

*(God's) Justice for All:
A Sermon for Martin Luther King Day*

*Preached by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver at
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In past years, I have used the occasion of Martin Luther King Day to reflect on one episode of his life or another. We have sung some of the great hymns of the African-American traditions, the spirituals that gave hope and sustenance to a people sorely in need. Today, we're once again singing those songs, for they are part of our Christian tradition, but we're not going to look at King's life today. Partly, it's because we've done this before; partly because it seems kind of cheap to do this on just one Sunday a year, and to then ignore him for 52 others; and partly because we don't do this for other giants of the faith. Still, the day should not go unmarked so I'd like for us to consider one of the themes that was central to the work of King and his colleagues in the Civil Rights movement: the quest for justice.

Justice: what does that have to do with the Bible? Isn't that a political or legal matter? Not on your life. It's important and, if we look at the Hebrew Bible, the Scriptures that Jesus read and studied and followed, we see that it is indeed a central theme of the Torah, and would be echoed in the New Testament.

So what is justice? This is a topic that has filled many pages in a huge number of books and I could go on for days trying to get at a pithy definition, and then we might still all be in disagreement. If you study this as a question of philosophy, you have to decide whether classical or modern approaches make more sense. Do you think that a just society promotes virtue or that it is agnostic on the subject? What is the ultimate source of justice: a theory, cultural tradition, divine revelation?

Michael Sandel, a professor at Harvard, teaches an immensely popular and heavily subscribed course titled "Justice." A few years ago, he wrote a very popular book based on the class. It's well written and well reasoned, but being a philosopher, and not a theologian, he leaves God out of the question, allowing his

readers to try to find common ground, though he acknowledges some people will find God to be central to their understanding of what justice is.

Reading his book brought back memories of my college days, of philosophy classes in which so many hours were spent on Plato and we engaged intense yet strange questions about the nature of reality, of what is real and what is reflected. This was all to the good, but I don't recall coming away with a good definition of what justice is, just a vivid recollection about the nature and reality of the tree outside our classroom, a topic that consumed us, and an abiding dislike for the influential modern philosopher John Rawls. Something was missing, and you can guess what that was.

Perhaps because of the milieu in which I was raised, a religiously grounded household, I defaulted to the notion that what is just is related to who God is and what God does. I will not say my early understanding was particularly sophisticated, it was more a sense that what is just is what is right or what is fair and that God will judge us. Of course, that leads us back to those definitional problems. Who is to say what is just? Who is to say what is fair?

The Hebrew Bible provides us with some needed direction when considering these matters. Let's start with the word itself. You've probably heard that Eskimos or Inuits, have fifty words for snow; it's true, though depending on which dialect one is speaking it may be 40 or 53. The notion is that the Inuit need all these words for what is a huge part of their environment, of the word in which they live. The same thing happens in Hebrew, though obviously not with snow!

The Hebrew language uses two words, *mishpat*, which we translate 'justice', and *din*, which we render 'judgment'. I could further confuse the situation for you by exploring the source of the word *mishpat* with you – that would be the three-letter root *shin-fay-tet* –but I won't. What I will do is tell you that if we look at the ancient texts we see there are two elements to justice, which can operate independently, sometimes in concert. They are the sense of legal judgment and what Temba Mafico defines as the 'restoration of a situation or environment which promoted equity and harmony – or *shalom*.' Ah, there's another complicated term with multiple meanings that we find in the Hebrew Bible — we'll deal with that

another time. What is important here and now is that justice is both a function of enforcing the law but it is also about building a good society, which the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King would have called the 'Beloved Community'.

The ancient Israelites, like the other peoples of that time, believed their deity was Judge of the entire world. We see this idea expressed in Genesis 18, the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah. In Psalm 99.1-4 we read that God created the earth and established equity and justice. These ideas grew in importance in the Israelite world, even as society veered from the path of righteousness. When corruption flourished, the call from the prophets rang out. Who can forget the clarion call of Amos 5:24, where we hear the famous words: *Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

Again, *Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

These eloquent words derived their power because of the idea, the concept that God had established a covenant with the Israelites, first with Abraham and later with his descendants the Hebrews, when they were delivered into freedom from slavery. There were obligations involved in such an agreement, in such a relationship. God was the font of justice and so he expected his people to be just, to live justly, to build a society that was defined by justice.

Before Israel had kings, they had judges, or *shofetim*, figures that led the people into battle against their enemies and adjudicated disputes among the populace. These judges were expected to act fairly because they were seen as God's agents, and God was always fair, always just. The position of these judges did not come with benefits, but with responsibilities. This, of course, is something we know was supposed to be true also of the kings, but they often strayed and were condemned for their waywardness. The kings of Judah and Israel often and repeatedly failed to deliver justice. Which once again brings us back to that first question, what is justice?

It wasn't and isn't what the king or a president says it is. Justice, rather, is something that God has ordained and we are to strive for it. Further, and this may set some people off, God does have favorites among his people. We may all be the

Lord's children and we will all be judged solely on the merits and then through grace receive mercy, but God has a keen interest in the condition of the widow, and the orphan, and the stranger among us, and the refugee, and the poor. That's not a political statement and it's not a value judgment, nor the endorsement of any candidate for office. It's not meant to be a veiled threat to the rich or a warning to the wealthy that God hates them – though I will note he cares about what they do with their money, but frankly, God cares what all of us do with our money. No, that statement of preference, that claim of divine interest comes directly from Scripture.

God delivered a band of slaves to freedom. His prophets decried the abuse of the poor over and over. For an example, just look at Amos 2 and the Judgment Against the Nations and the Judgment Against Israel, which includes an indictment for the abuse of the poor. The laws of Israel made provision for those without. Remember the Book of Ruth? She and her mother-in-law were out in the fields gleaning which was their right, not by custom, but by law. A Godly society is one that cares for the poor and powerless, that makes provision for them. Yes there are different ways this can be done but it needs to be a priority, not an afterthought.

Which brings us back to Martin Luther King Day. On Monday we will remember the man, and the movement he inspired, the work he did, the oratory he shared. But in too many circles there will be little note that he was a minister, a preacher, who believed that the God of Israel, the God of Jesus Christ, wanted nothing less than justice for his people – all of his people.

To King and to the church justice wasn't – isn't – simply a political or philosophical concept, though justice has political and philosophical ramifications. Rather, justice is something characteristic of God, and by design is part of the fabric of the universe. Consequently, when we allow injustice to occur, we don't just err or break the law – we sin.

Yes, justice is a religious concept and we who call ourselves Christians must approach justice as something that is essential to God's good life, something that should be present for all people.

When I was little we said the Pledge of Allegiance at the beginning of the school day. I'm sure many if not most of you did too. You can probably still say it by

heart. Do you remember the final words? 'With liberty and justice for all'? *For all!* Not just the people in our neighborhood or the ones who vote like us or the people who can work an angle, demagogue the system, pay a bribe, make a campaign contribution but – all. That's a very Biblically-rooted concept. The authors of the pledge may not have realized that but King surely did.

What Martin Luther King did was rooted in his understanding of the Gospel. What he did was an expression of his Christian faith. His politics were shaped by his faith. The vision of America, of the Beloved Community that he wished to see, that he articulated was fundamentally a response to Jesus Christ, to the God of Israel who came to earth, of the One who loved humanity so much he sacrificed his all for us.

Justice is so much more than the legal system. It is, to Christians, to the church, and I hope to us, a bold and concrete expression of the world in which God wants each of us, and all of us, to be able to live and thrive and be the his people.

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