

Justice and Only Justice

As I've already mentioned this morning, we have something of a split focus for our worship service today. On the one hand, it is the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, an observance that has been around since 1908. If you are a fan of J.R.R. Tolkien, you might say this is the eleventy-first anniversary of the Week of Prayer. On the other hand, this is the Sunday before Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. Both of these observations are significant to me and I think to Good Shepherd Baptist Church. Ultimately, I find more and more that rather than competing with each other, that these two observances resonate with and enhance each other. I want to talk a little about that idea this morning as well as telling you about the situation in the country whose representatives chose the theme for this year's Week of Prayer, as has become my practice during this week each year. Then I'll take a look at the scripture for this morning and some obvious and not so obvious lessons from it. Finally, I'll have some suggestions as to what we might do as our part in fulfilling the charge that God gave the Children of Israel through this passage.

I suspect most of you know by now how important the cause of Christian Unity is to me personally. Raised as a Southern Baptist, I also spent three formative years in Church of England schools as a boy, faithfully attending weekly chapel services and daily intoning over my lunch, "For what we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly thankful, for Christ's sake, Amen," which is about as Anglican as you can get. As a preteen and teenager, I had many lively discussions with my school friends about their own traditions and how they differed or were similar to mine. I continued that habit as I went to college and to work, including with a pretty little Catholic girl who worked with me at Six Flags. I went so far as to marry her... now that's commitment to ecumenism!

When I became your pastor nearly 14 years ago, I had a pretty good indication that I was in the right place when I read in my contract that one of my duties was to "seek to maintain a cooperative relationship with... local ecumenical organizations." Some of you will remember that I was the convener of the South Snohomish County Ministerial Association for a couple of years as well as being a board member, treasurer, and finally president of the Church Council of Greater Seattle. Although the local ministerium is not currently meeting and I was unable due to health reasons to continue in leadership with the Church Council, I've enjoyed maintaining warm working relationships with a number of local ministry leaders and continuing to meet with them in various venues.

That contractual requirement of ecumenical involvement wasn't inserted into my contract simply because it was agreeable to me. It was an existing clause and I suspect it had been in your agreement with your ministers for quite some time because it speaks to points raised in the old mission statement of Good Shepherd Baptist Church, recently restated as statements of mission, core value and goals. It's in your bulletin every week: let's look at it together. Look at this phrase under mission: we are to be a community "that reaches out to all in a spirit of unconditional love." That certainly sounds like the roots of Christian Unity. Skip down to our statement of core values: "We value and support: A variety of viewpoints, biblical interpretations, and Christian expression" and "The dignity of each individual as an unduplicated child of God." Again, those are values which express a desire for unity with those who see things differently than we do. Finally, look at the second goal on our list: "To fill the church

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with people of every race, age, gender, & social strata.” We seek diversity of all kinds here. Wonderful!

Incidentally, does it ever occur to you to wonder how we are living up to or into these high sounding phrases? At the last Annual Meeting of our Evergreen Association, a challenge called “Yes, We Will!” was laid before our member churches. How would each church frame their individual mission from God in this world and how would we know if we were actively pursuing that mission? In December, I got a call from Brooke Ralston, a member of Seattle First Baptist Church, who’d been given the assignment of finding out where Good Shepherd is with those questions. I was able to walk Brooke through these statement of Mission, Core Values, and Goals, and tell him exactly what we were up to in the living of them, from our new art glass windows enhancing the beauty of our Sanctuary, to our part in the establishment of Shepherd’s Village and before that, Shepherd’s Garden, to our plans to support Pastor Stephen and Pastor Jorge as they bring more immigrant families into the life of Good Shepherd Baptist Church. He and I both gave thanks to God for your faithfulness and vision in these strategic steps for the Beloved Community.

Back to Church Unity and the connections with Dr. King. One can scarcely mention Martin Luther King without thinking of his dream of unity. Do you remember how he phrased it? “I say to you today, my friends, even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood... I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today. I have a dream that one day down in Alabama, with its vicious racists... one day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today.” Let’s not forget that as pluralistically religious as the United States was and is, Brother Martin was primarily talking to and about Christians and their unity.

I want to turn now to the specifics of this year’s Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. You may remember that each year Christians from a different nation are invited by officials from the World Council of Churches and the Vatican to submit a theme Scripture and some interpretive material around that theme. This year’s committee comes from Indonesia. I confess, Indonesia is not a country I know much about or keep in the forefront of my mind. Did you know, for example, that Indonesia is the country with the world’s largest population of Muslims? 86% of Indonesia’s population of 265 million follows Islam, while only 10% are Christians. You can understand why Christian Unity would be important to that minority. Indonesia is comprised of over 17,000 islands with people of 1,340 ethnic groups speaking over 740 local languages. National ties, however, come from a unified national language, Bahasa, and the nation’s five founding principles, called Pancasila. The national motto translates as Unity in Diversity. The committee writes, “Across the diversity of ethnicity, language and religion, Indonesians have lived by the principle of *gotong royong* which is to live in solidarity and by collaboration. This

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means sharing in all aspects of life, work, grief and festivities, and regarding all Indonesians as brothers and sisters.”

While that certainly sounds idyllic, as we all know, there is always a snake in the garden. Let me read you this next from the committee’s statement: “Much of the economic growth that Indonesia has experienced in recent decades has been built on a system that has competition at its heart. This is in stark contrast to the collaboration of *gotong royong*. Corruption is experienced in many forms. It infects politics and business, often with devastating consequences for the environment. In particular, corruption undermines justice and the implementation of law. Too often those who are supposed to promote justice and protect the weak do the opposite. As a consequence, the gap between the rich and the poor has widened; and so a country rich in resources has the scandal of many people living in poverty... Meanwhile particular ethnic and religious groups are often associated with wealth in ways that have fed tensions. Radicalization that pits one community against another has grown and is exacerbated by the misuse of social media that demonizes particular communities.”

I don’t think I have to stretch the truth at all to say that these points identified as dangerous by Christians in Indonesia could just as easily be cited as causes of many of the ills we currently face in the United States. Our capitalist ethic is deeply competitive with big winners and big losers and, increasingly, not much middle. It is a far cry from “love your neighbor as yourself.” One of the biggest losers is the environment; a process sped up by the rapacious policies of the current administration. As the self-interest of many in our country leads them to flout safety and financial regulations and as it becomes increasingly clear that “justice” often depends on the color of one’s skin and the size of one’s bank account, faith in our legal system from local police departments to the Supreme Court grows weaker each day. We live in the richest country on earth and yet thousands are unhoused and hungry. Scapegoats and straw men are everywhere: people of color, immigrants, non-Christians, those of the opposite political party, rednecks and snowflakes alike are all held up as “what’s really wrong with our country;” all inflamed by the incessant barrage of posts, tweets, and irresponsible media.

To heal their national wounds, our national wounds, and begin the process of reconciliation, our Indonesian sisters and brothers have turned to the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy. A deep dive on this passage would give us clues as to the nature of justice in Israel during both the period of the judges and of the kings, as well as the place of Deuteronomy in the Five Books of Moses but those concepts are rather beside the point today. Or we could engage in a comparison and contrast between the two dominant words of the passage: justice (*mishpat*) and righteousness (*tsedeq*). But I think our Indonesian sisters and brothers have chosen wisely in focusing on just one phrase from this passage: “Justice, only justice, you shall pursue...”

I don’t know how the unified Bahasa language of Indonesia nor its 740 local languages translate that phrase from Hebrew but the English NRSV translation both reveals and obscures some of the meaning in the original: “Tsedeq tsedeq radaph.” The doubled noun at the beginning of the sentence highlights the importance of the concept translated as “justice” in the NRSV and also adds a sense of urgency and imperative. God’s word for Israel is that they must pursue justice if they are to live long and prosper in the land that God has given them. It is a clear mandate for the Children of Israel, for the Indonesians, and for us. The answer for the divisions plaguing our

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countries, the heart of Christian Unity, is the restorative justice of God. Our Indonesian friends coupled their choice of this passage from Deuteronomy with Psalm 82, which we used in our Call to Worship this morning. It gives us the picture of what God's vision of justice looks like: "Bring justice to the downtrodden and orphaned. The poor and the hungry, protect their rights. Rescue the needy and afflicted; from the hands of the wrongful, lift them away."

But here's the funny thing about our translation of Deuteronomy 16:20 and I've already given you the key. Normally, even in this passage, "Tsedeq tsedeq radaph" might not be translated as "Justice, only justice, you shall pursue." The word most commonly translated as "justice" is not "tsedeq" but "mishpat," even in this passage. The common translation for "tsedeq" is "righteousness." We are not to seek a mere adherence to the technical legal meaning of justice, which is what the root of "mishpat" points to, but rather the deeper, fuller righteousness of God. Suddenly, a rich collection of key phrases from the Scriptures come tumbling to our minds. Righteousness is loving God and loving neighbor as self. Righteousness is doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness," Jesus said, "and all these things shall be added unto you."

We find this link between justice and righteousness in Dr. King's work as well. In his last sermon from his own pulpit at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Dr. King contrasted his own calling with those who sought what the world sees as success through what had been called "the Drum Major Instinct." "...if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter."

"Tsedeq, tsedeq radaph!" Justice and righteousness, justice and righteousness, we shall pursue! Our goals, our values, our mission all add up to this one thing: restoring our world and all its people to loving relationship with our Loving Creator. It's why we don't use Styrofoam cups for our coffee. It's why we invite people to come and grow vegetables and flowers on our land. It's why we gather food for the hungry and provide shelter, transitional and long-term, for those in need. It's why we support the work of this church with our tithes and offerings, so that our works of justice and righteousness and discipleship can continue. It's why we reach out to our lawmakers, local, state, and national, to remind them that our country's stability and prosperity truly rely not on the cleverness of bankers nor on the size of our armed forces but on true justice for all, rooted in the righteous values of our pluralistic society. It's why some of us marched with the Poor People's Campaign, the renewed call for justice begun by Dr. King. It's why we come here each week to learn more and more about God's vision for justice and righteousness, which became flesh in the man Jesus.

The Indonesian committee had this to say about their situation, and ours: "Christ's Church is called to be a foretaste of (the) kingdom (of God). However, in our disunity we fall short. We fail to be the sign of God's love for (God's) people. Just as injustice has widened the divisions that have riven Indonesian society, so injustice has also fed the divisions of the Church. We repent of the injustice that causes division, but as Christians we also believe in the power of Christ to forgive us and heal. And so, we find ourselves united under the cross of Christ, calling both for his grace to end injustice and for his mercy for the sins which have caused our division... as individual Christians and communities, we are often complicit with injustice, and yet we are

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called together to form a united witness for justice and to be a means of Christ's healing grace for the brokenness of the world." Witnesses for justice... a means of healing grace... these are our callings as well. And even though we may feel overwhelmed by the level of injustice in our society, even though we may feel the deep pain of our own complicity, we remember those words of Martin Luther King which paraphrased so many of the promises of our God: "The moral arc of the universe bends slowly but it bends towards justice." In other words, we shall overcome. Thanks be to God! Amen.