

## **“Refining Fire”**

First Congregational United Church of Christ

Gaylord, Michigan

Sunday, July 25, 2021

Texts: John 14: 15-18,25-27; 15:26-27; 16:33 and 1 Corinthians 3: 9-15

“With liberty and justice for all.” That is not a new phrase for any of us.

There is no question that we strive for liberty and justice for all, but when it comes to justice, it’s often a certain kind of justice. It is called *retributive justice* and that kind of justice seeks retribution, or punishment, for crimes and injustices committed against another. We all need justice, sometimes as victims and other times as perpetrators. We desire a system that is fair, and often believe that justice is blind or that it is supposed to be. All of these are lofty goals, but often our retributive justice system does nothing more than create an incarcerated nation, a divided people, and a whole lot of pain. Wouldn’t it be great if there was another way? Knowing we all need justice, could there be a better kind of justice? A kind of justice that did more good? A kind of justice where people and societies “seek to restore the dignity and relationships of all involved?”

To have such a system, Fania Davis reminds us, “[Is] about returning to the part of us that really wants to be connected to one another in a good way.

Returning to the goodness inherent in all of us.” I am not quite sure that most

people believe that we can be connected to one another in a good way anymore. Instead, we spend our time looking for the differences among us, justifying ourselves being right and another being wrong. Even watching our response to Covid-19 seems to indicate, sadly, that even when it comes to health it's all about one's own health and little concern for the health of others. Certainly, there are exceptions, but it appears that more and more that many among us don't really care about what happens to someone else. Instead, we just look out for ourselves.

Further, we have experienced poor theology, both within and outside the church, that has led "most people to view God as a sometimes benevolent Santa Claus or as an unforgiving tyrant who is going to burn us in hell for all eternity if we don't love him" (Richard Rohr, *Retributive Justice and Restorative Justice*, Daily Meditations, Center for Action and Contemplation, Tuesday, January 26, 2016). According to Fr. Richard Rohr, psychologically, humans tend to operate out of a worldview of fear and scarcity rather than trust and abundance. "This stingy, calculating worldview makes both grace and mercy unimaginable and difficult to experience." In other words, we place our system of retributive justice at the feet of God, implying that God operates the same way and therefore we are justified in acting the same way.

Rohr continues: [Retributive justice] does hold civil society together. I certainly recognize many early passages in the Bible that present God as punitive and retributive, but you must stay with the text – and observe how we gradually let God grow up. God does not change, but our knowledge of God surely evolves. Mere divine retribution leads to an ego-satisfying and eventually unworkable image of God which situates us inside of a very unsafe and dangerous universe. Both Jesus and Paul observed the human tendency toward retribution and spoke strongly about the limitations of the law (Rohr, see reference above).

Instead, the biblical notion of justice, beginning the Hebrew Scriptures (or Old Testament) with the Jewish prophets – especially Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Hosea – is quite different. “If we read carefully and honestly”, says Rohr, “we will see that God’s justice is *restorative*.” So, what is *restorative* justice?

“The aim of restorative justice is to return the person to a useful position in the community” (Rohr, *Daily Meditations*, Tuesday, June 12, 2018). “What humanity needs is an honest exposure of the truth and accountability for what happened. Hurt needs to be spoken and heard...which is what the prophets [of our Hebrew Bible] invariably promise the people of Israel (e.g., Ezekiel 16:53;

Isaiah 57: 17-19) and exemplified in Jesus' story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15: 11-32) and throughout his healing ministry. We lose that and we lose the Gospel itself (Rohr, June 12, 2018)." Author Howard Zehr, a long-time advocate, teacher, and practitioner of restorative justice, centers the needs of the victims. He writes:

Restorative justice requires, at a minimum, that we address the harms and needs of those harmed, hold those causing harm accountable to "put right" those harms, and involve both of these parties as well as relevant communities in this process. (Howard Zehr, *The Little Book of Restorative Justice: Revised and Updated* (Good Books, 2015), 35. Quoted in Richard Rohr, Sept. 8, 2020, *Daily Meditations*).

He continues:

- Crime or wrongdoing is a violation of people and of interpersonal relationships.
- Violations create obligations.
- The central obligation is to put right the wrongs, [that is], to repair the harms done by the wrongdoing.

But all of this depends on us living in a society that believes we are all interconnected. You can find this in the Hebrew Bible concept of Shalom, the Maori culture *whakapapa*, the Navajo Nation, *hozo*, many Africans, the Bantu word *ubuntu*, for Tibetan Buddhists, *tendrel*. "Although specific meanings of the words vary, they communicate a similar message: all things are connected to each other in a web of relationships... (Rohr, Sept 8, 2020)."



To sum it all up, I do believe that our concept of justice the system by which we find justice needs to be improved (to say the least), but before any of that can really happen, we need to believe, and live, as those who are interconnected. What happens to another affects me, and vice versa. We know we will wrong one another, both as individuals and as groups or nations, but until we develop a system where relationships are healed, I do believe that we will continue to seek retribution which only seems to divide us and harm us more.

Brian McLaren in his book we've been studying says it this way:

The word in the Bible for putting things right is *judgment*. Unfortunately, many today, drawing from the concept of a judge in today's court system, understand *judgment* to mean nothing more than condemnation and punishment. In contrast, in biblical times, good judges did more than condemn or punish. They worked to set things right, to restore balance, harmony, and well-being. Their justice was restorative, not just punitive. The final goal of judgment was to curtail or convert all that was evil so that good would be free to run wild.

It's obvious to everyone that this kind of justice doesn't always happen in a satisfying way in this life.

But what if it did? What if it could? What if we practiced restorative justice here in this place and among one another? How can healing happen when a wrong occurs? How can relationships be restored? What difference does it make? Could our justice system need reform? Could our own individual justice system be

reformed? Is there any other way to operate than retribution for a wrong that has been committed against us? It would be so much harder than just "getting 'em back", but would our society benefit? Would we, even when we're the victim? Is there another way?

I believe in many cases there is. Judgment is necessary, but retaliation, not always, not for those who look to Jesus as the model for our faith community. It's all hard work, this being faithful thing, but we become more faithful each time we recognize we do have choices. We can choose something other than what is around us. We can live differently. And when we do, I believe we'll all find more freedom and more justice, and most of all, more hope.

In the many blessed names of God, Amen.