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13th Sunday after Pentecost

Preached on August 30, 2020
St. Thomas Episcopal Church
Greenville, AL

Readings: Exodus 3:1-15; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28 NRSV

This morning we are going to look at a character trait shared by Moses and Peter and Paul.

In each of these three men, we see a driving desire to see social justice achieved. And we see that each of these men, at a critical point in their spiritual formation, collided with an indelible truth regarding social justice.

Each man was made to face this difficult truth:

that “social justice” is a concept human beings are capable of grasping for, but are incapable of attaining apart from the power of God.

The phrase itself, “social justice” is an oxymoron.

The word social denotes ‘modes of organization’ and systems arranged toward fulfilling individual and corporate needs.

By their very nature, social systems devolve into systems of class and caste, regardless of how noble the original ideal expressed might have been.

We see social systems not only in human behaviors but in many species.

The difference is human beings bring self-consciousness to bear on these systems, AND, we are capable of being guided by a God-given code of moral laws.

What we see in the journeys of Moses and Peter and Paul is their awakening to an understanding of this difference between man’s estimation of social justice and God’s.

In today’s reading from Exodus we find Moses at a mid-point in his journey toward this understanding.

Forty years before this moment when Moses stood in front of the burning bush, Moses had fled Egypt after having killed a man and discovering that his crime was known.

Exodus 2:11-12 says, “One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and saw their forced labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsfolk. He looked this way and that, and seeing no one he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.”

The story continues by saying Moses went out the next day, and observing a fight between two Hebrews, he tried to intervene only to have one of them respond by saying, “Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?”

Moses fled from Egypt, but his story resumes in Midian with yet another attempt at defending others when he came to the aid of the daughters of Midian’s priest at the well.

Exodus 2:16-17 says, “The priest of Midian had seven daughters. They came to draw water; and filled the troughs to water their father’s flock. But some shepherds came and drove them away. Moses got up and came to their defense and watered their flocks.”

So this characteristic of a concern for social justice was a dominant part of Moses’ personality.

But by the time we reach the events we read about in today’s reading from Exodus 3, Moses had surrendered himself to a life of isolation, a life where he had removed himself from being confronted by issues of human justice.

Where the only confrontations Moses had to worry about in the wilderness of Midian was defending his father-in-laws sheep from predators.

Exodus 3:1 tells us that Moses had passed through the wilderness and was at Mount Horeb.

In Hebrew, Horeb is translated as ‘dryness’ or ‘desolation,’ so here we find Moses at a place literally named “desolation” when God spoke to him from the burning bush.

So we see that Moses, having fled from the consequences of the action he took through his own understanding of what seeking social justice meant

arrived years later at this desolate place beyond the wilderness

where he was finally ready to listen to the voice of God

It is important for us to understand Moses' journey regarding his desire for social justice to this point in his life if we are to fully appreciate the lessons God was about to teach him about justice through his experiences with Pharaoh and then while leading the people of Israel.

At the point at which we enter Moses' story in today's reading, Moses, who had been impulsive and emotionally reactive when it came to defending others, was finally ready to obey God's voice of guidance instead.

Peter began his journey with Jesus with a very similar zealous, impulsiveness when it came to issues of social justice and 'saving others.'

In our Gospel reading; Peter's emotion driven reaction to Jesus' pronouncement about his coming death was anchored in Peter's desire to protect Jesus and defend him.

Our reading says, "From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering."

Peter must have been in anguish and disbelief as he listened to Jesus describe his coming death.

Like Moses, Peter was limited by his human perception.

Peter's emotions must have been reeling as he tried to reconcile the idea of God's plan for bringing justice for Israel somehow requiring Jesus' death.

How would Jesus' death make any sense within a human's limited understanding of what constitutes justice?

The fact is, to Peter, it couldn't, and it didn't.

Peter's journey would continue to include more poignant moments when he came face to face with the measured difference between his human understanding of justice and God's plans.

Jesus would tell Peter to put away his sword in the Garden of Gethsemane, and Jesus would heal the soldier Peter injured just before Jesus was dragged away into the darkness.

And Peter would break down in anguish after his greatest failure of all in defending justice, after his denying even knowing Jesus.

Yet, each of these experiences were part of God's plan in forming Peter into the servant of God and leader of the church he would become.

Over and over, God's Word tells us that we are incapable of righteous judgment and of bringing justice without God's guidance.

In Isaiah 55:8-9 the prophet wrote, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

From these words we understand that it is only through faithfully seeking God's estimation of justice that we even begin to approach thinking rightly about such things, and even more so, in our efforts to take up right action in addressing issues of justice.

Part of what Peter was called to deny, as he learned obedience to the Lord, was his own human sensibilities of what constituted social justice and right action.

Peter would have never obeyed God's instruction to go to the household of Cornelius if he had not learned to value God's judgment more than his own.

And we still witness Peter struggling in this area when he and Paul came into conflict over Peter sharing meals with Gentiles in Antioch, but then not doing so when he was being observed by Jews who had come from Jerusalem to observe the practices of this early faith community.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul wrote about publicly confronting Peter over his unjust action of distancing himself from the Gentiles he had previously shared meals with.

And it is this same Paul, who confronted Peter, who most embodies what it means to serve justice by surrendering our judgment to God.

Paul's first engagement with those who followed Jesus was his campaign of persecution against them.

We, in fact, first hear of Saul, who would become Paul, in Acts 7:58 during the stoning death of Stephen, the first martyr of the church. Those stoning Stephen laid their cloaks at Saul's feet and Acts 8 begins, "And Saul approved of their killing him."

What a transformation we see evidenced in Paul's letter to the Romans as he talks about the role of believers and the role of God when it comes to meeting out judgment and justice.

This man, who first set out believing he was defending God by seeking to destroy the early church -

God transformed this man from one who was promoting violence in the "name of justice" to a man who wrote these words to the church in Rome, "Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."

And perhaps most important of all in this passage are these words of counsel to those who follow Jesus as their Lord,

"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Sometimes it is difficult to know what constitutes good – to know the right action to take, the right words to say, the right 'side' to be on when it comes to issues of justice.

In such moments it is imperative for Christians to know, and be led by the Word of God, and through their prayerfully seeking God's judgment.

Because as we see in the journeys of these three mighty servants of God, even when justice is the desire of one's heart and even when humans are motivated by good and noble ideals, they are capable of acting unjustly and against the very unity and righteousness they desire to promote.

Sometimes the best we can do in a difficult moment, is know what does not constitute God's justice and what does not serve the purposes of God's mercy and love.

For instance, God's justice does not wait for the cover of darkness, but instead brings the actions of men into the light.

God's justice is not violent or vengeful.

Just the opposite, Paul counseled those who follow Jesus to “not be overcome by evil, but to overcome evil with good.”

As humans, we do not always understand what overcoming evil with good entails.

This is why we must be faithful in seeking and serving God, rather than being informed by our limited human understanding and our emotions.

We are not capable of “getting it right” without God.

We are not capable of moving past self-interest and self-protection, no matter how noble and righteous and justified we believe ourselves to be.

Human beings were created for relationship with God first, and then for relationships with one another governed by the laws of God.

The driving desire these three men shared was a desire to see justice served.

And the way that God shaped these men was through bringing them to the realization that no matter how right or good or pure hearted their human understanding of what constituted justice was – They were not God.

These men came to realize that only God, through his omniscience and grace and mercy, sees the world and us, quite differently than we are able to ‘see’ others and sometimes even ourselves.

As Christians, we lose our lives by giving ourselves to be shaped by the Potter's hand. We surrender our lives as we let go of our own ideas and allow God to open our hearts and minds to the work he calls us to in building His kingdom. Amen.