

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



Date: February 27, 2011
Sermon Title: Justice
Scripture: Amos 5:14-15; 21-24
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

Amos 5:14-15

*Seek good and not evil,
that you may live;
and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you,
just as you have said.
Hate evil and love good,
and establish justice in the gate;
it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts,
will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.*

Amos 5:21-24

*I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings,
I will not accept them;
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals
I will not look upon.
Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

Since the Egyptian revolution it has been fascinating to follow the analyses. Was it the first Twitter, social network, Facebook, young people's revolution? Or is it a front for the Muslim Brotherhood and a fundamentalist Muslim takeover?

This quote caught my eye. In a *New York Times* article titled "In One Slice of Egypt, Daily Woes Top Religion," it quoted a 21-year-old college graduate,

Ahmed, the son of Islamist parents, who said, "Bread, social justice, and freedom. What's religious about that?" I suppose the good news is that he is not connected to Muslim Brotherhood, but the bad news is that he joins most of the world in not seeing a connection between religion and bread, religion and social justice. (Shadid, Anthony. "In One Slice of Egypt, Daily Woes Top Religion." *The New York Times* 16 Feb. 2011: A4. Print)

After 5,000 years of Judaism, 2,000 years of Christianity, 1,400 years of Islam, it is said that too many do not see the connection between religion and bread, religion and social justice, religion and freedom. That little quote is just one of the little signs that convinced me to preach about justice today. I wasn't sure if I should.

Our weekly Bible study has started up with justice as our own topic, and we are in the third week. What is it? What does the Bible say about it? What is our Christian responsibility toward it? Frankly, it hasn't been easy. It's a tough topic. Invariably, any discussion about justice is going to lead to talk about crime, society, and politics, three topics that are loaded with landmines.

For us here in Fairfield, we have the Donnelly murders and the killing of the family in Cheshire all over the front pages – the sentencing, the details. Naturally, our definition of justice runs toward crime and criminals and punishment and the legal system, the justice system. As a result, we lose sight of Biblical justice, which has a lot more to do with how we treat the poor, the truly needy, the most vulnerable. The Bible doesn't ignore criminal justice; indeed, the Bible is at the forefront of establishing law and courts and punishment. Even one of the 10 Commandments, "Thou shalt not bear false witness," is aimed specifically at assuring the integrity of the legal system. But overwhelmingly, when the Bible talks about justice, it's talking about the just treatment, the fair treatment, of those who are really hurting.

I was not only anxious about preaching a sermon on injustice, I was also cautious about devoting a whole Bible study series to it. But then in early December, a new book came out called *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just* by Timothy Keller. Keller is a pastor of a mega-church in Manhattan, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, an unusual church in many ways. It began at Hunter College. They now hold five services every Sunday at five locations in Manhattan from 9 AM to 7 PM. Some are traditional like ours, some jazz-oriented. And listen to their mission statement I took from their Web site: "to build a great city for all people through a gospel movement that brings personal conversion, community formation, social justice, and cultural renewal to New York City and, through it, to the world."

That is an amazing statement. That is as left-wing/right-wing; evangelical/social gospel; liberal/conservative a statement as you can get. I like it.

Keller is pretty blunt in his book. He admits that talk of justice, especially social justice, and linking church work to social justice is highly controversial. We've discussed that here in our own church. You've heard me say before that for too long, even centuries, Christianity was divided into two camps: people who talked about Jesus and people who did what Jesus said to do. That's an oversimplification, but it's pretty accurate. One group wanted to save souls. The other group wanted to save lives. One would build churches. The other would dig wells. One gave out Bibles. The other gave out food. Both important. Both Biblical. But sadly, they didn't talk to each other. In fact, each group put down the other.

The evangelicals were called the Bible-thumpers, "fundies," right-wing, anti-intellectual, at best people with good faith but no brains. The other group, made up of the social justice types, were do-gooders, liberal, communists, pinkos, socialists, and at best people with no faith but good hearts. Finally, people started seeing evangelical Christianity and social justice Christianity as kissin' cousins, as partners, as two sides of the same coin. With his book, Keller is now a leading voice for Christianity and justice.

This also helps my résumé. For a couple of years, there was a Christian businesspersons' group that met at the Harvard Club in Manhattan at 6:30 or 7 AM. Keller was their regular teacher, but when he couldn't make it, I was a regular pinch-hitter. This was back in the '90s, and it was exciting to see top leaders of American business already committed not only to Jesus Christ, but also to the kinds of justice that Jesus stood for: justice for the most vulnerable. Keller uses that term over and over, "the vulnerable." He even refers to the Bible's emphasis on "the quartet of the vulnerable: the widow, the fatherless, the immigrant, and the poor." (Zechariah 7:10-11; Psalm 146:7-9; Deuteronomy 10:17-18)

Indeed, one of my favorite quotes from Keller's book is a terrific formula for how to pursue Christlike justice. He says, "One has to decide where lie the greatest injustices and where lie the greatest vulnerabilities. Other things being equal, one focuses one's attention on those." *One has to decide where lie the greatest injustices and where lie the greatest vulnerabilities. Other things being equal, one focuses one's attention on those.*

So I knew I wanted to bring this kind of justice to you in a sermon. Indeed, the signs kept coming, pointing me toward today's sermon on justice.

The Arts section of *The New York Times* on February 16 had an article about a new TV series "The Injustice Files," a new series about Civil-Rights-era cold cases." "The Injustice Files." One of the things we've already seen in our new Bible study series is that God is just as interested in injustice as justice; that injustice, or even just the lack of justice, is considered a sin! (Lee, Felicia R. "TV Series Tries to Revive Civil Rights Cold Cases." *The New York Times* 16 Feb. 2011: C1. Print.)

You may remember that when Jesus was describing the rewards and punishment after death, he said that the folks who *don't* get into heaven are the ones who "did *not* feed the hungry when they had the chance, did *not* give water to the thirsty, did *not* seek out the lonely." *Not* doing the just thing – God takes that as seriously as *doing* the just thing. I knew that was important to teach you, but I still couldn't decide about preaching on justice. It's controversial. It's unpopular. It gets misunderstood. It gets pastors fired.

Down through the years, whenever pastors spoke too much about justice, sooner or later folks would start to say, "Stick to the Bible, Preacher, and stay out of politics." Somehow or other, we allowed ourselves to get convinced that justice was political, not religious. There is an old saying, popular in missionary circles, "If you feed a hungry person, people think you're a Christian. If you start to wonder why they're hungry, people think you're a communist." I think that's sad. Unlike Tim Keller, I want to shout to the mountaintops, "Justice is ours. Justice belongs to us. Justice is in our Christian DNA. It's part and parcel of who we are. It's not political. It doesn't belong to any "ism" other than God-ism or Christian-ism or Bible-ism or Greenfield Hill Church-ism."

So, I kept creeping towards this sermon all week, with my life inundated with references to justice. I was studying in our church library when I saw the cover story for a *Christianity Today* magazine from a couple of years ago. It was "Songs of Justice, Missions of Mercy," an article about top Christian music stars on a world tour to bring justice and mercy into the hearts, the villages, the lives of the poor. Here is the opening sentence: "In the late 1970s the holy rockers of the nascent Jesus music movement distinguished themselves from their mainstream counterparts even further with one radical step: they discovered social justice." They went on to talk about all the giants of Christian music: Amy Grant, Michael W. Smith, Casting Crowns, the Winans, Phil Keaggy, many of them inspired by U2 and Bono. (Moring, Mark. "Songs of Justice, Missions of Mercy." *Christianity Today* Nov. 2009. Print.)

These folks were traveling the world not to increase record sales, but to do justice. These Christian rock singers and Christian pop singers were just echoing that wonderful quote from Keller's book, "One has to decide where lie the greatest injustices and where lie the greatest vulnerabilities, then focus attention on needs."

That approach to life echoes the words of Job. Job is a legendary, complicated Biblical figure, too complicated to get into today. Let me just say Job's definition of his life is the perfect definition of an ethical, just, Christlike, Godly life. He declared, "I rescued the poor who cried for help and the fatherless who had none to assist them and the one who was dying. I guided the widow and made her heart to sing. I was eyes to the blind, feet to the lame, father to the needy. I have not kept my bread to myself, nor denied the desires of the poor, nor kept warmth from the needy. I have not been unfaithful to God." (Job 29:12-17; Job 31:13-28, various, some paraphrases)

That's solid liberal Biblical Christianity, acted out by Job once upon a time, and Christian music stars today, as told in *Christianity Today*. Let me hasten to add *Christianity Today* is America's leading evangelical, even fundamentalist Christian magazine. They take the Bible 100 percent seriously. They take Jesus 100 percent seriously. So when they link "social justice" to the Bible, to Jesus, that's major.

Well, God's hints and pushes and shoves just kept piling up all week long. Even on TV. I found myself mesmerized by three movies on the Turner Classic Movies channel. First, Charles Dickens's "Great Expectations." Then "Cromwell." Then "The Search," with Montgomery Clift. It seemed that in every scene, someone was trying to do justice or correct an injustice. In "Great Expectations" it was personal, set things right among family and friends. In "Cromwell" it was national. Oliver Cromwell's trying to rid England in the 1650s of an autocratic king in order to set England on a more just path, as defined by God. In "The Search," it was humanitarian, a post-World War II movie set in Germany, as lost children and lost parents, separated by war and concentration camps, try to find one another. Montgomery Clift personalizes the desire to do the right thing.

Even yesterday, walking my endless miles on the treadmill, reading *The New York Times Book Review* section, I found a review of three new books about Nelson Mandela, the great icon of freedom. One of the books is called *Mandela's Way: Fifteen Lessons on Life, Love, and Courage*. The author says that one key lesson Mandela learned was "the limitless potential of humanity to do the right thing." *The limitless potential of humanity to do the right thing*. It doesn't say we always do right thing, or even most of the time. It

only declares what the Bible declares by its demands and assumptions. We *do* have limitless potential to do the right thing. (Ledgard, J. M. "Revolution From Within." *The New York Times* 13 Feb. 2011, Book Review sec. Print.

That's why my favorite Bible verse on justice is Micah 6:8, "You know what is good and what the Lord requires: do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with your Lord." I should have picked that for today's Scripture. I'm sorry I don't have time to dig into the verses I did choose, from Amos, but you get the idea just hearing them. God is simply saying to forget all the trappings of religion and piety and tradition. Instead, if you want to make God happy, "Let justice roll down like the waters, and righteousness like an overflowing stream." And we do want to make God happy. That's sort of the subtext of worship. We are here to honor God. And God says the best way to his heart is justice. "Let justice roll down like the waters." "Do justice. Because down deep you know what is good, and what the Lord requires. You know."

That was actually my first thought for this sermon, and now I'm about to end with it, the idea that, hey, for Pete's sake, it's not rocket science. "We know what is good *and* what the Lord requires."

As soon as I taught that at Bible Study two weeks ago, I remembered my childhood hero, Ted Williams. Everyone in this church thinks I'm a dyed-in-the-wool Yankee fan. People don't believe it when I tell them I was a Red Sox fan as a kid and Ted Williams was my hero. Alida actually hunted down a small statue of him from back in my day as a surprise for me. Williams was legendary in so many ways, a Hall of Famer; a World War II and Korean War fighter pilot, shot down, crash landed; the last guy to hit .400. And he was legendary for his perfect eyesight. One umpire said, "No umpire will ever call Ted Williams out on a called third strike because if Ted Williams didn't think it was good enough to swing at, it wasn't good enough to swing at." In other words, in Biblical language, he knew what was good. The Bible and evidently Nelson Mandela give us the same credit. We know what is good. To do justice.

Well, here I am at the end of a rather simple sermon. It doesn't seem as though it went anywhere. It didn't soar or inspire. I almost feel as I would if I were invited to lecture at a math class at Yale and started with $2+2 = 4$. The audience would hardly be impressed and probably greet me with that teenagers' derisive response, "Duh!" In other words, that's obvious. Truth is, everything in this sermon is obvious.

You know that I have taught a course the last 10 years or so called "Literature That Feeds Our Faith," and every year I begin the first class with this quote I stole from someone: "All literature is sacred, or it is nothing at

all." I would just adjust that for this sermon: "All religion is justice, or it is nothing at all." It is that obvious.

Jesus was pretty clear. God, in the Old Testament, was pretty clear. Those are really the only pillars of our religion worth worrying about, and they stood foursquare for justice. Do the right thing.

"Consider where lie the greatest injustices and where lie the greatest vulnerabilities. Then focus your attention right there. Do justice. Love mercy. *You do, we do* have limitless potential to do the right thing."