

The Prophet's Path to Justice

Isaiah 42: 1-9

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The Congregational Church of Needham

When people hear the word justice, I think that their thoughts go in all kinds of directions in terms of what it is and what it should look like. One might think that here at our church, we might all together have the same understanding of what justice is and how it manifests itself in our lives, town, church, workplace, schools, nation, and the world. But that probably is not the case. We all have our particular ideas about justice.

My guess is that for the majority of people, justice is a very personal matter. It is all about the 'me' – how I am being treated, what I am getting for the work I am doing or the years I have been putting in. For many, justice is simply a matter of being treated fairly. Kids have, or they think they have, a great sense of what is fair and what is not. Parents have great practice in navigating the perceived unfairness in their child's life (which often happens when boundaries need to be set), and their child's response is: "It's not fair!" The answer all too often has to be: "Well, life is not always fair!"

Adults come to that very same conclusion when life deals us a heavy blow – incurable cancer diagnosis, death of a child or spouse, loss of a job after 20 years of dedicated service – life is not fair; justice is far from being done to us.

For others, it is only worth really talking about justice when it relates to people and issues that we should be concerned about. This is known as distributive justice or social justice. Social justice means different things/issues to different people.

If you ever want to have an interesting conversation at your next dinner party, or if you are interested in doing something different than playing Twister or Charades, ask your guests the question: Can you define the term social justice? It might be the last dinner party you ever give, but I promise you the answers are as varied as your guests. Social justice means different things to different people: universal health care, child welfare, gay rights, equal access to education, women's rights, fairness in the work place, right to housing, income inequality, paid sick leave, racial inequality. The list of social justice issues is huge and it actually is a very complicated issue.

But at its heart, social justice is about pursuing a society that is fair and just for everyone. It is about equality amongst everyone in society. Social justice applies to all aspects of a person's life and is closely related to human rights. Everyone has the right to be treated fairly. Social justice is seeking fairness for everyone despite their gender, sexuality, religion, age, political affiliation, disability, social class, or any other discriminatory factor. If you look at your bulletin – our Covenant and our Statement of Welcome, they are our statements of our commitment of pursuing social justice.

Then there are others whose heart is given to environmental justice – a term that emerged in the early 1980's. The term has two distinct uses: it describes a social movement that seeks to pursue a fair distribution of environmental benefits and burdens, and it defines the "the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, sex, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies." (EPA's definition, Wikipedia)

Proponents of environmental justice generally view the environment as encompassing "where we live, work, and play" (some definitions also include 'pray' and 'learn') and seek to redress inequitable distributions of environmental burdens (such as pollution, industrial facilities, and crime).

Some people might think of justice in terms of criminal justice – that those who do harm in any way should be punished. They are interested in a system that fairly administered punishments regardless of race, color, sex, national origin, income, political persuasions.

Another kind of justice is restorative justice - an approach to justice that focuses on the needs of the victims and the offenders, as well as the involved community, instead of satisfying abstract legal principles or punishing the offender. Victims take an active role in the process, while offenders are encouraged to take responsibility for their actions. South Africa, after the end of apartheid, has become a champion and a teacher about restorative justice.

I think you get the point that justice means many things and many different things to different people. And it is hard to have a decent conversation about justice because it is so embedded in the political "who we are, what we believe in and what we think is right."

As people of faith we cannot get away from it. Our story of faith is deeply embedded in the matter of justice, but justice does not start with us. It starts with God and what God had done for us. Justice, in the end, is about love.

Let's see what the prophet Isaiah has to say to us about justice. In ancient times, prophets were the ones you'd rather see leave your town. Most prophets would bring disturbing news, if not bad news. But in this passage, the

prophet Isaiah brings upliftingly good news. Before we take a closer look at Isaiah's message, I want to give you some back story. God delivered God's people from bondage in Egypt, made a covenant with them, and brought them through wilderness into the land of Canaan. They became a nation and built a temple, the only place they saw fit to worship their God. For centuries they saw military victories and defeats under kings and generals. On occasion, they strayed from God's covenant but prophets called them back. Then, in the sixth century BCE, the unthinkable happened.

The Babylonians defeated Israel. They destroyed the temple, plundered Israel's treasure and livelihoods, took them into bondage, and marched them back to the gates of Babylon in chains. The Babylonian victory over Israel was absolute. This was complete and utter devastation of the political, social, economic and religious life God's people had known for centuries. Israel ceased to exist. Everything was gone.

In so many ways, it is really hard for us to imagine what it was like or left like. None of us has ever been close to this kind of devastation. And what made all of this so much worse was that God did not intervene. I am sure they asked very hard questions of God: Where are you? How can you let this happen? Why, God, have you abandon us? In exile they could only conclude that God had withdrawn favor and allowed the Babylonians to punish them for their sins and disobedience.

Into this crisis Isaiah speaks his words. Help is on the way. Hope is on the way. Love is on the way.

He says: "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights" (Isaiah 42:1). "I have put my spirit upon him' (v. 1) ... He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching" (v. 4).

The servant of God will be known for his justice and his teachings. The Hebrew words for these are *Mishpat* and *torah*. The prophet Isaiah is announcing that God's servant is bringing justice and teaching right into the middle of all the chaos and confusion of day-to-day human life.

Only the question is: "Who *is* this servant of the Lord? Even though Isaiah never says it, the vast opinions in academic research say that Israel, God's people, is God's servant. God is reminding them that they are the Lord's chosen people, with a mission of sharing God's teachings with the world and establishing justice on the earth. "I have given you as a covenant to the people," says God through the prophet, "a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind" (vv. 6-7).

Israel indeed became a light to the nations, and opened the eyes of the people around the world to the teachings and justice of God. Without Israel we never would have been introduced to the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel. But the story did not end there. It is through the same God and God's covenant

that we've gotten to know God's Son Jesus. But the story did not seem to end there either. God continuously has sent servants and prophets into our world to show us the way, to teach us the ways of God's love, hope, and justice.

Tomorrow we are remembering one of God's great servants and prophets: The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King is known to us as a civil rights leader, and indeed he may have been the most important and distinguished civil rights leader of our time, but more importantly, he was a man of faith, a prophet, and a servant. It was his faith in the living God that moved him forward, and it was his faith in the Promised Land that gave him the vision, strength, and courage never to turn back, always to keep moving forward in the face of bigotry, legalized racism, imprisonments, violence, and ultimately death.

Dr. King was a prophet in the deepest sense of the word, a visionary who could see the world not through human eyes, but through the very eyes of God. Dr. King was a prophet who continued the legacy of a journey that started with the first step of Abraham, as he left his kin and homeland behind to embark on a journey to a Promised Land that has yet to be fully realized.

This is still our common journey inspired by a vision where love and justice prevail, where the pettiness of our divisiveness should be a thing of the past, and where the dream of one humanity should be enveloped in the beauty of diversity. This is the dream not just of one man or one movement in time but it is God's dream for all of humanity.

Dr. King leaves us with an inspired vision. His last sermon before he was assassinated is the testament of a man who had become a prophet, a man who could see things in the fullness of all its potential, and in the fullness of what God had intended from the beginning when God began creating the world.

In his final sermon, delivered on the eve of his assassination at the Bishop Charles Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 3rd, 1968, Dr. King concluded his sermon with these words:

"Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the Promised Land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

It is reported that after Dr. King concludes his sermon, he returns to his chair, he sits down, and you can tell by the gaze in his eyes that he has seen something most of us have yet to see, God's reign fully realized, the Promised Land in all its glory. This is the legacy of Dr. King.

Bringing forth justice and being a light to the nations are not just the responsibility of Israel, or Jesus, or Dr. King. It is now our task as people of faith. It is up to us to bring *mishpat* – justice – into our time and place.

The hymn we are going to sing at the end of our worship service was not a familiar one to me prior to coming to the US. But I fell in love with it the first time I sang it. We sang it at the opening worship for the 1990 academic year at BTS.

*Lift every voice and sing till earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of liberty.
Let our rejoicing rise high as the listening skies;
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.*

I had no idea that this hymn was once (and still do) considered the Black National Anthem. To me it was one of the most beautiful hymns I had ever heard.

*God of our weary years, God of our silent tears,
God who has brought us thus far on the way;
God who by your might led us into the light;
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.*

These are not black words, nor are they white words. They are Christian words — words of faith in a God who can guide us, protect us and lead us into the bright light of freedom, equality and justice. Amen.