

# The Virtue of Justice

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost, 14 October 2018

Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Psalm 22:1-15; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31

For the past several weeks we've been talking about the classic virtues – temperance, courage, wisdom. Beginning next week we'll look at three Christian virtues theologians added to the classical list – faith, hope, and love.

So today brings us to the fourth of the classic virtues, the virtue of justice.

We often picture her as a blind lady holding balanced scales and a sword. It's an image of what we want justice to be - a system that is no respecter of persons, that defends equal opportunity and equal treatment for all.

We often think of justice in terms of legal justice. You may have heard of the Code of Hammurabi in your world history classes. Hammurabi was a Mesopotamian king who wrote down a series of laws in the 1700's BCE. It is one of the oldest legal codes we know of today, older even than the Ten Commandments. His purpose in writing these laws, the king said, was "so that the strong might not harm the weak." That's one goal of legal justice.

But our application of justice sometimes falls short of the goal. There are numerous examples from history and from today where something that is perfectly legal may not be perfectly just. The law can fall short of justice. So when we speak of justice we aren't speaking just about law. We are dreaming of a world that works for everyone.

Long ago, according to Genesis, we left the Garden of Eden. We left a world that operated the way God intended. Ever since, we have been trying to get back there. We have not made it yet. We likely aren't going to get there any time soon. But we can and should keep trying to get a little closer to God's vision, a little closer to a world that works for everyone.

I think that's part of what Jesus was trying to tell the poor rich man.

The rich man wanted to know how to enter the life of the ages. We usually translate it eternal life, but the phrase also has the sense of life as God intends it to be, now and forever. How could he get that kind of life? So Jesus started quoting the Ten Commandments. Notice he only quoted six of the ten. He skipped the first four that have to do with our relationship with God.

*You shall have no other gods before me.*

*You shall not make for yourself an idol.*

*You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God.*

*Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy.*

Jesus did not mention these. Maybe it was because the man had these covered. Or maybe he was trying to make a point about . . . Instead, Jesus quoted the six commandments that are about how we treat one another – don't murder, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness, defraud. Honor your father and mother as well. The man had done all of these since his youth. He had obeyed the written law.

But looking at him, Jesus loved him. This is the only time Mark's gospel speaks of Jesus loving somebody. Jesus loved this man. He loved this man who had everything but lacked one thing. He loved this man enough to encourage him not to settle but to keep going. Don't settle for do no harm. Try to do proactive good. *Sell what you own. Give the money to the poor. Have treasure in heaven. Come follow me.*

Granted, what Jesus asked was hard. Jesus knew it was hard, as hard as a camel going through the eye of a needle. But Jesus knew it was not impossible. For God all things are possible.

But this man could not see the possibility. He could not imagine a life different from the one he already had. He went away grieving because he could not imagine another way to live and be.

The rich man was wrestling with a form of economic justice, what to do about his things. Job was wrestling with the idea of cosmic justice. We talked a bit about Job last week. Job had always believed life was fair. He and his friends believed deep in their souls that good people are rewarded with good lives and bad people deserve the bad lives they get. The first are first and the last are last for a reason and that's the way it should be.

Job was a good person – the best. He was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil. But Job was suffering terribly. How could this be?

For 23 whole chapters, from Job 4 to 27, Job's friends tried to convince him to give in and confess what he had done wrong so that God could forgive him and take away his suffering. But Job would not do it. He insisted he had nothing to confess. The whole situation made no sense. So he argued with his friends, defended his innocence, and demanded a hearing with God. He longed to come to God's dwelling and give God a piece of his mind. *"I would lay my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments."*

I suspect most of us can relate. When we think of the suffering in this world, when we think of a catastrophic hurricane that sprang up almost overnight and destroyed homes and businesses and crops and lives, when we think of the people we know who are dealing with sudden devastating illness, when we think of the agony of refugees with no where to go, when we think of victims of crime and assault, when we think of children who suffer at the hands of others, we might want to lay out a case before God as well. These things make no sense.

But Job kept trying to make sense of it all. Job seems to have been convinced this was all some cosmic, administrative error, like Job's name had somehow gotten on the naughty list instead of

the nice list. Job was convinced God would listen and the mistake would be corrected. *“There an upright person could reason with him, and I should be acquitted forever by my judge.”*

We’ll get to God’s response next week. The short answer is that God turned the question around. The world is so vastly complex, God said, how could human beings possibly understand it fully. There is no way for human beings to figure out the rhyme and reason of it all. That’s how it is.

But notice Job’s response to this reality. Rather than shrug his shoulders and go away grieving, Job confronted the injustice of his situation. He stormed heaven. He spoke up and made it clear that something was wrong. He tried to come up with a solution. His friends told him he deserved his suffering. Job ignored them and made an enormous fuss. And in the end God was glad that Job noticed. God praised Job for speaking up.

It didn’t change the situation. The world remained chaotic and unfair. Job’s fortunes were eventually restored but there was no guarantee he wouldn’t lose them again. Still, the story makes it clear God was pleased that Job noticed the unfairness of it all and said something about it.

In the face of all that is wrong in this world, what is our calling as faithful people? To turn away grieving and do nothing, or to rail against heaven and confront the wrongs we see?

I heard a story this week that illustrates the point. This comes from Tupelo, Mississippi, just two years ago. In 2016, a woman paid \$275 to the manager at an RV park to rent a spot for her family’s trailer. She and her husband were trying to save money and get their finances back on track. This was the best deal they could find.

The manager was nice to her at first. He took her deposit. He gave her a big hug. He invited her to church. But the next day he called her back and said her family was not welcome at the park because of their race. The woman is Native American and Hispanic. Her husband is African American. The woman explained that her husband is a good man who served in the National Guard for 13 years. The manager said he didn’t care. The neighbors would complain. If he had known she was married to a black man he would not have rented to her.

The woman said she prayed and prayed that the manager would change his mind, but he didn’t. He returned their deposit and they found a spot at another RV park that cost more a month.

But this woman did not turn away sad like the rich man. She acted more like Job. She knew her family had been treated unfairly. She later told a lawyer she wanted her children to know how to fight against injustice. So she filed a Fair Housing Act claim with the Department of Housing and Urban Development. The settlement was finalized this week. But the woman said, *“It was never about the money. We don’t want his money. We just wanted him to do the right thing.”*

Her attorney is someone I knew in college. In his Facebook post about the case, he said, *“She simply refused to let her family be mistreated, and she embodied an amazing balance between fierce tenacity and genuine kindness.”*

That's a good description of the virtue of justice – with fierce tenacity and genuine kindness refusing to let anyone be mistreated

So maybe we should rethink our image of Justice, the one with the blind woman and the scales. Justice is not blind. Her eyes are wide open to see what is wrong in this world as well as the possibility of fixing it. And like Job her mouth is too. Thanks be to God.

+ + +

*The story about the family from Tupelo is at*

*<https://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/2018/10/12/soldier-wife-evicted-because-race-now-landlord-must-pay/1553313002/>*

+ + +

©2018 Grace Burton-Edwards  
St. Thomas Episcopal Church  
Columbus, GA 31906  
StThomasColumbus.org