

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Third Sunday of Easter, May 8, 2011
Lessons: Amos 5:7-13,21-24 and Luke 16:19-31

HOPE FOR JUSTICE

I had already chosen the theme and title for this sermon, “Hope for Justice,” before the killing of the terrorist leader, Osama bin Laden, brought the word “justice” to the forefront of our national conversation. But what are we talking about? What is this thing called justice, and is it only one thing – a goal upon which we all agree – or a variety of things sometimes at odds with each other? People seldom if ever speak out directly against justice, naming it as something they oppose. Even the most blatant perpetrators of injustices claim to be righteous in their actions as Osama bin Laden demonstrated, but he is scarcely alone in claiming justification for acts of cruelty and disregard for human life. The very worst things we humans do aggressively – murder, torture, enslavement, and genocide – all begin with dehumanizing some group of people: they are not like us, they are hateful to the core, they do not deserve respect or compassion, they lack normal human virtues, they are the enemy of all we hold dear, and so on until we feel justified in attacking them or, more passively, ignoring their needs and rights while benefitting from their labors.

First, because it has happened since I chose this theme, let’s look for a moment at the killing of Osama bin Laden. The type of justice claimed for his death is *retributive justice*, meaning the kind that provides *retribution* for the evils he had done and planned to continue doing. It is tempting but not quite fair to equate retributive justice with revenge, which is not justice at all. A greater type of justice, much closer to the heart of God, is that called *restorative*. The prophet Ezekiel draws the contrast for us:

Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord GOD, and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live? . . . I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord GOD. Turn, then, and live. [Ezekiel 18:23,32 (NRSV)]

Osama bin Laden showed no signs of turning but remained steadfastly committed to his murderous goals because he sought what he regarded as righteous revenge. So, what he had done caught up with him, and he was stopped from doing more of the same. There is some measure of relief for the world in his death. There is not cause for jubilation. As his life was grievous to God who created him to be a much better man than he became, so his death adds the final note of tragedy to a life gone horribly wrong. Ezekiel does not say for

God that we should let the murderous continue their murder in hope they will someday turn from their evil. No, justice must protect the victims and call people to account for what they have done, and so in that limited sense justice has been served, but not in the restorative way that brings joy to God. There is some small relief for the world in what was accomplished this past week and some very partial and unsatisfying sense of satisfaction in seeing that murderous evil did not go Scot free. Why do I call such satisfaction unsatisfying? Ask those whose loved ones were killed on September 11, 2001. No life has been restored. No loved one returned. There is nothing of resurrection hope in Osama bin Laden's death.

Let there be no pride in revenge, for the cycles of violence will continue, and revenge is their fuel. Let there be relief and reflection and renewed concern for the victims of human cruelty and all left with empty arms to mourn, but let there be no jubilation over the death of even such a man. Now, let's move on. There is far more to our resurrection hope for justice than the question of Osama bin Laden.

Look at the irony of Jesus' parable. The poor man who begs at the gate while suffering the indignity of having the street dogs lick his sores has a name: he is Lazarus. Jesus gives the rich man no name but presents him as a type, which effects a complete reversal of the norm. In our world, rich people have names, they are known and admired; the poor are the nameless ones. So offensive is this abnormality in the parable that someone in our tradition quickly pasted a name on this rich man, and he became Dives, but Jesus does not bestow any name upon him. Did our tradition hasten so to name any of the beggars Jesus heals in our gospels? No, a beggar needs no name. Neither does a leper, a demoniac (as the mentally ill were labeled), or a woman caught in the act of adultery. For the most part, people are content to leave them as types without personal names. Jesus reverses the norm. God knows Lazarus and every Lazarus in this world. Every beggar, street urchin, prostitute, slave, and addict on earth is known by name to God. Every laborer and migrant worker, every person left alone, every one unemployed or under-employed, each in any way cast out or forgotten is known by name to God and matters to God infinitely. That truth transforms the meaning of justice, giving us great hope in this world and the world to come.

The wealthy, the healthy, the comfortable, and the privileged are tempted to regard justice as a matter of their right to take and keep what they believe they have earned and not to have any thieves, employees, or do-gooders take any of it from them or intrude upon their gated world. The rich man in Jesus' parable is content as long as Lazarus and all his kind stay outside the gate. God is not content with that arrangement.

For the prophets and Jesus, justice is active and sometimes downright aggressive. It feeds the hungry, cares for widow and orphan, clothes the ragged, and houses the homeless; it also changes systems and structures to better serve the poor and vulnerable. God's justice

declares human society truly a society and not a gathering of birds at the feeder pecking each other and throwing their weight around to get the most seed. For the Bible, human life is relational, and so justice comes as we acknowledge our relatedness throughout the human community. Sin is our denial of relatedness and our refusal to be God's children together. Justice does not parcel out life's benefits by percentages of calculated human worth but serves the love of God for each person and for the whole community of earth. Quite a few years ago now, there was considerable debate over something that came to be called "the social gospel." What a curiosity, the social gospel! The Bible knows no other kind. If justice and salvation, too, are not social – are not about the redemption and restoration of the human community – then they are not justice or salvation, but some kind of privatized privilege with God that is alien to Jesus and the prophets. Privatized salvation is like a marriage of one person or a community of just one, with all the rest kept outside the gate.

In Jesus' day, the party within Judaism known as the Sadducees scoffed at the Pharisee's concept of resurrection. The Pharisees, with whom Jesus seems to have had much in common and therefore many arguments, hoped for a general resurrection so that retributive justice (retribution) could be done in every case. They saw that many wicked people lived and died prosperous and unpunished; they saw also that many poor and pious people lived and died unrewarded. Jesus had no use for the Pharisees' dogma of reward and punishment because God wants far better for us, but he did connect justice denied with resurrection, and so we profess, that he "will come to judge the living and the dead." That profession of our faith means that he and his way are the standards for justice in God's eyes. He will not judge by our standards. Jesus goes far beyond the shallow justice of retribution, but even so, all must stand for an accounting of what they have done to others and how they have participated in the human community, especially how they have related to the Lazaruses kept outside the gate. The resurrection proclaims that God's grace does not end when we die.

Let us be thankful now and forever, that God's justice is greater than retribution. *Restorative justice* is a movement among psychologists, social workers, judges, police officers, educators, and others which should probably get some attention in our adult forums next fall. But the Bible has seen justice as restorative all along – never excusing evil but going to amazing lengths to restore us to God and to each other, heal the harm done by criminal activity or by selfish prosperity, and establish a harmony that actively corrects and overcomes injustices done to any person or group of people. Retribution is not good enough for God, and so Jesus gave himself to horrible injustice for our sake, and he is the one who lives. We have hope for real justice because he is the living standard for it: he who rejected revenge, entered into solidarity with the Lazaruses of this world, welcomed the shamed and sinful, warned the privileged of their danger, and calls us home to God together. His compassion and self-giving love generate our hope for the kind of justice that heals and makes us whole, and because his love has triumphed, our hope does not fail. Amen.