

“Lover of Justice”  
Stouffville United Church  
Sunday, October 18, 2020

Psalm 99, Matthew 22

In Psalm 99, the psalm writer tells us about God. Here is the wording from different Bibles - “You are a Leader who loves justice.” (IB) And here, “You are a lover of justice, you have established equity.” (NRSV) And here, “You are a lover of fairness, who sees that justice is done everywhere.” (CEV)

Justice is an equalizer. Justitia was the Roman goddess of justice and is usually portrayed as holding an evenly balanced scale in one hand and holding a sword in the other. Known as ‘Lady Justice,’ she often wears a blindfold. The blindfold represents the justice system that cannot be seduced or corrupted or misled by noticing a person’s wealth, power, gender, and race.<sup>1</sup>

Justice is one of the underpinnings of our society. But I wonder how effective that blindfold is? There is so much injustice in this world. There are so many people crying out for justice. They are crying out because injustice continues in their lives, based on the colour of their skin, their gender, their social status. The papers, the media are filled with cries for justice.

Justice is something I rarely think about. I am thankful justice is around but other than that, a cry for justice rarely comes from my mouth, my mouth of white privilege and whiteness. White privilege is the ‘unearned advantages that are granted because of one’s whiteness.’<sup>2</sup> White privilege is the system that benefits me. White privilege finds its base in colonial rule which shaped our institutions and governance structures. And because of that, injustices rarely cross my path because I am a white person in a white system.

But for those who are not white, the cry for justice is often a daily cry. Let’s start with the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. A cry for justice has been heard for years but finds too little response from the RCMP and the Federal Government. Indigenous families lament and grieve the missing or murdered indigenous women and girls. Indigenous women continue to vanish along a corridor of a god forsaken highway in British Columbia.

The Mi’kmaq people of Nova Scotia. The Mi’kmaq people are guaranteed the right to moderate livelihood as per Treaty 1752, and are legally allowed to continue lobster harvests, even when the official season is over. White fishers resent the indigenous people’s claim to continue harvesting the lobster. Earlier in the week, there was intimidation and Mi’kmaq property damaged. But this weekend, it escalated to much worse as the Mi’kmaq lobster processing plant was suspiciously set on fire and burned to the ground. It was determined to be arson.

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<sup>1</sup> I googled ‘Lady Justice’ and there were many entries that described her attributes.

<sup>2</sup> Layla F. Saad, *Me and White Supremacy: Combat Racism, Change the World, and Become a Good Ancestor* (Naperville: Sourcebooks, 2020), 34.

People of Asian descent have borne harsh criticism and backlash due to the origin of the coronavirus which surfaced in Wuhan, China. The American president's insistence to keep naming the corona virus the China Virus continues to aggravate this racist point of view.

Where is the justice when so many black people have been killed simply because of the colour of their skin? From the thousands of men, women, and children lynched in North America during the late 1800's and early 1900's, to the recent murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, where is the justice for these deaths?

When I turn to our gospel reading for today, the Pharisees and Herodians offer Jesus a description of what he represents. They say, "Teacher, we know you're honest. You don't act out of respect for important people." (IB) And in another translation, I read this, "You are sincere, and show deference to no one." (NRSV) and here, "You are honest. You treat everyone with the same respect, no matter who they are." (CEV)

Fairness, justice, equity. Jesus is the embodiment of the justice that the psalm writer lifts up in Psalm 99. Jesus is a lover of justice. Jesus hears the cries for justice and responds, with action, with teaching, with confrontation. The last shall be first and the first shall be last. Eating at tables with sinners and prostitutes and the marginalized. Challenging the status quo. Chipping away at the destructive hierarchy of an oppressive system. I imagine Jesus wants to hurl that roman coin they handed him into the dirt in disgust at the 'system' it represents. 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and give to God what is God's.' A hierarchal system built on values that divide, separate, and make distinctions based on social status, culture, skin colour.

The Benedictine religious order bases their community on the Rule written by St. Benedict in 597. The Benedictine community is based on egalitarianism, not hierarchy. Former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams describes the *accountability* that is found within the Benedictine community: "Within the community you are answerable to the concreteness of the other. Everyone is responsible to and for everyone else."<sup>3</sup> Esther de Waal observes that within the Benedictine community, the person who holds the garden trowel doing menial work with weeds is no less important than the one who lifts up the chalice from the altar. All things are from God and there is no distinction between gifts. She writes, "The Rule shows respect for each single person whoever they may be, irrespective of dress, background, professional skill. This totally cuts through the sham that any one person is superior to any other or could have more value than another."<sup>4</sup>

Reading a few books on systemic racism or indigenous claims hardly makes me a lover of justice. Keeping up with the news hardly makes me a lover of justice. It is the 'smallness'<sup>5</sup> of my concept of justice that hinders me from being the lover of justice that I hear God calling me to be. It is the 'smallness' of my concept of justice that makes me settle for the little I do in response to a cry for justice.

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<sup>3</sup> Paraphrased from watching a video of Rowan William's lecture, 'God's Workshop', 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Esther de Waal, *Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1999), 101.

<sup>5</sup> Feasting on the Word Biblical Commentary, Pastoral Perspective, 442.

Justice is what love looks like in public. These words from Cornell West echo the words of the Gospel, when Jesus tells us what God asks of us: “The first commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind. And the second law is like the first – Love your neighbour as yourself.” (Matthew 24)

To be a lover of justice  
is to love your neighbour as yourself.

To be a lover of justice  
is to hear the cries for justice  
as if it was your own voice  
crying in the middle of the night.

And, as a lover of justice, answer that cry.

Here is a song we have often sung as our ‘going out’ song at the end of worship. May they find meaning in your heart today.

Sent out in Jesus’ name,  
our hands are ready now  
to make the world the place  
in which the kingdom comes.

The angels cannot change  
a world of hurt and pain  
into a world of love,  
of justice and of peace.

The task is ours to do,  
to set it really free.  
O help us to obey,  
and carry out your will.

Thanks be to God. Amen.