins to put together a speaker series for the winter and spring.

But today I want to begin this conversation where we start all our important conversations, with the Bible. The Bible is all about justice and the Bible was the most influential document for most early settlers, many founding fathers, and our most revered national reformers, from Susan B Anthony and William Jennings Bryant to Martin Luther King.

The Bible is a book of stories about how Hebrews slaves escaped and then became a covenant community that learned to shape a life based on principles of justice. Indeed God gave The Ten Commandments to Moses to show the Hebrews how to establish fair guidelines for human communities. The foundational story of the Bible – how the Hebrews escaped from unjust slavery – demonstrated God’s hope that all the people of the earth would treat one another justly. Stories of David and Goliath point to the injustice of abuse of power. Stories of how Jesus reached out to the lepers or those in abject poverty raise issues of how we treat all people fairly.

Our story today is a little gem, often overlooked in the Biblical panorama. King Ahab was a good man, but Ahab’s success made him susceptible to temptation. One thing led to another. Let’s take a closer look at this story to see what we can learn about justice today.

In the first place The Bible says that justice requires us to follow the spirit of the law every bit as assiduously as the letter of the law. True justice is more than complying with the rules.

Ahab was a hugely successful king. The first king of Israel mentioned in Assyrian monuments, he mounted armies of 2000 chariots and 10,000 foot soldiers and he did it all 850 years before Jesus lived. But Ahab was also greedy. Owner of a vast estate, he coveted his neighbor’s vineyard for a vegetable garden. He wanted the convenience of having fresh veggies close to his kitchen. But Naboth would not sell because this vineyard had been in his family for generations. It carried generations of meaning and history, so was more valuable to him than just the land. Ahab used his power to pressure Naboth, but when his subject would not relent Ahab manipulated his wife. The great general moped around the palace and then took to his bed. He

refused to eat and becomes so depressed that his wife finally decided to intervene and fix things. She took charge of the situation. She set up Naboth to be killed. She found people who would testify falsely. It is all a lie, but Naboth was executed and they took his land. Queen Jezebel found a way to get what she wanted. She followed all the rules, but justice is about what is true. The spirit of the law needs to comply with the letter of it.

The Bible is full of stories about abuse of power. They are there to remind us that from time to time we are all tempted to use our power to be greedy or to over reach. We might even be able to get what we want and find rules that allow us to. But justice is never about finding loopholes; it is about a set of principles that hold us all accountable to principles of fairness. To be a just person you need to reflect on your life as honestly as you can.

Three years ago I was called to serve on a jury in Roxbury. A young man of color was accused of accosting an officer. I listened quietly to the evidence and then thought about what was at stake. It was a dubious honor to be one of the older people in that jury deliberation. I discovered that some of the other jurors were anxious to get this over with. They thought jury duty was an inconvenience, and the guy must have done something or we wouldn't all be here. It was a hard slog. Over and over again, I tried to quietly explain that the prosecutor needed to prove this young man's guilt beyond a shadow of a doubt. It still bothers me that I may have done less than could have done. Those of us with privilege need to be worried about justice. In our story Ahab had blood on his hands. So did everyone who stood by and failed to stop the injustice.

In the second place injustice hinges on the stories we tell ourselves.... Ahab told himself he needed a garden and this man's vineyard was in the way. Jezebel, his wife told herself she needed to get involved because her husband was unhappy, and she needed to fix this situation. The liars in their kingdom told themselves that they were following orders. The judges told themselves that the rules were all followed, and the king wanted the land. Everyone had a story that worked for them. But still justice was not served.

Dan Ariely is a professor of psychology and behavioral economics at Duke who has written a book entitled Predictably Irrational; it is a book on cheating. I heard him speak at Chautauqua several summers ago. What he said fascinated me. He said, "Cheating has nothing to do with morality, nothing to do with the probability of being caught. It is not about how much money is to be gained either. But it has to do with your

rationalization. We all think of ourselves as good people who cheat from time to time. Creative people cheat or lie by making creative rationalizations. Peers affect cheating, because we take our cues from the people we admire and identify with.”

Ariely told this story. Johnny stole a pencil from the student next to him. He got caught and in a lot of trouble. His father heard about the incident and had a stern talk with his son. “You are grounded for 2 weeks,” his father said. “ You have humiliated all of us. Besides, if you needed a pencil just tell me and I will get a dozen from the office.” What a slippery slope life can be, sometimes. The Bible says that we need to pay attention to the stories we tell ourselves. Are we rationalizing our behavior? Are we justifying things we won’t be proud of one day? Are we just being greedy? Are we finding ways to justify a lie? Justice hinges on the story you tell.

Finally, God has a vision for happiness. The Ten Commandments were not designed to box us in but to create rules that would set enough rules and guidelines to create a social safety net. When all people experience justice, then we all feel safe. That is why Jesus was so compelling and charismatic. He reached out to the least and reminded people that the world does not need to be a snake pit. Just as families are all happier when the little ones stop crying, we all feel better in a world where things are fair.

Today’s unrest and indignation about racial injustice comes from our fear that no one is really safe or happy in a land where black people are frequently murdered. This is what has ripped open the scars left from centuries of racial tension in our land. Young adults are demonstrating and older folks are wondering if things are really right in America. But I believe those hard nagging questions will be the making of us. It will be tempting to rationalize something easier than the truth. But that has never been the path to greatness in our country. Out of the cauldron of this conversation I think something good will emerge. Perhaps we will listen.

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann was interviewed during the racial unrest in Ferguson and he said, “We are all situated sociologically and economically...I can’t ever put myself in the place of an African American or a Native American, but I can learn and I can be in touch with the reality of injustice all around me. I can speak about it and I can be instructed by people who are closer to injustice than I am. We are all in the process of being educated.” In our lives we so want everything to be “nice” that we have to work toward being honest about injustice. Micah says that God does not want to hear a lot of platitudes or promises. God expects us to

act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God. God does not care about our big gestures or good intentions. God see it all and cares most about integrity. God wants justice to roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.