
Is Justice Fair?
Mimico Presbyterian Church and Wesley Mimico United Church
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by Paul Shepherd

Based on Micah 6:1-8 and Matthew 5:1-12

I have a confession to make. The scriptures today are not from our lectionary. I selected them myself because I thought it would be fun – and in truth I thought it might be *easy* – to preach on these well-known pieces of scripture. I've seen the Micah passage “what does the lord require of you” as an iPad cover. The texts are well-known. And the passages deal with the issue of justice – something we all care about. In selecting these texts I was setting myself up for an easy sermon.

So, I was a bit taken aback when I started to prepare for the service today and realized that the concept of justice is a bit hard to actually get ahold of. For example, some people see capital punishment as “the ultimate justice” while others see it as “the ultimate INjustice”. How can the same event be seen as either extreme justice or extreme injustice. Perhaps justice is not so straight-forward after all.

I think the problem is that justice is about recognizing something as “unfair” and transforming it into something “fair”. And even though we often agree on what makes a situation unfair, that does not mean that we agree on what fair means, and it certainly does not mean that we agree on how to transform an unfair situation into a fair one. Even young children readily identify a situation that is “unfair”, but “fair” is more elusive.

Perhaps that's not so strange. When my family and I go on a sailing trip, we all enjoy different parts of the adventure. We have different ideas of what makes a “great” sailing trip. I want good winds and some navigational challenges. My wife Marjorie wants calm seas and beautiful sunsets. My son Gareth wants good fishing. My son Ian wants lots of time for shore leave. See, we don't agree on what makes for a good trip. On the other hand, we do agree on what makes a bad trip. We all agree that being cold and miserable is bad. We all agree that inadequate food and drink makes a trip bad. We all agree that when someone sits down on our last loaf of bread, that's bad.

Likewise, the idea of what is unfair is easier for us all to agree on, while the idea of what is fair seems more personal, more subjective. And so, the words of Micah - “what does the lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” - are not so clear after all. The words are comforting, but they do not exactly lay out a road map that we can simply follow.

Of course, there are many passages in Scripture - even passages that describe God - that make it hard to know what justice looks like. Consider the story of Noah’s Ark. When we bring that story up in church, we often focus on God saving Noah and his family. We even revel in the story, singing up-beat songs like the Rise and Shine “Arky Arky” song. Compete with actions which we teach to our children so that the story is more memorable. The story does talk about saving Noah’s family. The story also talks about God committing genocide on the human race. Where’s the justice in that? And what about the animals? Even if we condone the human genocide because they were “evil people”, what had the animals who died done wrong? What exactly does an evil snail look like anyway?

Of course, we don’t need to read that story literally, but it’s an example of how hard it can be to consider what justice really means, even if God is in the story. Micah’s command to “do justice” needs a bit of unpacking for my taste.

Justice is not so simple. Anyone following the news will probably agree with that. Is justice served when our own youth – like Trayvon Martin - can be murdered with impunity? Is justice served when fraud investigator Sylvie Therrien is suspended without pay for revealing that her job involved meeting quotas for EI fraud? Is justice served when Marte Deborah Dalalv spent 16 months in prison, charged with sex outside marriage when she reported to police that she was raped? Justice is not so simple.

The passage we read from Matthew today is the beginning of what we know as “The Sermon on the Mount”. This “sermon” goes on for three chapters, but the opening words - which we read - are words of comfort, words of support. We often read them as words of justice because the poor and the disadvantaged are told that they will receive good things.

But I’ll be honest with you - I struggle with these words. In the text, we are invited to consider who is “blessed”. Don’t we all want to be “blessed”? Yet in order to be blessed, the text says we must be poor in spirit. We must mourn. We must be meek. We must be hungry and

thirsty. We must be persecuted and reviled. If that's the cost of being blessed, I'm not so sure I want it.

Some scholars think that Jesus made these statements just to shock people. That Jesus was simply trying to emphasize how the Kingdom of God would be utterly different than all of our expectations. That might be right. In our consumer culture today, we would not be surprised if someone said that rich people are blessed, but it shocks us to consider that the poor might be blessed. We don't even blink when we see a TV show about rich and famous people, but we would probably notice a show dedicated to the poor and invisible in our society. If Jesus wanted to shock us - he succeeded.

But still - I don't *want* to be poor. I don't *want* to mourn. I don't *want* to be hungry. Are those *really* the requirements? Are those really the entry requirements to the Kingdom of God? If that's really what involved, I think I have a whole new appreciation for those who want religion in their lives, but don't want it too soon - and certainly do not want it *right now*.

And yet - there is something encouraging in Matthew's words. Something compelling. Something more. Something that tells us that we have already passed this way in our own lives.

Consider: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." What does "poor in spirit" mean? Does it mean being sad? Does it mean being desperate? Does it mean being lost or confused or alone? Does it mean being "at the end of your rope"? If so, then we've all been there. Think of the times you were there. When I was there I was down, but I was also more open to change. I was more open to accepting help from others. I was more open to God's grace. I was more appreciative of small gifts. I was more grateful and less critical. I was - in fact - blessed.

Consider: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." Mourning comes from a deep sense of loss. It comes from a life transition that we find painful. We've all been there. Think of the times you were there. When I was there I've experienced pain, but I was also liberated. My loss made space in my heart for other things, for other people, even for God. My loss made me realize that I myself continued. I was still alive. I was still me. I was - in fact - comforted.

Consider: "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth". What does meek mean? Does it mean powerless? Does it mean socially disadvantaged? Does it mean invisible to the crowds? Does it mean unemployed or incarcerated? Does it mean struggling with normal day-

to-day living? If so, then we've all been there. Think of the times you were there. When I was there I felt the sting of lack of control. I felt resentment. But when I had nothing, I still had myself. I had nothing so I learned to be content with myself - with who I am - nothing more, nothing less. When I stopped grasping for things, I was able to embrace friends and community in ways that were more real. I found out that I possess many of the things in life that cannot be bought. I was - in fact - blessed.

Consider: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." Hunger and thirst come from not eating or drinking enough. Hunger and thirst also come from engaging, from working, from exercising. We've all been there. Think of the times you were there. When I was there I was depleted, drained, exhausted. But I also felt the joy that comes from honest labour. I found peace by working with my muscles. I delighted in working together with my brothers and sisters in helping others. I experienced the joy that my body functions as it should. I was - in fact - blessed.

Consider: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." What does pure in heart mean? Does it mean being at peace inside ourselves - that deep peace that only comes when we are at one with ourselves? Does it mean being still with ourselves and with God? Does it mean caring? Does it mean loving? If so, then we've all been there. Think of the times you were there. When I was there I was still, reflective. I connected my inside self with my outside world. I saw God in myself. I saw God in others. I was - in fact - blessed.

Consider: "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you". Does that mean being hated? If so, then we've all been there. Think of the times you were there. When I was there people lashed back because they were uncomfortable because I spoke the truth. I cut a bit too close for comfort. People often attack the truth with much more hostility than they attack lies. And yet, I was glad that I did speak the truth. I was affirmed. I was doing what others wanted to do but didn't. I was doing what I had to do. I was - in fact - blessed.

Jesus's words about being blessed and entering the Kingdom of God are not about some future reality. Those words are for right now. We are all *already* a part of that ongoing story. We are a continuing part of that story to help bring justice to life right now. That - in itself - is one of our greatest blessings. Let us all embrace that blessing with all of our heart, mind, and strength.

Amen.