

## The Justice Formula

Zechariah 7:9-10; Psalm 145:14-21; Matthew 11:1-6

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John the Baptist was in a Roman prison awaiting certain execution. John was the cousin of Jesus through his mother Elizabeth and Mary the mother of Jesus. John had been the one chosen by God to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus and the message that Jesus would proclaim. How could John ever have imagined that he would find himself in prison for speaking truth to power? For sure, John was a firebrand who spoke often without regard to consequences, but now the consequences will be fatal.

John had dared to speak out against the life style of Herod the Great. Herod was a tyrannical ruler over the nation. He set no moral limits on his personal behavior. He was the kind of person who would have said, "I have never done anything for which to feel guilty or need forgiveness." John fell into trouble with Herod when he spoke out against the fact that Herod had driven away his wife so that he could marry Herodias, the wife of one of his relatives. She was as evil as was Herod. It was Herodias that urged her new husband to imprison John in the dungeon in the castle at Machaerus (pronounced Mac u' rus) near the Dead Sea.

The Roman Empire at that time stretched across much of the known world. It would finally collapse some 400 years later (476 AD) for many reasons, not the least of which was

- the political corruption of its leaders,
- its disregard for the dignity of the individual,
- the decline of its moral and ethical values,
- and the influence of Christianity.

We sometimes forget that it is in this kind of culture, this kind of political environment, that Jesus does his ministry.

John the Baptist, now in prison, sends messengers to Jesus to ask the question to which he must know the answer before he dies. "Jesus, are You the person that I believed You to be? I was so sure, but now I must know before I die." Jesus knows what John needs to hear. John needs to hear that because of *his ministry* Jesus can now do what He was sent to do. Jesus sends back word to John. John, the government isn't changing, political corruption abounds, true justice is not being practiced, there is oppression of the poor, people are being oppressed in every way one can imagine.

Then Jesus sends a message that will be clear to John. It is a description about himself from the prophet Isaiah. (Isaiah 35:5ff)

John, even though an evil ruler is in power,

- the blind are receiving their sight,
- the lame are being made to walk,
- lepers are being made healthy and returned to their families,
- the deaf hear again,
- the dead are raised up to life,
- and John, the *poor*,

- the people nobody notices,
- the people nobody makes eye contact with,
- the people who don't matter to the Roman government,
- the people who don't matter to the religious leaders because they can't afford to pay the Temple tax, so they are excluded from high holy days of worship in the Temple,
- the POOR, John, THE POOR, have the Gospel preached to *them*.
- the POOR in wealth and the POOR in spirit are being both loved by Me.

Oh, John,

- I'm here to care for both the *somebodies* and those who are the *nobodies* in the eyes of the world.
- I'm here to tell everyone that they have worth, and significance, and value.
- I'm here to tell them the Good News that I have come to offer them hope where there is no hope, abundant life in the absence of plenty, and life everlasting.

The grief of Jesus is evident when, after John's messengers had departed, He turned to his disciples and told them, "There has not been born anyone greater than John the Baptist."

John was put to death in the year 36 AD. On an evening in that year, Herod gave a banquet for his friends. The wine flowed freely. When Herod was well drunk with wine, Salome, the daughter of Herodius, came into the hall and danced before him. Intrigued by her beauty and sexuality, Herod promised to give her anything for which she asked. She consulted her mother and returned with the request for the head of John on a platter. Although Herod was not happy to do this, he had to save face with his friends, and so he granted her request, and John was killed and his head brought to her and presented at the banquet.

Even so, Jesus, and those who ministered with Him, gave hope and courage to the desperate in that society. In Jesus they found the hope that no government could give to them.

Fast forward to this modern world with all of its disparity, all of its hurt, all of its injustice. People are standing outside the churches today wondering if there is *any way* in which the Church might be relevant to their needs as they live in today's world. They are asking, "What does this Jesus who walked this earth more than 2000 years ago have to offer today's world, today's problems, today's concerns. What does Jesus have to offer me?!"

Two thousand years have gone by and still this world is filled with

- political corruption and war,
- disregard for human dignity for folks who are "other" than us,
- human trafficking in plain sight,
- folks who commonly practice situational ethics,
- places where oppression is the norm,
- where people are literally dying of starvation and others are dying of obesity,
- where pure drinking water is unknown,
- where some die for lack of medications that would cost only pennies.

What does Jesus who walked on the earth 2000 years ago have to offer us today? What difference has it made that He lived and died and rose again. What difference does it make that the Body of Jesus Christ, the Church, exists in this world, exists in Alfred?

No difference, unless we are the hands and feet and eyes and ears and heart, voice of Christ! No difference, unless we do more than talk about the needs that somebody ought to do something about. No difference, unless we involve ourselves in reaching out and actually touching the lives of people, and the situations where change and healing and help and hope are needed.

We stepped up to help immigrants from Afghanistan as they arrived in this country, but other immigrants are not being treated with dignity. Some are being used as political "cannon fodder" to shoot at anyone who doesn't agree with the fact that we should allow refugees to seek asylum in this country. Thank God, the houses of worship in New York and Chicago, and Washington DC, and Martha's Vineyard, where these refugees have been "shipped," have been in the forefront of helping them with food and clothing and lodging and legal assistance, and most of all, respect and love.

Closer to home, in Hornell, in July, hate came to three houses of worship, Rehoboth Deliverance Ministries (a mostly black congregation), St. Ann's Roman Catholic Church, and Temple Beth-El. As people gathered to worship flyers promoting the "Aryan National Army" were posted on their buildings. On the flyers was the image of a skull positioned inside a swastika with the wording "We aren't going anywhere. It's time to clean up our streets." In all, more than 100 white supremacist pamphlets were distributed around Hornell over that same weekend on both public and private property. Police arrested three suspects, all from Hornell, and charged them with 115 counts of first-degree felony aggravated harassment, a hate crime.

Thankfully, that is not the end of the story, nor should it be! Soon after the arrests, the Hornell clergy began meeting to plan a response.

- They issued a proclamation declaring the fliers as an "intolerable assault on the fabric of the community that violates every standard of decency according to how we should treat one another.
- They called for a strong public repudiation of the pamphlets.
- They have planned a peace walk in Hornell on Saturday, September 24 at 1 p.m. They will stop outside each of the houses of worship where fliers were left and have a brief service of prayer.

What about us? In this town of Alfred there are people all around us who never hear the Good News that Jesus loves them and cares about them and for them. Does that bother us?

We live in a high-tech society, but the ministry of Jesus was high touch. Technology is marvelous, and I would never want to retreat into the "good old days," but

- a computer cannot hold you when you hurt.
- a text message may be expedient, but it cannot replace a human voice that embodies the presence of Christ.
- an electronic tablet in your hands may deliver the news of the day, but it cannot replace a human voice sharing the Good News that Jesus cares for you.

The Church can care for others in many ways. Sometimes it is by giving of time; sometimes it requires extra energy; sometimes it requires the giving of resources.

This month our mission focuses on Habitat for Humanity. We will give out money to support, but I hope that there will be, at some time, an opportunity for an actual work crew to participate. That ministry is a form of justice that says “your worth to us, or to Jesus, doesn’t depend upon your financial worth.” Each month we commit ourselves to a ministry that helps others. Let us continue to give of ourselves and our resources to these ministries.

Let us also become aware of the other kinds of justice issues that need our help. One such issue of course is the environment. It would be hard for anyone to reasonably deny that our climate is in a crisis mode. At this point we can do something to turn things around. We have not much longer to do that. It is a complicated issue, but there are some very simple things that we can do to turn this complicated situation around.

God said, “Justice, justice only shall you do.” (Deuteronomy 16:20) Ruth Bader Ginsberg thought these words so important that she had them framed and hung on her office wall so that she saw them each day as she began her work.

What was the justice for John? No one could come to his rescue. He died an unjust death. But today

- We hold his name in reverence.
- There are churches named for him.
- During Advent each year we talk about the ministry purpose of John’s life even before he was born.
- Each year when we commemorate the baptism of Jesus, we also honor John who prepared the way for Him.

When do we ever hear of Herod?

- None of the structures that he built remain.
- No honor is given to his name.
- No monuments have been erected to his memory.
- The only time that his name is mentioned is in a sermon that describes how evil he was.

So the question is, “What would it mean for each of us to be involved in bringing about social and spiritual justice in the world in which we live, that world in which we live and move and have our experience?”

Someone is going to say to me,

- I’m too old to do anything anymore.
- I’ve done my time, let someone younger do it.
- I don’t know what to do; if someone would tell me what to do I might consider it.
- I’m so busy with my work and my family, there’s no time for anything else.
- I don’t have any abilities that can help.
- I don’t want to get involved.

It almost sounds like Moses as he stood by the burning bush and responded to God by saying “Oh, God, I would love to do what You have asked me to do, but I have several excellent excuses.”

So where might one begin? Start with something simple:

- Try going on a mission work trip that isn't a vacation.
- Try volunteering at an agency that helps people.
- Try giving time to intercessory prayer for the needs of others.
- Try asking God to direct you to something that will make a difference in the lives of people and something that will also make a difference in your life.

As long as God gives us life and a measure of health to function in any way, there is a purpose that God has for us to help others. God's justice formula leaves no one uncared for.

Amen.