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Date: June 21, 2020
Sermon: "Sweet Justice"
Scripture: "Signs of Hope" Scripture Litany
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

Signs of Hope

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. (Isaiah 11)

For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them. (Matthew 18:20)

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. (Matthew 5)

But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:24)

With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:6-8)

Great verse from Micah: "You know what is good, and you know what God requires: do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with the Lord. We know it. The Bible says so. It's in in our bones.

Scrolling through Facebook last Saturday, I came across an ad for a T-shirt, a beautiful eye-catching black Biblical T-shirt. Down one side was that Bible reference, "Micah: 6-8." With the rest of the T-shirt emblazoned with the keywords in dark blue and light green: "Act justly. Love mercy. Walk humbly."

The T-shirt got me thinking: why is the word "justice" such a dark, divisive, intimidating word? Why can't we see it as a beautiful word? We seem to

emphasize the negative side of justice, the consequences. We hear angry people demand "justice." We talk about bad people getting their "just desserts." But the word "desserts" is a good word!

On "The Great British Baking Show" Sunday night, our preferred pandemic binge show, the champion bakers had to make petit fours. The judge said, "Petit fours must be perfect in every way. They are for those occasions when you've finished an extraordinary dinner, only for the host to present a tray of beautiful, delicious, bite-size petit fours you cannot resist." Now *that* sounds like a just dessert! Justice ought to be like that. Eye pleasing. Irresistible. A great T-shirt. A joyful slogan. A perfect ending.

We called our Scripture litany today "Signs of Hope." It began with a sweet promise, "A little child shall lead them," which Christians take as a promise of the Christmas Baby Jesus, who would grow up to lead us to God's Kingdom "on earth as it is in heaven." The litany ends with two great classic justice verses: Micah 6:8, "Do justice. Love mercy. Walk humbly with God." And Amos 5, "Let justice roll down like the waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Those are lovely, uplifting, positive images of justice.

The doing of justice is accompanied by mercy, all of it encompassed by love. And then justice appearing like refreshing waters, beautiful waters, a mountain stream, a mighty river; or around here, the Long Island Sound on a perfect end-of-day sail.

The problem, of course, is that all over the world, all through history, people, most people, have been denied justice. By the king. By the majority. By lords and barons. By traditions and design. By oligarchs and Jim Crow laws. By weak enforcement. The end result is the English "Magna Carta" or the American Revolution.

Or, for that matter, lots of revolutions that swept over the world—France, Russia, Cuba, China. We may not like how they ended up or were conducted, but they started with folks being fed up, waiting for justice. The fact is, justice delayed, justice denied is always an eruption waiting to happen.

This shouldn't be a surprise. Most white people in America are descendants of people who fled injustice in the old country. Black people got here by injustice. Hispanics and Asians found economic oppression or denial of rights or random violence or grinding poverty too much to bear in the old country. So here they are, one way or another.

Justice should be lovely and beautiful, but instead, we have to seek it, demand it, struggle for it, fight for it. I'd rather make it irresistible.

I have a favorite cellist, Gautier Capuçon. We've seen him live in Paris and up at Tanglewood. The music is great, and of course he's great, but what enralls me the most is his blend of two contrasts: vigorous focus and unbounded joy.

YouTube him. You'll see it. We saw it at Tanglewood with his brother on violin, a friend on piano, and the Boston Symphony Orchestra behind him. He embraces that cello. He closes his eyes, he plays with such intensity; *and* he looks all around, eyes open, smiling broadly at the violinist, at the pianist, up at the conductor. He will turn all the way around to see the wind instruments and the brass, the other strings. Intensity and delight. Focus and beauty.

That's the path to justice. To embrace it, while wanting everyone to share in the joy of it. Why should something so lovely, so joyful, be made hard to get?

When my father was about 80, he was still a full-time Church pastor. But his money started disappearing. It was clear that his secretary was robbing him blind. But we couldn't get the local police to give a hoot. They figured my father was an old man in his dotage, probably wasn't keeping track, not worth the effort. So one day, I'm sitting in the police precinct across from a detective who wasn't interested in my father's case at all. But over his shoulder was a poster about elder abuse. "Elder abuse is a crime," it declared. Call such-and-such a number." So I excused myself from the bored detective, went into the hallway, called the New York City Police Elder Abuse Hotline. And just like that, justice was served. The police got to work, the woman was arrested, and my father got his money back. Justice served.

In my mind, in my use of language, my father is the one who got "just desserts," with a cherry on top. But even in this minor example, Justice had to overcome certain prejudice, an official dragging of the feet.

I would ask you to think about the times you've had to fight for what was rightfully yours. And then think what must it be like if you must begin every single day fighting for what is rightfully yours, just because of your color, your background, or your religion. Or your age.

This "American exceptionalism" people are proud of began with the idea of "inalienable rights." Undeniable. No debate necessary. No exceptions. We deserve them by virtue of being human!

I've heard several media people complain, "Why are we still talking about Confederate statues or flags?" "Why are we still talking about racial profiling?" "Chokeholds?" "Black Lives Matter?" "Why is there still affirmative action?" It's because justice didn't get resolved the last time!

I'm still amazed by computers, all those little people who live inside a square box on my desk that do things for me like spellcheck. Many of you have gotten emails from me so you know it's true. I type like e.e. cummings. Just letters, no punctuation, just ". . ." between thoughts. But I do have spellcheck in three forms: some words turn bright red. Others go blue, and if I click on them, they correct. Meanwhile, some words correct themselves before my very eyes. I love it. And so the first three or four sentences of anything I write come across correctly spelled.

Whatever is wrong has been fixed. By me or by some outside force. But then, about the fifth or sixth line, all those little people inside my computer must get tired or bored or fed up with me, and they stop correcting. It's as if they've moved onto something else. They lose their focus, their interests.

That's what America does or probably all humans do. Something catches our eye, focuses our attention, claims our commitment. We send a few dollars, we march, we sign petitions. But then, some other crisis, some other issue, some other urgent need comes along, and we move on to that. We lose interest. Things don't get finished and done right.

But justice isn't a fad, isn't some passing fancy, an occasional hobby to fill up empty time. Justice is the long arm of God tapping you on the shoulder, telling you, "Make this right." Justice is you, looking at something, hearing about something, and knowing, "that's not right." Then doing what's right. Justice isn't a thing to be parceled out, hoarded, or rewarded. Justice is an idea rooted in the essence of God, and it is therefore without limits. Just like God.

Our nation is in an uproar; cities, in particular, are in conflict; black people in general and young white people alongside have taken to the streets in protest because a specific, usually young black person was killed by a specific, usually white policeman over and over and over again. This makes for a black/white dynamic, a police officer/black citizen dynamic.

Now, this is our country, our issue, our time. Our particularity. But our particularity is also universal. My guess is that when Rome invaded Gaul, life wasn't very good in the streets for the people of Gaul. Or when Germany invaded Czechoslovakia. Or Italy invaded Ethiopia. When North Africa invaded West Africa. Or Iraq invaded Kuwait. Spain invaded Mexico. The cries for justice have risen from the streets forever. Which is what makes the Bible so special: it speaks to all times, to all particularities. With a bottom-line clarity.

So I end with two Bible verses that are all about justice, yet never mention the word. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "Blessed are they that mourn."

My friend Tony Compolo explains that puzzling verse this way: "Blessed are those whose hearts are broken by the things that break the heart of God." To make it more personal, "Blessed are you if your heart is broken by whatever breaks God's heart."

And the other verse you know by heart, you've heard it your whole life, the whole world knows it. They even know its title even if they don't know who said it. The Golden Rule. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." I mean, seriously, does ethics get any simpler than that? Does the search for justice get any clearer? I'm dead serious here. When you look at all those conflicts and acts of violence and altercations, look at the victim, the person mistreated unjustly, and ask yourself if that had been you or someone you loved, what would you have had "done unto" them or "done unto" you?

If you were Trayvon Martin walking home from a candy store? If you were Eric Garner selling loose cigarettes on a street corner? If you were 12-year-old Tamir Rice playing with a toy guy in a playground all by yourself? If you were Ahmaud Arbery out for an afternoon jog, sneaking a sip of water from a wide-open construction site? If you were George Floyd? If that were you or your brother or your friend, what would you want "done unto" them? I'll bet you'd want a Micah 6:8 encounter with someone who did justice while loving mercy from walking humbly with God.

That's a beautiful thing.

Our final hymn today is "Wonderful Words of Life"

*Sing them over again to me,
wonderful words of life;
let me more of their beauty see,
wonderful words of life.
Words of life and beauty,
teach me faith and duty:*

*[Refrain:]
Beautiful words, wonderful words,
wonderful words of life.
Beautiful words, wonderful words,
wonderful words of life.*

*Christ, the blessed one, gives to all
wonderful words of life;
sinner, list to the loving call,*

*wonderful words of life.
All so freely given,
wooing us to heaven: [Refrain]*

*Sweetly echo the gospel call,
wonderful words of life;
offer pardon and peace to all,
wonderful words of life.
Jesus, only Savior,
sanctify forever. [Refrain]*