

Texts: **Psalm 99 & Luke 18: 1-8**

As a continuation of our *CALLED FOURTH* program, this month, the youth groups at Fourth Pres have been engaged in a study of our biblical calling to practice “Justice and Reconciliation.” This morning, we join with them to hear God’s call on our lives, God’s call to be a people of justice.

Our psalm text this morning is a hymn of praise to God, and of all the reasons to celebrate who God is, the psalmist lifts up God’s justice. God is called the “Mighty King, **lover of justice**, you have **established equity**; you have **executed justice** and **righteousness**,” (Ps. 99: 4). This title for God: “**lover of justice**,” appears only in this psalm, but the vision of God as the giver and defender of justice runs throughout the stories of Scripture.

At the beginning of the story of Exodus, the Hebrew people have been unjustly enslaved in Egypt. We are told, “The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them,” (Ex 1: 13-14). In the midst of this injustice, the Hebrew people cry out to God, and God hears their groaning cries. God shows himself as the “Lover of Justice,” by calling Moses to lead the oppressed people into freedom through the Red Sea. Once they are free, God acts again, giving them the law of the covenant. Though summarized in the Ten Commandments, the full covenant laws that God established for the wandering Hebrews fill up a majority of the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. These laws are given for the ordering of the community’s life around justice and equity, and particularly for the protection of those who have no power. God’s justice is seen in many places throughout these covenant laws. Listen to a few:

“For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing.” (Deut 10: 17-18)

“You shall appoint judges and officials throughout your tribes, in all your towns that the Lord your God is giving you, and they shall render just decisions for the people. You must not distort justice; you must not show partiality... Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, so that you may live and occupy the land that the Lord your God is giving you.” (Deut 16: 18-20)

“You shall not pervert the justice due to your poor in their lawsuits. Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent or those in the right, for I will not acquit the guilty. You shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the officials, and subverts the cause of those who are in the right.” (Exodus 23: 6-8)

“You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow’s garment in pledge. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this.” (Deut 24: 17-18)

“‘Cursed be anyone who deprives the alien, the orphan, and the widow of justice.’ (Duet 27:19)

God gives the gift of the Law to the wandering people who needed a guide.

After their 40 years in the wilderness, the Hebrews finally arrive in the land of Canaan, where they are frequently picked on by larger and more powerful groups like the Midianites, the Ammonites, and the Philistines. When the people lift up their cries for protection and justice God calls “judges,” like Gideon and Samson, to set things right. Soon, God charges the last of the judges, Samuel, to anoint the kings that will begin the kingdom of Israel. After solidifying his power as king, we are told that “David reigned over all Israel; and David administered justice and equity to all his people” (2 Sam. 8:15). Again and again in scripture, justice and law are seen as gifts from God, given to a people in need. And yet, our stories also tell us that in sin we distort this gift and turn justice into a tool for our own purposes.

Soon, however, the lust for power turns kings into unjust tyrants. Within a few generations, the rulers of Israel become concerned only with their own riches and luxurious lifestyles. Those in power over Israel have perverted the justice they were supposed to defend. As Amos tells us, they “sell the righteous for silver, and [sell] the needy for a pair of sandals—they trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth and push the afflicted out of the way...and in the house of their God they drink wine bought with fines they imposed” (Amos

2: 6-8). While committing these offenses against those who are helpless in their society, the ones in power cover over their guilt by increasing the visibility of their religious devotion. They build new places of worship; they bring grand sacrifices to the altar; they make sure that everyone sees them praying and fasting, and celebrating rituals—all the while continuing to crush the poor with unjust systems of power. It is into this oppressive situation that God calls people to serve as prophets, speaking truth to power, lifting up God’s justice against an age of unholy oppression:

The prophet **Hosea** cries out,

“Hear the word of the Lord, O people of Israel;  
for the Lord has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land.

There is no faithfulness or loyalty,  
and no knowledge of God in the land.

Swearing, lying, and murder,  
and stealing and adultery break out;  
bloodshed follows bloodshed.

Therefore the land mourns,  
and all who live in it languish. (Hosea 4: 1-2)

The prophet **Amos** speaks the word of the Lord against outward religious practices that are devoid of any real sense of social and economic justice,

“Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood,  
and bring righteousness to the ground!

I know how many are your transgressions,  
and how great are your sins—  
you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe,  
and push aside the needy in the gate.

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;

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

The prophet **Micah** even uses the scene of the law court to indict the rulers of their unjust ways and call them to return to God’s justice:

“Hear what the Lord says:

Rise, plead your case before the mountains,  
and let the hills hear your voice...

for the Lord has a controversy with his people,  
and he will contend with Israel.”

And Israel’s reply to charges of injustice are:

““With what shall I come before the Lord,  
and bow myself before God on high?

Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings,  
with calves a year old?

Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,  
with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?

Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?””

God’s answer:

“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: 1-8)

Time and time again in scripture, God is shown to be the "lover of justice." God acts on behalf of those who are oppressed. God comes to the defense of the helpless. God grants freedom and gives the law as a gift for the ordering of human life. God sends prophets to call us back to the law of God's love. In the Old Testament, the stock figures of the "poor, the orphan, and the widow," serve as symbols of social and economic helplessness. Those without wealth, parents, or husbands were, in that society, completely dependent on others for their survival. Thus, the ways that they were treated served as a measuring stick for whether or not the people were following God's justice. The biblical idea of God's justice, with a particular focus on those who are marginalized by society, stands in sharp contrast to our modern understandings of the law. Today we think of justice as a blind, impartial system of punishing wrongdoers for what they deserve and rewarding those who can afford to play the game.

The Reformed theologian Shirley Guthrie speaks of God's "loving justice" and that this biblical view differs from our modern notions of justice in two ways: "(1) The God of scripture is not a blind judge but one who sees very clearly the difference between people—especially the difference between the rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless, the insiders and "strangers" or aliens. And God's justice is openly on the side of those who are poor, weak, threatened, and excluded." (2) God's justice gives people not what they *deserve* but what they *need*. *It is justice that gives rights to those who have no rights.*"<sup>1</sup>

This dichotomy between God's justice and our fallen legal systems is seen most clearly in the parable that Jesus tells his disciples and that we read this morning. Jesus said, "In a certain city there was a **judge** who neither *feared God nor had respect for people*, (Think of the two great commandments: to love the Lord, your God and to love your neighbor—this judge does not follow either). In that city there was also a **widow** who kept coming to him and saying, "**Grant me justice.**" "Help me, my rights have been violated!" For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, **I will grant her justice**, so that she may not wear me out ..." And the Jesus said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. **And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?**" (Luke 18: 1-8).

As the narrator, Luke tells us that this parable is about persistence in prayer, and this certainly is the case. But, this parable is also clearly about justice. Of all the stories Jesus could have told about prayer, he chose to tell one about a *widow who cried out for justice*. Now, his disciples would have immediately caught the implications of this symbolic character from the Old Testament—the helpless one whom God commands us to protect. And she is contrasted with the "unjust judge"—what a name!—who serves as a perfect caricature of the perversion of justice by those in power. This judge is not *blind*, apparently he is *deaf*! He refuses to hear her case. He refuses to acknowledge that this poor beggar woman exists because she cannot be used for his benefit. The legal system for this judge is all about power and prestige, and since the widow has none, she can be ignored...at least for a while. But through her constant, persistent, painfully dehumanizing experience of begging day in and day out for years on end, she finally gets her day in court.

From these stories of scripture we see this image of God as "lover of justice" come to life, and we see clearly that God's justice has a focused partiality for those who are pushed to the margins. God is on the side of the poor and oppressed. The story doesn't end there, however, for as Guthrie tells us,

"Scripture goes beyond this political and economic aspect of God's justice to emphasize another dimension of it that is even more shocking. The just God of scripture is also on the side of those who are *morally* and *spiritually* poor and oppressed: poor *sinners* who are "oppressed" not just by others but by their own sinfulness, people who are "without rights" because they deserve only condemnation for disobeying the law of God... Whether [we] are rich or poor, respectable insiders or excluded outsiders, whether [we] are guilty of "little" sins or the worst criminal act, God's justice means that God is for and not against sinful people, accepts rather than rejects [us], seeks [our] restoration and salvation and not the punishment [we] deserve for what [we] have done or not done. How do we know this? Because in Jesus Christ God was the *friend* of sinners (Luke 7:34). Because God's justice is executed in the Jesus

who died for the “ungodly,” the “enemies” of God so that they might be “justified” before God by God’s *grace*, as a gift (Rom. 3: 21-26, 5: 5-10).<sup>ii</sup>

Clearly, the biblical view of God’s justice, that God is on the side of the poor and those oppressed by sin, is good news for us all! Writing to his friends in Corinth, the Apostle Paul tells us about this good news of the gospel, that God is in Christ, “reconciling the world to himself,” (2Cor 5:19). We are recipients of this reconciling and redeeming justice of God—a loving justice that will not leave us as we are, but that truly seeks to change us and the world into ways that reflect God’s love. As Paul says, “All this is from God, who **reconciled** us to himself through Christ, and [who] has given us **the ministry of reconciliation;**” (2 Cor 5: 18). This calling, this “ministry of reconciliation,” comes *after* our being reconciled to God by the grace of God in Jesus Christ. In other words, our work for justice, our efforts to include those who are outcast, our task of reconciling broken relationships, our charge to lift up the voice of those long silenced by poverty and oppression, our call to practice justice and reconciliation—all of this is our thankful response to God, the lover of justice, who has *already reconciled us* to God and to one another through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Just as our sense of justice is illumined by the biblical witness of God at work for the poor and oppressed, so too is our call to practice justice and reconciliation directed by scripture. The biblical witness challenges us to take a very serious look at the world around us and identify the places where people are crying out for justice. It calls us to ask some very pointed questions:

How does the biblical understanding of the call to care for the poor challenge us to examine how and on whom we spend our money?

How does the biblical image of the widow crying, “Grant me justice!” call us to listen for those who today are being silenced and kept at arm’s length from the halls of power?

How does the biblical notion of caring for the “orphan” guide us as we seek to uphold the promises we make at every baptism to care for all God’s children, to serve as their role models in the faith, and to keep their best interests in mind as we make difficult decision about their education?

How does the biblical charge to welcome the alien invite us to reexamine our views on our nation’s stances toward those from other countries, finding ways to place biblical hospitality in forefront of our policies?

How do biblical stories of strangers being accepted as friends call us as the church to extend a welcome embrace to all those who are rejected and told they don’t fit in?

How does the biblical view of justice, God’s justice, call us into lives of gratitude, lived in light of the gift of grace? Our answers to these questions may be different for each of us, but they are surely united by the common calling from our one Lord, the lover of Justice, who **reconciled** us to himself through Christ, and has given us **the ministry of reconciliation.**” Thanks be to God for the good news of the gospel, that in God’s loving justice we are forgiven and set free. And thanks be to God for the call to respond to this grace by living lives of justice and reconciliation. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, p. 107.

<sup>ii</sup>Guthrie, p. 108.