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Sermon Title: Justice. Period
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Scripture: Litany for Justice

Litany for Justice

Deacon: I will discipline you but only with JUSTICE. (Jeremiah 30:11) . . . will shepherd the flock with JUSTICE. (Ezekiel 34:16) . . . For I, the Lord, love JUSTICE. (Isaiah 61:8) . . . I will make JUSTICE the measuring line. (Isaiah 28:17)

Congregation: Follow JUSTICE and JUSTICE alone, so that you may live and possess the land God is giving you. (Deuteronomy 16:20)

Deacon: The Lord works righteousness and JUSTICE for all the oppressed. (Proverbs 16:11)

Congregation: To do what is right and JUST is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice. (Proverbs 21:3)

Deacon: Do not pervert JUSTICE . . . judge your neighbor fairly. (Leviticus 19:5) . . . do not deprive the alien or the fatherless of JUSTICE. (Deuteronomy 24:17)

All Together: You know what is right, and what the Lord requires: do JUSTICE, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. (Micah 6:8) . . . Let JUSTICE roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:24)

Alida has been away for three weeks, so I get to go to movies she would refuse to go to. Therefore, I spent two and a half hours to see Leonardo DeCaprio's "Revenant," three hours to see Quentin Tarantino's "The Hateful Eight." Five and a half hours of snow, blizzards, freezing cold, mountain men bundled up in bear skins killing anything in sight, all seeking *justice*. Good guys, bad guys, cowboys, Indians. Civil War "Blue Bellies" and "Johnny Rebs," fur trappers, stagecoach operators, criminals, sheriffs, and even one of the bears, all seeking justice.

You're left with the impression that everybody has his own idea of justice, and that may be so. Justice is what we think is fair and right, which is a useful starting point. Try this: justice is what we demand for someone who has wronged us. They should get their "just desserts," they should get what's coming to them. They shouldn't be able to wiggle out of it.

On the other hand, justice is what we want when someone comes after us. When we've done something, or one of our loved ones has done something, we want to be sure we don't get railroaded; we want to be treated fairly, equally, justly. To put it in more Christian terms, justice is when we want others to be treated the way we want to be treated. Treat alleged criminals, troublemakers, even problems and issues the way we would want to be treated if we were the issue. If you get dragged into court, if you get your name in the paper, if there's some issue important to you, some matter, some crisis important to you, how do you want to be treated? Justly.

One thing most religions agree on is God is just. God wants justice, demands justice, expects us to be just in all our dealings, and by golly, when the time comes, God is going to mete out justice justly. Now, some Christians, like us, for instance, we temper justice a bit. God is just, yes; *and* merciful. God demands justice, yes; *and* mercy. And when the time comes, God will mete out justice mercifully. See? That's better. And some Christians, like us, we temper justice with love. God is just, yes; *and* loving. God demands justice, yes; *and* love. And when the time comes, God will mete out justice mercifully *and* lovingly. That's a lot better. It's even Biblical.

God is just. And merciful *and* loving. But even when we temper it, justice is still big. Churches that emphasize hell, that's all based on some idea of justice, strict justice. Their idea is that God is so perfect, so holy, that God cannot stand any blemish, any sin, any filth in his presence.

I had a dear friend once who had a lovely home; indeed, a perfect home. Her living room was entirely white. Entirely. White carpet, white sofas, white chairs, white pillows. And I was never allowed in there. Ever. Period. Because the purity of white cannot withstand a single blemish, a single

mistake, a single oops. That's God: obsessive about dirt, your dirt, my dirt, any dirt. So if you try to go to heaven with any dirt, any "mark" against you, you're toast. God wants everything just so. That's why there's a hell.

However, Jesus does a fairly convincing job of putting us and God in a family relationship. We just prayed the Lord's Prayer, using Jesus's own words, "Our Father, who art in heaven." The Bible calls us God's "children," "offspring," "heirs." Jesus even invites us to call God "Abba." And no, that's not the Swedish rock group. "Abba" is an intimate term for "Daddy."

So Christians like us, like me, anyway, find it hard to imagine "Daddy" tossing his children into hell, outer darkness, oblivion, the lake of fire, eternal torment, Dante's Inferno. Unless God's idea of parenting is Joan Crawford in "Mommy Dearest," the idea of "Daddy" and "hell" don't go together. What I do get is that God is demanding, very demanding: Excellence. Results. Perfection. Do your best. And then do even better the next time. I get that. My "Daddy" was like that. When I was about 18, I played a baseball game. When I got home, my father asked how I did. I told him. I went four for five, three home runs, and a triple. "What did you do the other time up?" he asked. So even if I don't get "Daddy" and "hell," I do get "Daddy" and "perfection."

That's God. God wants things done right, to perfection; justly, fairly, correctly. And then, do even better. Our job is to strive for excellence, strive for it, demand it for others, demand it *of* others, demand it of ourselves. And when we fall short, we throw ourselves on God's mercy, count on God's love, and do better the next time. Which puts us back on track with justice. We are to demand it, pursue it, provide it.

Our Scripture Litany laid out the case for justice. God loves justice. Measures us by justice. Wants us to live according to justice. Requires us to deal justly. And demands that we advocate for justice. These Scriptures, built to the final two verses we read together, are God's bottom line. Micah 6:8: "You know what is right, and what the Lord requires: do JUSTICE, love mercy, and walk humbly with God." And Amos, 5:24: "Let JUSTICE roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

We're all products of our environment, right? Well, I went to college and seminary in the '60s. Bob Dylan was 100 percent right: "The times [were] a' changin'" and fast. America was torn apart every which way. The Civil Rights movement was marching. The Vietnam War was raging. Our cultural heroes were dying young. Our political heroes were assassinated. Drugs, protests, riots.

I read an excellent book about the year 1965, accurately titled *The Eve of Destruction: How 1965 Transformed America* by James T. Patterson. In that environment, I got converted. I decided to be a Christian, go to seminary, become a pastor, and save the world. Saving the world seemed like an obvious goal. The Bible demanded it. The world certainly needed it. And the fact that it was an obvious goal is clear from that verse, Micah 6:8. “You know what is right, and what the Lord requires: do JUSTICE, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.” Notice that opening phrase, “You *know* what is right, you *know* what the Lord requires. You *know* it.”

Much of the Bible tells us stuff we don’t know, until God tells us, and Jesus explains. In the Old Testament, Deuteronomy 6, when God lays out lots of laws, God then says, “You’d better write this down. Write it on your doorposts, write it on your foreheads.” Write where you can see it, and remember it. Because you don’t seem to know it! When Jesus comes along, he has this huge emphasis on “love,” and he actually says, “A *new* commandment I give to you that you love,” love, and love some more. With Jesus we end up with a *new* religion, with a *new* Testament, based on a *new* commandment, to love.

But . . . Micah introduces his emphasis on justice by saying, “Here’s something you already know. It’s not new. It’s not revolutionary. It’s not something we have to teach you like monotheism or grace or keeping the Sabbath holy or tithing. You already know down deep, you know what God wants: ‘do justice, love mercy, be humble.’” Come on, this isn’t news to you!

This weekend we honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. We honor him as a person because he was extraordinary. He was our Mahatma Gandhi. He was this powerful blend of passion and peace, devoted to both. We also honor him as the epitome of a movement, the Civil Rights movement, a movement that started long before him and continues long after him. But in the middle of it all, Dr. King was the dynamic force. He was our modern-day Micah, declaring, “Come on, America, you know what is right. You know what is good, you know what God requires. I’m not here to teach you. I’m here to remind you. Do justice. Have mercy. Be humble.”

Micah and Martin weren’t going to let us act like “Hey, I just had a new idea! Let’s consider being nice to people! Let’s ponder being fair. Let’s weigh the possibility of equality. Let’s cogitate the concept of doing the right thing.” It’s hard to believe, but once upon a time, Americans actually sat around and discussed and voted on who could drink from what water fountain, who could sit where on a bus, who could eat at what lunch counter, who could play in the Major Leagues, who could kiss whom on TV, who could vote, who could attend a decent school, who could get buried where. Those of us who

lived those days have some turning point where the Civil Rights movement woke us up. Dr. King's speech at the Lincoln Memorial. The march across the bridge in Selma, the Freedom Riders. The protesters being hosed by police. The Civil Rights workers killed in Mississippi. Something got us. For me, it was a little news item, maybe late '60s. A black kid got drafted. Sent to Vietnam. Gets killed. They ship his body back home. The local cemetery refused to bury him. No blacks allowed. Not even a dead one. He was good enough to be drafted. Good enough to defend America from communism. Good enough to die for us. Just *not* good enough for our dirt.

Micah and Martin were just saying, "Are you kidding me? You have to think about this? You have to take a vote? No! You know, O man, what is right and what doth the Lord require: do justice." You don't need President L.B.J. You don't need the Supreme Court. You don't need a march from Selma to Montgomery. You don't need riots in Newark or busing in Boston to know that when it's hot, you can use any old swimming pool that's close by; that when you're thirsty, you can use any old water fountain that's handy; that after work, you get on the bus, you can sit on any old seat that's open; that when you are born, you can try to accomplish any old thing you can imagine. That's justice, and the Bible is saying you know it, God has planted that idea in you. You know what is right and fair and just; you know what you would want for yourself, for your loved ones; you know what is good and what doth the Lord require. You *know*.

Justice is such an immense, sweeping, universal issue, it encompasses a thousand—probably a million—issues. In every corner of the world there are justice issues. In every corner of the world, someone is standing up, saying, "This isn't just!" Demanding, "I want justice!" Human rights. Honor killings. Sex trafficking. Censorship. Churches shut down. People disappeared. Corruption. Pollution. Incarceration. State violence. Police violence. Gang violence. The latest justice issue is Flint, Michigan, where the citizens don't want to drink water with lead in it, provided by the government to save money. We probably don't think much about water or Flint, Michigan, or lead, unless we make it personal and put it all together.

What if your pregnant daughter lived in Flint, Michigan, and drank water provided by the city filled with lead? Then, "You would know, O Man, what is good and what doth the Lord require of you but to do justice."

Take that thought and apply it to every matter under heaven. Put yourself in the story. You do that, and you'll find what justice is pretty quickly.

God put it there.