

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God of all the earth, this world is in turmoil. Your creation groans for completeness, but we lack it. We see violence, we see pain, and we often focus on our minor inconveniences. We forget our brothers and sisters who truly struggle to make a living and to live lives of joy. Walk with us to be other-centered, to look past our daily inconveniences, take heart in the blessings we have, and to foster joy among those around us. We are mindful of those things we carry with us, joyful and sorrowful, all those lifted here and in our hearts, and we present them to you. Lead us in turn to respond faithfully to our concerns and address the needs of others as they present themselves.

Holy God, we admit we live in an unholy world. This world denies authenticity, it denies hallowing your creation, it denies seeking the benefit of each of your children in favor of selfishness. As your children who hear your voice, we seek to push back. Guide us to hear your calling for justice in a world of darkness and despair. Guide us to fully love our neighbor, as inconvenient and frankly difficult as it often is. The world tells us that life is not fair, but you came to show us something different. We know that what is truly not fair is the death of your Son Jesus Christ so that all may see life. Help us always keep that sacrifice in mind when we respond in exploring how this world's injustice affects us and our neighbors. We pray all these things in the name of the one who lived, taught, and died that we might experience life in all its fullness, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying...

SERMON

You want to know what's not fair? What's not fair is that it seems like the press always loves the Green Bay Packers and the Bears get all the holes poked in their team.

Everyone's gotta love Aaron Rodgers. It's not fair is that dessert doesn't always come with a meal. It's not fair that whenever I get a dessert, Catherine needs to have a big bite and I just get a little of hers, if any. It's not fair that I gotta work on Sundays while y'all get the day off. It's not fair that I can't get a phone upgrade as fast as I want. You know what? I really suffer from a lack of fairness in my life.

But what is fair? Are these things truly unfair, or is this a misuse of true unfairness? Fairness is something that we talk about from the beginning of our lives. It's somehow engrained in us. One study by UCLA in 2008 claimed that we are naturally attuned for fairness; it's almost a biological need. As a child, when one feels wronged by another, the first thing that comes out is "that's not fair!" To the wronged, it makes all the sense in the world. To the aggressor, it seems like you just need to quit your whining. We appeal to an idea that we all must be taken cared of, and that our neighbor will abide by this. So where does this basic need come from, and is it legitimate?

As a high school teacher of mine said, "Life's not fair. If you want fair, it's in July." And, to an extent, he's right. On the other hand, we claim to be different people than the world is and loves. As a pastor, I'm called to share the wholeness of the gospel; all facets, from the comforting to the challenging. Some sermons should be comforting; some sermons will be harder and challenging to the way we live. Some sermons will call us to some dark and hard places about our world and our times. This is one of them. We follow a crucified Savior who showed the very unfairness of life in this world. He withstood what was unfair in this world so that he may show us a different kind of unfairness in grace and in new life. We love and serve a God who calls for goodness and love toward all our neighbors where all have what they need. As a result, we work for fairness. That fairness is

called justice. We proclaim that we serve a God who demands justice, and our God calls us to the same. Let us discover how God calls us toward a just world in seeing what this scripture means, what justice is, and how we can learn about it and live in a world that desperately calls for it.

When this scripture passage begins, we're led to believe that this is about the need for fervent prayer and never to lose heart. Indeed it is, but it is unique in how it takes shape. According to the Texts for Preaching commentary, one important piece to recognize is that she is a widow. Remember, at that time, widows were nobodies. She has no foundation in the community. We recognize that it's not always what you know but who you know, right? As a widow, she is left out. She knew no one in "high places" to help her out. She was alone. Even the judge she keeps harassing has other intentions in mind than doing what is fully right. So she keeps pushing. This widow just simply won't go away. She prays in an action-oriented way. Prayer here is not just about sitting alone in a room and speaking to God but letting our lives take the form of our supplications to God. We enact what we believe, and that shapes our lives and faith. Her prayer became fullest when she pushed against the unjust judge, and Jesus lifted her example as faithful, worth following. She was searching for and couldn't find justice, but kept working anyway.

Justice is a complicated word. There are many facets of that word. I'm sure that what first comes to mind is the courtroom. We see lawyers, witnesses, the defendant, the prosecution, and a judge. That's one facet, but there are many we can concern ourselves with. What does justice mean to us as Christian people in this world? Putting it super simply, I believe that it means that everyone gets treated fairly, no exceptions. In a courtroom as in life, that's not always the case; justice sometimes fails. But we claim a God

who is just. God's justice means that in this world that was created and is loved by God, everyone gets treated just as they should: a blessed child of God. There is criminal justice, but there is also social justice, and that is where we focus today in making sure that all of God's children are respected and treated fairly. It works against the grain of our world, but then again, when we pick up our cross and follow Christ, we work against the grain! God works against the grain! And we need that when we look at this world. There is poverty; there is hunger. Not everyone gets a shot at living a full life. This justice looks consistently from the perspective of the underside of society, from the most despairing of people, the most marginalized of humanity, and seeks to do right by them.

When I was in college, I took on an internship with the Nebraska United Methodist Peace with Justice ministry. We travelled all around the state to learn about justice issues all over the place. There are always social justice issues to be encountered. From experience, I can say it's a difficult notion to believe that people can just, as they say, "pull themselves up by their bootstraps." The problems in justice work are not issues of personal responsibility but how larger society works often against people. It's really complicated. Jesus preached about personal responsibility, but he often preached down those in power; the way they colluded hurt many of God's children. Our calling is the same.

Let's pin down justice a bit more. There are two parts of the Christian life that address the right way to treat others in need. Those are charity and justice. One is much easier than the other, but as I learned in my internship, they are like two shoes on your feet; we travel much further with both than with one or the other. Look at it this way; this was an illustration shared with me. Imagine you are a person who lives by a river. One day, there is a baby who comes floating down the river. You pick the baby up, and take care

of it. The next day, the same thing happens. You pick up the baby and take care of it. Every day, the same thing happens with a new baby floating downstream. So, what do you do about it? To consistently pick up the baby and take care of it is charity. Justice is when you go up stream and see why all these babies are floating downstream and try to do something to prevent it from happening. Charity is about the small picture; justice is about the big picture. Why is it, for instance, that so many people starve? Is it a lack of food? No, it isn't; we have enough food to feed every person around the world, but the systems that distribute the food prevent us from feeding every person. That is where justice comes in.

As we think about justice, we must be aware that it is not instantaneous. Charity, as we know, is about direct service that fulfills our need for instant gratification. But that does not work for this widow. This passage about the widow is about tenacity and never giving up. And with good reason! As I read about the widow, I see it says, she "kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.'" But how long was that? It doesn't say. When talking about justice issues, I think we could put pretty much any word in there and it could be accurate in the fight for justice. She kept coming to him for days, for weeks, for months, for years and saying, "Grant me justice against my opponent." The struggle is still the same today, but we bow down to something greater than the result. As the show Sermon Brainwave said, this passage is links directly to the passages before it about the ongoing coming of the Reign of God, with a unique twist. Our calling is to witness to God's justice in a world that so quickly denies it. We live in a world that focuses on "What's in it for me?" or that assumes that one person's perspective should be the perspective of everyone else. That's not the way of respect and love, and that's not God's way either.

If we look throughout all scripture, we'll see the thread of what justice means. It's what all of the prophets were about; it's what a lot of the Levitical laws were about! It is what Jesus was about. Amos calls out Israel for "sell(ing) the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals" and "trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth and push the afflicted out of the way." Many of the Levitical laws were prescriptions of what a world led by God would look like. Scripture witnesses to a world where we truly take care of one another instead of dismissing someone for not living up to expectations. We live in prayer and hope, so those call us to move somewhere: witness to God's ongoing justice when hope seems lost. This is what is against the grain: the widow, the one so kept out of society, so below regard, so scorned, keeps working without any sign of change to gain justice when there is no justice to be had. And she found hope. With God, we will too.

This is not an easy sermon to preach or to hear. I could talk for hours, days, weeks, months, years about justice, just as about how long as it would take to make lasting justice difference. But I hope this provides you with more questions, which is the point. As a pastor, sometimes I'm called to provide answers; sometimes I'm called to provide more questions, but we're walk the path together. Justice is a difficult thing, but we are called to figure it out, to explain it, to work together; these commands are engrained in the words of scripture. God calls throughout all of scripture to attend to the needs of all people, those we love and those we'd rather not. And, like that scorned widow, we walk with heart, knowing that the results we work for will take time. Days, months, years, we don't know, but we testify to God's goodness and justice that will one day find completeness. In the meantime, we pray and bring those prayers into action. We've looked at the big picture, but next week we will get more specific. Next week we will seek to do justice tangibly as

we have the ability to act in one way among many that is just and that benefits our neighbors who often have no voice. Thanks be to God for God's guidance and support in a world so complicated we often have a hard time discovering who to be and what to do.

Amen and Amen.