

“The Justice of Blood”

Reading: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Romans 1:18-25, 5:15-21

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If I were to walk up to you one day and, without saying anything and without any provocation, I kicked you as hard as I could in the shins, there isn't a person among us who would simply ignore it without giving it a second thought; every one of us would immediately recognize that we had been wronged and needlessly hurt. Everyone recognizes that there is such a thing as justice in the world, or at the very least we recognize when justice isn't being satisfied. We know instinctively that something like a kick in the shins upsets the order of things: a wrong has been committed, things are out of balance, and we want that balance to be restored. Different people in different times in different parts of the world might have very different ideas about what constitutes “justice” – some people might demand jail time for a kick in the shins while others might only ask for an apology – but in any event, everyone always believes that there is such a thing as justice, fair play, order, right and wrong.

And the reason all of us have always believed that there is such a thing as justice is because there really *is* such a thing as justice. There really is an order to the way things are, or at least to the way things should be, even if we aren't always able to see that order very clearly. We intuitively grasp the need for justice because God designed and created us with justice in mind; we were built to live in a just world. But we all just as quickly see that our world is rarely just: innocent people go to jail, children suffer for their parents' mistakes, thieves get away with theft, justice gets corrupted by money.

It is this search and desire for justice that leads us into our next discussion of the meaning of the cross. Last week we began by asking why it was that Jesus had to die, and how it is that his death so long ago and so far away makes a difference in our lives today. Our celebrations of Good Friday and Easter, when Jesus died on the cross and was raised from the dead, are the high point of the Christian year, so much so that we take the six-week period of Lent before Easter to get ourselves ready for it. Jesus' death on the cross is the center of all that we preach, it is the lens through which we focus all of what God has been doing in our lives, and even so, Jesus' death is so deep and so wide that putting its meaning into words has challenged some of the greatest Christian thinkers. Even in the Bible we see a cluster of different images being used to describe what God accomplished on the cross; there's not just one explanation. Last week we saw how Jesus acted as a sacrifice that reconciled us to God; this week we're borrowing our images from the courtroom, because there are many places in the New Testament that speak of how the cross affects our legal standing in the court of the Lord.

We have plenty of prime time TV shows that make the courtroom look more dramatic than a theater, but in reality our system of laws is deliberately cold and calculating. When we personify *justice*, she is blind and carrying scales to dispassionately weigh nothing but the cold, hard facts. Justice to us consists of punishing or rewarding a person in proportion to their deeds. Laws don't care who you are, at least in theory: if you break the law, you go to jail. And laws can ultimately be rather arbitrary: one legislature can make a law and the next legislature can take it away. As a result, we often think of the justice of God as being similar to the justice of the United States: God's law consists of a list of rules, arbitrary things God likes and things God doesn't like, and if you happen to break one of the rules, then you get punished in equal measure.

Many Christians think of Jesus' death in that sort of context. For example, if you commit a sin, something God doesn't like, such as stealing a car, then God is going to get you and make you pay. The way this payment works, so the theory goes, is by eternal punishment in hell. One sin, any sin, is a crime against God that is so bad, they say, that it makes any person worthy only of unbearable everlasting torment regardless of anything else that they do while they're alive. That's the justice of God in many peoples' minds. Jesus enters the picture because, according to this model, he paid that penalty for us; his torment on the cross was so bad that it outweighed the bad things every person has ever or will ever do, and if you become a Christian, then God will accept his punishment on your behalf, and God will no longer hunt you down to bring you to his brand of justice.

One of the big problems with this sort of an understanding of God's justice is that it's not biblical. That's simply not how God's justice works in the Bible. God is not up in heaven eagerly waiting for us to break some obscure rule in his book, looking for a chance to jump out and shout, "Gotcha!" so that he can have an excuse to toss us into the flames of hellish agony. We find a completely different picture of God's law and justice in the Bible if only we have the eyes to see it. One of our texts for this morning came from Deuteronomy chapter 30, which is just one of the places we see God's law spoken of in terms of being life for his people. He had given them a set of instructions for them to follow as his community of chosen people, and even though some of those instructions seem random to us, they were far from an arbitrary, abstract list of rules for people to follow so that they could avoid upsetting God's whims. These laws were given to the people as a way of *life*. Justice in the Old Testament is far more than simply following a list of rules, it is life lived in loving community with God and one another, life lived in peace, life lived in wholeness, where all things are working as they should with everything in the order God has given it.

And so God's justice goes far beyond a disinterested set of laws that doesn't care what you do so long as you don't break the law, God's justice is part of the order of the entire universe. That sort of justice is concerned with balance, harmony, making sure that all things are working as they should, according to the order God gave it when he created it. God does not just make up laws on a whim, decreeing whatever seems like a good idea to him at the time and then demanding that we obey him for all eternity, his laws are made with a desire to care for and protect the things he has made and he loves. In the ancient world people understood God as their lord, their ruler to whom they were loyal. This is how things work with a lord: the people give honor and worship and tribute to their lord and their lord in return gives them protection and order. That was God's desire when he called the people of Israel to join him in a covenant: his desire was that he would be their God and they would be his people. God's concern for justice goes far beyond just whether you cheated on your taxes last year – though he is of course concerned with our actions – but more than that, justice for God is rooted in the cosmic order of things; he is concerned that the entire universe is functioning the way he made it to function.

But you know as well as I do that things do not function the way they should; our lives and our world are not balanced, and justice and peace are often fleeting. Things wear down and they break, loved ones let us down and they hurt us, relationships become tools for taking advantage of others, families tear themselves apart, governments go to war and thousands die for an obscure political agenda, parents and grandparents who should be honored are left to die forgotten, the rich who have more than enough refuse to take care of their brothers and sisters who have nothing. Many of us have been touched – or injured – by the effects of sin, and even if we haven't, we've seen it happen to

others, and we know that there is precious little of God's sort of justice in the world.

That's what Paul talks about in our reading from Romans 1. Even though God has revealed himself to the world, even in spite of all he has done to create and sustain and bless the universe that he made, we as a race rejected him. That's what sin really is; it is our rejection of the justice that God created for the world, it is our attempt to reverse the cosmic order, remove God from the throne, and put ourselves in his place. And so, Paul tells us, for a while God allowed humanity to have its desire. God let humans be their own rulers, he let that disordering of the universe take its toll, he gave humans over to the results of their sin. It sounds almost mean when I put it like that, but really God merely let us have what we wanted. The result is all around us, we live in it and with it every day, and we bear the consequences of our choice to reject God. And so we have broken lives, broken families, broken communities, broken governments, and there is no justice.

Paul was pointing out that the destructive power of sin rebounds and echoes and grows as it passes through lives and time. Individuals might seem to get away with their sin, but the rest of the world has to live with those consequences, and so the world becomes a little more like hell with each sin committed. That's the world out of order, with humans wrestling God for his throne, and everything loses its balance as a result, and there is no justice. If God was really interested in punishment, all he would have to do would be to leave us alone and let us stew in the hell of our own making. But God is not just looking to hand out punishment, he is concerned with justice. He is the Lord, he's the one who takes on the responsibility of protecting and providing for his world, he's the one who maintains the order within his realm.

And so we come to the cross, that place where we see atonement, reconciliation sent from God and accomplished by God, things made right. The cross is where God re-orders the world that has been disordered by our sin, it's where he brings justice back to a creation that has fallen from the justice God originally gave it. The cross is where we see that God is concerned for the order and the beauty of his world; Jesus died not as punishment but out of love for his creation.

As Paul tells us in our reading from Romans 5, the gift of Christ on the cross is not like the trespass, the gift is far out of proportion to the trespass. Jesus was willingly sent from God the Father to be obedient in our place, so that through his act of obedience he re-ordered creation and offered his righteousness to those of us who do not deserve it. It wasn't fair or just that Jesus died; his trial was a sham, he was innocent, and in fact he should have been crowned as king rather than executed as a criminal. Jesus is God in flesh, and so if the world was ordered as it should be, he would have been honored and worshiped. But the world is broken, and so when Jesus died he accepted all of the disorder of the world onto himself, and in that act he reconciled it and gave it the order it should have had, the order of a world that willingly obeys the will of God. We refused to offer God the Father our obedience, and so the Son offered himself to compensate for what God's fallen creation failed to offer. This is a gift of absolutely unmerited grace, a gift of such worth that it outweighed the entire weight of human sin, so that sinful humans could instead place themselves back into God's order. That is the God we serve: not God the judge, demanding just punishment, this is God the Lord who *makes* justice by dying for it.

The result is that when we place ourselves under the cross, when we plead the blood of Christ, we see how God makes justice. Our Lord who is so concerned with the order and justice of his

creation looks upon us and declares that we are not guilty, he declares that our sins will no longer be considered in his royal court, because we have re-ordered ourselves by Jesus' death. If we come to Christ and take his cross on ourselves, we are rejecting the disorder of the fallen world and accepting the true and rightful lordship of Christ our God. We are no longer judged as rebels, we are judged as God's children, as brothers with Christ, as heirs of the gift of God's own Holy Spirit. We are forgiven, which opens the door to reconciliation with God and one another, which means that new relationships with God and one another are possible.

And more than that, when we are reconciled to God he sends his Holy Spirit, the very presence of God himself, into our lives, to give us new life. He actually works to re-order our lives so that we can actually live our lives in God's order; we're not just forgiven people who are doomed to remain sinners, forgiven sinners but sinners nonetheless, God actually works in our lives to shape us into the image of Christ, so that we can really live according to the order and justice of God.

This morning we have an opportunity to come face to face with the reality of God's justice. We celebrate communion together for many reasons, and one of those reasons is that this is the gift of God to us for our salvation. This family meal of bread and juice is Christ offering himself so that we can enter our lives into the new covenant that God has made with his world; this is all of creation and all of us being re-ordered as things were meant to be, with God as our Father and Lord. This is Christ calling us to become living sacrifices, to place our entire lives before God as a sacrifice of obedience, to hold nothing back from God and those he loves. This is the blood of the new covenant, the sacrifice that restores us to God and restores God's order in us.



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