

Perseverance: In Restorative Action

Galatians 6:9-10

Amos 5:24

Isaiah 42:1-4

Micah 6:8

Our series these past few weeks: perseverance—in mind and heart, perseverance in hope, perseverance in prayer. The pandemic, social transition and turmoil (which includes racial struggles and political rancor), and the possibility of covid19 making a resurgence this fall which will require continued physical distancing, we need to persevere. We need the Holy Spirit's help to keep us encouraged and strengthened, and to keep us thriving and moving forward in faith and trust. And, in action. And that's our theme this morning: being people who persevere in doing good; in restorative action.

And I'm approaching that theme this morning by talking about justice. Justice *and* mercy, and how to act in *restorative* ways as God's people—because true justice is restorative; mercy is restorative—for everyone. One of my goals this morning is to enlarge our understanding of the meaning of justice, Biblically, and see how much God's heart is a heart of justice. And, how much it is expected of God's people to be people of justice and mercy, even when the going gets tough. We have a few short verses this morning for our reflection:

Our theme text from **Hebrews 12** says, “Let us run *with perseverance* the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.”

Galatians 6:9-10: “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to *all people*.”

Amos 5:24 (perhaps one of the most famous passages in the prophets of the Old Testament): The entire book of Amos, if you can get through it—Amos is a salty prophet; he minces no words and pulls no punches as he speaks on God’s behalf—the entire book is basically about the peoples’ neglect of the poor, and their self-satisfied accumulation of wealth at the *expense* of the poor, and God’s calling them out about their fancy but empty worship, because of their callousness and perpetuating of injustice. God says through Amos:

“But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

Isaiah 42:1-4: (a text we traditionally read during Lent, or Holy Week, as it points to Jesus Christ, the suffering servant): “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth *justice* to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth *justice*. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established *justice* in the earth.” Jesus perseveres in justice!

The Scripture I want to focus on this morning is **Micah 6:8**. Like in Amos, there is a criticism of the people’s worship and sacrifices, while they continue to ignore the needs of the poor and marginalized, and God tells them what real worship is, and real sacrifice, with these words:

“He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you?
but to do justice, and to love mercy,
and to walk humbly with your God?”

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

Well, obviously here are some Scriptures that reveal how central justice is in the Bible, and how close it is to God's heart. Because the poor and disenfranchised are so close to God's heart. So much so, that Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor." And, "Blessed are the merciful" (those who enact justice and live restoratively).

Justice, unfortunately, has become a troublesome word. It's been politicized, polarized, seen by some to represent an agenda that certain other people have, to the exclusion of the gospel. But friends, it's a gospel word; it's Biblical word. It's one of the Bible-est Bible words there is. But it has fallen out of use, or it's been misunderstood and misrepresented. And there is some history as to why this has happened.

In the early 1900's, many white Protestant churches split over a "social justice or the gospel" controversy, mostly due to a reaction to the social gospel movement—a movement characterized by efforts to help the poor, work toward racial reconciliation (even 100 years ago), and create just systems in society. Which ironically came out of the last Great Awakening in America in 1904-5. Social justice was a huge aspect and outgrowth of this revival. As it is in all revivals. Social justice has *always* been part of any revival of Spirit.

But unfortunately, some pastors and church folks didn't like this, so they forced the question "Will you choose the gospel or justice?" because social justice didn't look and sound like the gospel they knew—personal salvation and conversion. And 100 years later that question still lingers. But that is a question that the Bible and God never ask, and never separate. The God who brings us salvation also reigns in justice and mercy. It's a false dichotomy to say "justice *or* gospel." They are not mutually exclusive! Book: *The Hole in the Gospel* by Richard Stearns (President of World Vision). The hole in our gospel is justice.

It's a bummer and a tragedy that the 'gospel or justice' legacy continues today. Because of a century of teaching that social justice is anti-Biblical or "liberal," instead of being taught the biblical foundations of it, many Christians reject the idea and practice of justice, out of a genuine desire to follow Christ and share the gospel with others. But justice is gospel! A *big* part of it.

Another reason for the church's misunderstanding of justice is because in western culture we have a limited understanding of what justice is and means. In our western mind, it has mainly to do with laws and courts and civil authorities, and justice is administered there, primarily. In addition to that, the Western concept of justice brings to mind judgment, and punishment. "We want justice"

for most Americans means, “He’s gonna get what’s coming to him; he deserves it.” And that has leaked into our theology and our understanding of who God is and what God does.

That’s a *retributive* understanding of justice. Which has to do with vengeance and punishment. The Bible defines and exhibits justice, not as retributive, but as *restorative*. So the dichotomy I want us to think about is not justice vs. gospel, but *retributive* justice vs. *restorative* justice. The latter being the Biblical form of justice.

In the Bible, justice means fairness, equality, equity, understanding and then acting on the truth that all people have equal worth, are equally valued as God’s children who are made in God’s image, and therefore are equally deserving of everything that life has to offer. It’s more than what happens in a court of law. That’s important, but it’s only part.

And justice, biblically speaking, is something that *all God’s people* are called to exercise in their daily life and interactions with others. The work of justice is not something that is simply left to the courts of the land. Justice, as exercised in the way of Jesus by you and me, sees a person as a person no matter who they are or what their condition is, and seeks to understand their story (that’s the

'mercy' part of it) and gives people what they *need*, and not just what they deserve.

Jean Kim celebration: woman from Mary's Place (church of Mary Magdalene): "Jean told us (women) that we had worth, and she helped restore our dignity, and told us that we have a place in society and that we deserve to be here." Isn't this gospel? This is true for women and men, whether they have been drug addicts, committed a crime, or are homeless and on the fringes of society. Jean's ministry has always been characterized by a *restorative* justice and mercy.

This was Jesus' approach to people. Jesus never took a "law and order" approach to persons, or to society. In fact, the only people that Jesus took a law and order approach with were the religious people of his day. Because they, like the people of old that the prophets spoke to, had perpetuated systems which marginalized vulnerable populations and took advantage of people.

Listen to one of Jesus' salty conversations, in the spirit of Amos and Micah (from Matt.23): "*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, yet have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith.*" He practically quotes Micah 6:8. And it must be noted: Jesus'

understanding of the “weightier matters of the law” did not have anything to do with heroic obedience to statutes, but justice, mercy and faith. Those are the weightier, substantive, matters of the law, because they are what the law points to. They are the heart of the law, and any laws. Justice, mercy, trust in God.

Parenthetically, in last week’s parable and sermon on persevering in prayer, from Luke 18, the woman who pestered the judge received *justice*, Jesus says. She was being treated unfairly; she was a marginalized person in that society (widow) being taken advantage of by the authorities. And Jesus describes the lesson this way: “Will not God grant *justice* to those who cry out to him day and night? I tell you, he will grant *justice* to them.” Jesus puts persevering prayer in the context of a cry for justice, and God making things right.

Right now, in thinking about persevering in doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God, I’d like us to reflect on all this for a moment in terms of *racial justice*—mercy and restorative justice for those who have suffered because of systemic racial injustice. And humbly looking at ourselves and the part we can play in living restoratively in light of this, in today’s society.

If you don't like the word justice, and doing justice, then think of it this way: of living restoratively. I really like that because it is descriptive how we can live—as people who are restorers in Christ. I'll introduce this with a story...

Friends on Whidbey Island: live in a house on a small bluff on the west side of the island overlooking a vast part of Puget Sound. Had been noticing a bad smell in their house. They were able to air it out, use fresheners, etc, until after going on a short vacation they came home and discovered it had turned into a major stink, rancid and nauseating. It had gotten into the carpet, into the curtains, into their clothes, and into the furniture. And they called an environmental services company, the fire department, even the police (is there a dead body somewhere?). While this was going on, a fellow church member who happened to be a marine biologist heard about it and said, you probably have a dead animal somewhere under your house. He came over and did some investigating and found a live sea otter, that, one night, made its way up the beach and across their front lawn and burrowed underneath their house, built a nest and gave birth to two babies. That was kind of exciting, but it took them quite a while to get the stink out of their house and furnishings.

Racism got into our society like that, perhaps without our awareness of it. It's gotten into our justice system, it's gotten into our housing system (for example, through *redlining*; if you don't know what redlining is, please go and learn about it; it began less than 100 years ago and even though it was later outlawed, technically, in the 1970's, it is still practiced in an evolved form), it's gotten into our financial institutions and economy, it's gotten into school systems, it's gotten into government, and yes, it's gotten into the church.

Some would say that racism didn't just get into the church, racism was brought to America *by* the church, and the church was complicit in embedding racism into societal DNA. Book: *The Color of Compromise*. Preachers used the Bible, from Genesis to the apostle Paul, to justify the inferiority of people of color (or the *superiority* of white people) and to justify slavery; Christians held to the belief that "all men are created equal" did not apply to people of color; churches banned blacks from their worship, and so forth.

Some people have called racism America's original sin. Condoleezza Rice (former Secretary of State, National Security Advisor) gave a speech 3 years ago in which she said, "America was born with a birth defect: slavery and racism. We're crippled, and we need healing."

This may sound overwhelming, over the top, and you may think “that was a long time ago; we’re past that,” but racism lingers in our society and our institutions and we can’t begin to overcome racism until we work to understand its roots, and the source of it. Racism is not just the terrible acts perpetrated by a few racist people. Racist people act the way they do because they feel emboldened and empowered by systems that support them, or at the least don’t act in restorative ways to create a more just society.

Just like racism got infused into society, it’s time for justice and mercy and humility to get infused into society. It’s time for renewed and sustained effort and energy and risk and struggle to ensure that justice is infused into society; that mercy has the last word; that humility—the willingness to look honestly at our own lives and see that we are no better or worse than anyone else—that humility becomes a signature quality of the people of our society. And it begins with God’s people. We have a clear and unequivocal call to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God today, in our social context.

How do we do this? I’m going to read you a few sentences from a book titled *Just Mercy*, which gives us a great example, and then conclude by providing some simple ways we can live restoratively.

Bryan Stevenson, the author of *Just Mercy*, is a civil lawyer, social justice activist, and founder of the Equal Justice Initiative and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama—which is a memorial to lynching victims; our son Ben and I visited there when I went to see him two years ago.

In his book *Just Mercy: A Story of Redemption and Justice*, he makes the case that it is distance—physical, social, and spiritual—that allows injustice to flourish. Proximity to one’s neighbor—and remember, everyone is our neighbor according to Jesus—proximity is what turns our hearts towards love and restorative justice. Stevenson writes about his first interaction with an inmate named Henry on death row, who was wrongly convicted and sentenced. Here were two men, exactly the same age, one studying at Harvard Law School, one condemned to die.

(From pp.10, 12, 17-18): “Henry asked me questions about myself, and I asked him about his life. Within an hour we were both lost in conversation... I had no right to expect anything from a condemned man on death row. Yet he gave me an astonishing measure of his humanity. In that moment, Henry altered something in my understanding of human potential, redemption, and

hopefulness... Proximity to the condemned and incarcerated made the question of each person's humanity more urgent and meaningful, including my own...

I've also represented people who have committed terrible crimes but nonetheless struggle to recover and to find redemption. I have discovered, deep in the hearts of many condemned and incarcerated people, the scattered traces of hope and humanity—seeds of restoration that come to astonishing life when nurtured by very simple interventions.

Proximity has taught me some basic and humbling truths, including this vital lesson: *Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done.* My work with the poor and the incarcerated has persuaded me that the opposite of poverty is not wealth; the opposite of poverty is justice. Finally, I've come to believe that the true measure of our commitment to justice, the character of our society, our commitment to the rule of law, fairness, and equality cannot be measured by how we treat the rich, the powerful, the privileged, and the respected among us. The true measure of our character (as a society) is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned.

We are all implicated when we allow other people to be mistreated. An absence of compassion can corrupt the decency of a community, a state, a nation. Fear and anger can make us vindictive and abusive, unjust and unfair, until we all suffer from the absence of mercy and we condemn ourselves as much as we victimize others. The closer we get to mass incarceration and extreme levels of punishment, the more I believe it's necessary to recognize that we all need mercy, we all need justice, and we all need some measure of unmerited grace.”

Is that not gospel?!? This sounds like Jesus to me! Preach it!

What did you hear in this? What I heard, among other things, is: justice is about relationship. Mercy is about relationship. Proximity. Nearness to someone to hear and understand their story, for the sake of mercy and restorative justice and understanding our common humanity. Now, literal proximity isn't fully possible these days with covid19 and physical distancing, but proximity for now can take place with things like phone calls, letters, video chats, and even simply reading and learning; there are so many good books out there to read right now. Like our OPOP team is doing with Dan Anderson (more in the coming weeks about that; stay tuned!).

When done right, justice is mercy, mercy is justice. And humility requires us to leave any judgment to God, and to reflect on our own lives and our part in acting restoratively. It requires us to be in proximity to people and see that we are not all that different from each other.

Justice is restorative. As the apostle Paul says, let us not grow weary in doing good to all.

10 ways to live restoratively. I have included it at the end of my sermon notes, and it'll be on our web site as a separate document.

Ten Ways to Live Restoratively

1. Take relationships seriously, envisioning yourself in an interconnected web of people, institutions, and the environment.
2. Try to be aware of the impact—potential as well as actual—of your actions on others and the environment.
3. When your actions negatively impact others, take responsibility by acknowledging and seeking to repair the harm—even when you could probably get away with avoiding or denying it.
4. Treat everyone respectfully, even those you don't expect to encounter again, even those you feel don't deserve it, even those who have harmed or offended you or others.

5. Involve those affected by a decision, as much as possible, in the decision-making process. A similar principle is, avoid paternalism: doing for others what they can do for themselves. It disempowers them.
6. View the conflicts in your life as opportunities. Not opportunities to show others how wrong they are, but opportunities to learn and grow and expand your understanding. Learn to live by the phrase, "I'm here to get it right, not be right."
7. Listen, deeply and compassionately, to others, seeking to understand even if you don't agree with them. Think about who you want to be in the latter situation rather than just being right.
8. Engage in dialogue with others, even when what is being said is difficult, remaining open to learning from them and the encounter.
9. Be cautious about imposing your views on other people and situations. Let your sentences end more often with question marks than exclamation points. Be curious.
10. Sensitively confront everyday injustices like sexism, racism, classism and other systemic "—isms."

From Howard Zehr, *The Little Book of Restorative Justice*