

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
"The Mighty Acts of God: Justice"
Rev. Dr. John Judson
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Exodus 2:11-22; Matthew 18:21-22

It was overwhelming. More than fifty inches of rain had fallen. Streets, homes were filled with water and bayous were overflowing. Across Houston men, women and children were trapped. Many of their lives were in danger not only because of the water that inundated their homes, but because they needed dialysis, or insulin or lifesaving medical procedures. Into this disaster stepped hundreds of Houstonians including Jose Contreras who worked six straight days as a paramedic rescuing the trapped. Into this disaster stepped Karla Perez and Oscar Hernandez who set up phone hotlines and dispatched volunteers with trucks to help people in flooded areas. Into this disaster stepped Sisters Karen and Paola Ramirez who made food for their stranded neighbors and ripped up rotting floorboards, then went to the George R. Brown Convention Center to help elderly people move their belongings. They are like so many Houstonians who helped, but with one difference. They are all dreamers, brought to this country illegally when they were children. They were able to come out of the shadows and become productive members of Houston society because of D.A.C.A., the Differed Action for Childhood Arrivals Program. But now with the end of D.A.C.A. six months away, I believe we ought to ask ourselves what would be the just thing for this nation to do for these heroes and the other 800,000 dreamers who are here?

I ask the question in that way, what would the just thing be because justice is a word that people on both sides of the issue have been throwing around in their comments on how these Dreamers are to be dealt with. On the one side are those who want to expel these children turned adults from our country. The proponents of this action use justice in this way. Justice means obeying and enforcing laws that Congress makes and since they have not authorized this program, then justice means deporting all of the Dreamers. On the other side are those who believe that the Dreamers did not choose to come here, contribute to our nation, and ought to be treated with compassion and welcomed in. Two very different views of justice. And so this morning I am not going to choose one side of this debate or the other because it is a complex and multifaceted issue. What I will do however is help us to understand what justice in the Biblical sense is all about.

I say this because justice is one of the key virtues of the God-following community. It is used more than 170 times in the Old and New Testaments. It is in fact considered to be an attribute of God, that God is just, and so is to be one of our attributes as well. The question again is, what does it mean and how ought it to be applied? Fortunately for us this morning we have a story in which three different aspects of justice are presented to us. In our Moses story we have three vignettes, each of which offers us a different, yet connected image of justice. I say this because Moses will become the great lawgiver, the one who shows the Hebrew people what justice looks like...and the justice in these three vignettes will become the basis for much of God's law. So we will walk through them, allowing them to help us gain some insight into this Biblical understanding of justice. And as an aside, chances are I will irritate almost everyone in here with one of these vignettes, so let's begin...

Our first vignette: On the surface this story hardly seems to depict justice. Moses sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew. Looking around and seeing no one, Moses kills the Egyptian. There you go, first degree murder, hardly justice. In order to find the justice here, we need to dig a little deeper however. Where we find the justice is in the Hebrew word beating, which does not describe a spanking or even a severe thrashing, but

describes beating someone to death. What Moses was witnessing was a powerful Egyptian overseer killing a powerless slave. Justice in that moment became taking one life to preserve the life of another. This is not the only justice we see in the Apostle Paul's statement that the government has the right to use the sword to defend itself and its people against those who would take life, but it is also the justice behind the Just War Theory. To flip this around, it would be unjust to let the powerful take the lives of the innocent when such an act could be prevented.

Our second vignette: Again, this story hardly seems like a justice story. Moses is once again hanging out and sees two Hebrews fighting amongst themselves. Moses evidently knows the reason for their fight and addresses the one who is in the wrong asking, "Why are you hitting your brother?" The response is not what he is looking for. The Hebrew who was in the wrong refuses to allow Moses to be the judge (how ironic) and then threatens to expose Moses to the authorities for his murder of the Egyptian. So where is the justice here? Justice is in attempting to reconcile the two men by having the one at fault acknowledge his sin, thus allowing for restoration of the relationship. In a sense justice is bringing the truth to light and in so doing restoring relationships. The Apostle Paul in fact tells the church at Corinth that it has been called to the ministry of reconciliation. And if you want to know more about what that looks like, check out pastor Joanne's sermon from last week.

Our third Vignette: Of the three, this is the story that probably looks more like the way the word justice is normally used. Moses has fled into the wilderness and comes upon a group of male shepherds who had driven the seven daughters of a priest of Midian away from the well and its water, to which the daughters had rightful claim. The image here is of the daughters and their sheep dying of thirst. Moses however comes to their rescue, driving off the other shepherds. Sort of like an Egyptian-Hebrew Superman. Justice here is not only insuring that all people have access to the water, but that one's right to life is maintained. And, by the way, notice, that Moses doesn't kill these men, but simply drives them off. Justice was brought about without the loss of life, which is only to be used in extreme circumstances.

What then is Biblical justice? I believe we can sum it up with the words I used in my last sermon; life and blessing. Justice is the effort to ensure that all human beings have access to life and blessing. If this sounds familiar, all we have to do is look to our nation's Declaration of Independence where it is noted that, "*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*" Justice is therefore neither rigid legalism nor unthinking compassion. It is the intentional work of people to insure that all human beings have access to life in its fullness and blessing such that they can experience the wholeness of the lives they have been given.

At the beginning of this sermon I told you that I would not be choosing one side or the other in the DACA debate because the issue of immigration is so complex. I will also not be taking sides because justice has not only to do with immigration but with what happens to foster children. It has to do with education. It has to do with access to clean water. It has to do with access to affordable housing. It has to do with adequate transportation. Justice is a Biblical mandate...that we do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God. My challenge to you for this week then is this, to choose one issue our society faces and bring justice to bear upon it. To ask how are the people affected by this issue experiencing the fullness of life and the blessings of God; then do something about it as God's people of justice.