

Social Justice – a Core Value of BAPC
Luke 18:1-8 and Micah 6:6, 8
14 March 2021

During the season of Lent this year, on our way to the Day of Resurrection, I have been trying to acquaint you with the Mission, Vision and Values that your leaders received from God as a result of the effort you and they put into Bon Air's rich and fruitful Mission Discernment process. We **started** with the freshly discerned Mission. God calls Bon Air Church to be: *Seeking and Serving Christ, Sharing God's Love for All Creation*. We then went on to look at the **Vision** Statement. **When** Bon Air addresses its mission faithfully, we will see: *A diverse congregation – open, affirming, and supportive of each other, and demonstrating faithfulness through worship, education, fellowship and service that is valued by the community*. Last Sunday we considered one of the five **Values** identified as being at the Core of this Church's identity – *Caring Community*. And **this** Sunday, we're going to focus on a second Value – *Social Justice*. (By the way – I'm presenting these five not in any order of priority or significance. There isn't one. I just threw a dart. Although you might want to organize them in a way that works for you – just for fun!)

As a way of moving **into** our reflection today, I've selected two readings from scripture... which I'd like us to approach with the following Prayer for Illumination: *God, the giver of all good things, grant us ears that are open to your voice, eyes that can see from your point of view, and a willingness to receive and proclaim with humility the Word that comes to us this day; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

First Reading - Luke 18:1-8

Second Reading - Micah 6:6 and 8

One Spring day about sixty years ago, 6-year old Billy and 5-year old Bethy were promised a treat once they put away all the toys they'd strewn around the living room. When the work was done – nicely, mom said – they could share a chocolate bunny from the family's candy jar. *All right!!*

We're done, they soon hollered. And once mom had **looked**, she said *Great!* And then she sent them to the jar... where Billy pulled out a nice, fat bunny, broke off the head and a good bit more, stuffed it into his mouth and, with a grin, handed the two feet to his baby sister... who immediately burst into tears. *It's not fair*, she cried as she ran to her mother. *Billy took almost all of it for himself. It wasn't right. It isn't right. He should be ashamed!*

(O, Bethy, he is. He is. And this afternoon he's going to bring you an entire chocolate bunny and **try** to make things right.)

At its most basic level, justice is **fairness**. It's **about** fairness... about what is right. Injustice is unfairness. Something's not right. Things are out of balance. Injustice **can** be a little difficult to **define**; but, as with pornography, we know it when we **see** it. That's **not** to say

that we do **always** see it... that we have no **blind** spots. Of course, we do. But **when** we see injustice, we usually know what it is. We **certainly** know it when we feel it **happening to us**.

In my Merriam Webster, *fairness* is actually the second definition for the word justice. The first definition is this: *Justice is the **administration** of what is just – as by assigning merited rewards or punishment.* The **administration** of what is just... the **work** put into promoting, securing or restoring what is fair, what is right, **through merited rewards** or punishments” ... the effort to bring about balance, equilibrium, fairness... a sense of peace, perhaps.

The Supreme **Court** of Virginia, as Kent Pankey well knows, has a seal with a picture of Lady Justice holding up a scale... a balance scale, with which she can weigh the evidence and determine if something's out of line, if something's **required** to make things right and true.

The judge in Jesus' story – *the unjust judge*, as Jesus called him – wasn't especially concerned with justice, with balance, with providing for fairness or promoting what was actually right and good for the persons who came before him.

What **he** wanted was **relief** from the widow's persistent call for fairness, for redress, for justice. He granted the widow's request for justice... to get **himself** some peace. It was not because he cared about **her** or about the importance of promoting, securing or restoring fairness generally... of establishing the equilibrium of justice within society. It was all about him. He figured, *No justice for her, no peace for me!* Well, OK... if that's what it took!!

But... step back from this story and consider justice from a wider perspective. I think one can make a case... a very good case... that **if there is**, in the larger society, a **condition** or construct that is unfair, that's not right, that's unjust for **some**... then that unfairness, that imbalance, will affect everyone in that society... morally and spiritually, at the very least... and very likely in many other ways.

We are profoundly connected to each other... profoundly part of a **common** society. Your being, your identity, is interwoven with mine and hers and theirs.

Our **personal** well-being is intimately **related** to the well-being of the wider society. And so, when **somewhere** in that society justice is denied and the balance goes down, **everywhere** in that society peace and a sense of equilibrium will go skittering away. If your end of the Titanic is going down, mine will be, too. It is one ship. But then of course, when injustice **somewhere** is **properly** addressed, the **well-being** of the **whole** society will be strengthened.

On our best days, we Presbyterian disciples have had a pretty clear understanding of this and an honest **determination** to strengthen the well-being of society by **addressing** injustices... unfairnesses... imbalances – in personal relationships, in the community of faith, and in the wider society as well. Our confessional heritage reflects this understanding and our determination quite clearly. Later this morning, we'll use a bit of the Belhar Confession as an affirmation of faith; but now I'm going to share a portion of the Declaration of Faith adopted by the Southern Presbyterian Church in the late 70's. John Leith, a professor at Union Seminary, was a prominent part of the team that composed it. From chapter eight, "The Christian Mission", here is section three:

GOD SENDS US TO STRIVE FOR JUSTICE.

God has reached out to those who suffer injustice
and taken up the cause of the excluded and the poor.
The Lord is moving toward the time
When justice will roll down like waters
And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.
We are persuaded that God is at work here and now
When people deal fairly with each other
And labor to change customs and structures
That enslave and oppress human beings.
We believe God sends us
To work with all available allies:
To correct the growing disparity
Between rich and poor nations;
To make the operation of courts and penal institutions
More just and humane;
To root out prejudice and racism
From our hearts and institutions;
To stand with men and women
Of all ages, races, and classes
As they struggle for dignity and respect
And the chance to exercise power for the common good.
We must not countenance within the church and its institutions
The inequities we seek to correct in the world.
We must be willing to make such amends as we can
For centuries of injustice which the church condoned.

This is part of the tradition... the *handed-down* perspective and beliefs of those in our Presbyterian community. And you Bon Air Presbyterians by and large **get** this. You own this and reflect this in your aims and desires. You sense yourselves **called** to promote, secure or restore what is fair and right; you **long** for there to be balance... peace... for one and all... both in your own community, your own society, and in the larger society, too. You **value** justice. *Social Justice*. It is a **Core** Value for Bon Air Church. It's deep in your DNA. Does that mean that Bon Air Church **always keeps its scales in balance**, hits the **fairness** mark with **every** decision and is the **first** in the community to show up **whenever** justice is being denied? Of course not. But this church **knows** that it's **meant** to pursue fairness, justice... and that when, in any way, it **is** pursuing, promoting and helping others enjoy justice, it's on the **right** path. It's on **its** right path with God.

And so, you try. You work to **be fair**... to deepen your **sensitivity** to injustices and your awareness of your own biases... to strengthen your capacities for **addressing** injustices helpfully... for creating conditions in which fairness is more possible. You work at this through

your **educational** ministries... and through the **fellowship** you seek to develop among members here and with diverse others in the wider community – those of other faiths, the prison population, differing ethnicities. And sometimes you work at it in that way the late John Lewis urged – making a little **noise** out there and getting in trouble – *good trouble* is what he called it. **You** know the kind. Mayor Stoney knows you know. And so does God, I'm sure.

Dr. Cornel West, you may have heard, said *Never forget – justice is what **love** looks like in public*. If so, then the pursuit of justice, the addressing of injustices, should be an **expression** of **love**. And, if it is not, then something will need to be done about that. Something. But what?

I've been thinking for a number of weeks about a three-legged **stool** I used to have. It may have come out of a milking parlor somewhere. I don't know. But wherever it came from, and wherever it went, it was a seriously stable stool... marvelously balanced... and a solid perch from which to do all kinds of useful things... because of those three legs. Two legs would have been teetery. One leg not much help. **Three** legs set you up **just right**.

That stool is what I pictured one day after reading the passage from Micah... and **hearing** it in a **fresh** way. The question was posed: **What** is **good** for us mortals... and what does God require of us? **This**, the prophet tells us... this **one** thing that the Lord has told us before: *To do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God*.

Now, that may **sound** like **three** things, but I think it's **actually** one. The one thing that God requires is three things that **together** work as one. Each is an aspect of the other **two** – justice is lovingkindness in public. Each is a necessary **part** of the whole. Each contributes to how the whole functions, what it provides for. **Kindness** is involved in the **proper** practice of **justice**. So is humility before God... which also flows **toward** kindness and finds joy in promoting balance. It's **not** unlike the **Trinity**. Three in one and one in three. Working en-semble... good... right... promoting what God intends: Peace? Beloved community? Balance? A perfect perch for life and ministry?

Take a seat, friend. Kindly take a seat on this one good thing that our God requires of us... of each one of us. Find some **balance** there – for **yourself**... for others. And, while you're **sitting** there, see if you can **use** those three legs to take a little **walk** with your God... to walk humbly with God... wherever **God** might choose to take you. You never **know** where God **might** take you. But, as long as it's God that you're going with, the trip's bound to be right and good and fair!

May it be so for you and for us all. Amen.