

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for October 17, 2010
Lessons: Jeremiah 31:27-34 and Luke 18:1-8

NOT LOSING HEART

The God of Israel, the prophets, and Jesus is a God of justice, but God's idea of justice differs from ours radically. We tend to think justice would be done if everyone got what he or she deserved. For God, that kind of justice would be a complete disaster because God loves us and so has far better in mind for us than what we deserve. God wants a much better outcome for the world than rewards and punishments. For God, justice requires straightening out what has been distorted by greed and cruelty, mending the broken, strengthening the weak, healing the wounded and sick, lifting up the poor and crushed down, and opening new paths to freedom and wholeness.

We know that peace without justice is a sham, a fraud tyranny maintains through fear. Do we realize, also, that justice without peace is not really justice at all? Biblically, peace (shalom) is wholeness, health, harmony, and well-being, not only the cessation of warfare, the silencing of the guns. How then could assigning blame and imposing punishment possibly amount to justice when no one is healed, no wrong gets set right, and nothing of wholeness, harmony, and well-being is gained? Justice and peace require each other.

God's justice fixes what has gone wrong, restoring rather than merely punishing, and the biblical term for restoration to family and community is *redemption*. The concept of redemption comes from interventions that make a family or community whole again by bringing back those who have been taken away or have taken themselves away. Redemptive interventions can be painful, but their purpose to heal and restore, rather than humiliate and further estrange.

We human beings hold the odd notion that punishment by itself sets things right. How? It is true that redemptive justice recognizes consequences for harmful choices and hurtful actions, but we have prisons crammed with people being punished and humiliated but not set right with society, with those they have hurt, or with themselves. Redemptive justice is relational. It's a matter of people. It seeks to heal the victims, the community, and the wrongdoer. It does not let the wrongdoer off as though the damage done did not matter. It's not a coverup that heals no one but serves only to encourage further wrongs. Redemptive justice is hard because it requires changes of mind and heart as well as changes in behavior and perhaps in the very structures of society.

As we look into Jesus' parable and bring to it our own questions about God's justice and compassion in a world constantly plaguing itself with misery, please keep in mind that God is not satisfied with rewards and punishments. They do not add up to justice and wholeness. Giving us all what we deserve might be an easier task for God than redeeming us, but it's accomplishment would be an unbearable disappointment to God, amounting to the destruction of all God's hopes and dreams for the world God created and loves.

As in some of his other parables, Jesus uses the argument from lesser to greater – in this case, from less likely to much more likely. An unjust judge who regards neither God nor people seems unlikely to provide justice for a poor widow who offers him no benefit. Why should he bother to grant her request? He doesn't care. Humorously, Jesus paints a picture of a callous man in power being pestered ceaselessly by this widow who just won't give up and go away. She's like a mosquito that waits near his bed every night to buzz in his ear.

In the end, though he cares nothing for her as a person, he gives in to her request just to be rid of her. If we agree that such persistence might pay off even with someone who couldn't care less about us, why do we not persist in going to the God who loves us and desires justice and wholeness for us? So, don't lose heart, and don't give up on God because God will not give up on you.

I raise a hard question in response, because we think these hard questions about our faith more often than we voice them, but they need to be asked, not silenced. Why must we persist in praying for justice and compassion when God already knows what we need, loves justice, and cares for us more than we can even imagine? Why is it necessary to pester God?

The standard Christian answer has been that God knows more than we do and sees much more clearly what we truly need and how our needs fit into the larger plan for the world's salvation. Fine. I realize God knows more than I do and understands me much better than I understand myself. I know also that life is not all about me, but my life is the only one I have to live. All the standard answer tells me is to keep quiet and not ask questions. Just accept what happens as *God's will*. Jesus refused to do that which, I believe, gives us not only permission but also responsibility not to accept whatever comes in life as God's will. By teaching us to pray that God's will might be done on earth, Jesus has declared that much of what is being done on earth is not in accordance with God's will and purpose at all. Still, the hard question remains unanswered. Why do we have to persuade God to justice and compassion?

Let me put the question into the context of redemption. God is not fine-tuning a system but raising children – daughters and sons – to respond to God's love and mercy by loving God back and putting that love into compassion for each other. God's will for my life

cannot be done until God's love and mercy are in my mind and heart. Life is not about my gains and losses, my credits and debits, my achievements, my comfort, or my pleasure. Jesus does not come to grant all my wishes or shower me with blessings; he comes to me to put God's will and purpose into my soul, which can happen only as I am changed by learning to share God's love and compassion for this world and its people.

I become redeemed as I begin to participate in the work of redemption. That's how my life fits into the greater purpose of God's will: not by playing my role as a pawn or puppet in a grand scheme, but by knowing God well enough to want what God wants, to be disturbed by what troubles God, and to be rendered thankful by what truly makes God rejoice.

I believe God suffers with us, and further that God sees and feels in all human misery and shame the torture and humiliation of Jesus, God's Son who is united with us in his death and resurrection. Empathy (feeling pain *with* the other person) and the compassion created by empathy are together the power and glory of God. Salvation progresses as our spirits are re-tuned into harmony with God's own Spirit, so that chords struck in God's heart reverberate in our hearts and redirect our lives so that we begin to feel and share the grace God gives us.

Does this concept of redemptive justice answer all the questions about human suffering in the world and all that truly is wrong, unfair, unjust, and oppressive for countless people? Does it tell in definite terms why desperate prayers seem sometimes to go unanswered? No, it does not, nor should it provide definitive answers. It's a starting point, not a finish. Injustices are not to make sense to us, and any grand explanation that makes sense of them is out of step with Jesus Christ. We are not to silence the cries or protests of the cheated with talk of "God's will." Jesus' prayer, "Thy will be done on earth" voices, not resignation to brokenness and misery, but desire for healing and wholeness with commitment to trusting God and playing whatever small parts we may in God's work of redemption.

We need to persist in prayer because we need to become persistent in faith, hope, and harmony with God's love for this world and its people. We need to be that way and keep becoming more and more truly sisters and brothers of Jesus the Christ. The world needs advocates – people who care enough to persist and who know God well enough to believe God will not quit until redemption and healing are complete. As long as we think of prayers as just the coins for a divine vending machine that dispenses blessings, we are not making progress toward justice and peace. Our minds need to be brought into harmony with God's Spirit. God wants us to care as Jesus cares and so to live and serve in accord with the Son of God who gave himself for us, because God so loves the world. Amen.