

Election sermon series
What Does the Bible Say about Justice
Isaiah 58
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There's been a growing anxiety among my colleagues that started last spring and has intensified as we moved closer to the fall. The foundational question that fueled this angst was this: "What are you going to preach in October?" The weeks leading up to Election Day are always to a certain extent fraught with challenges, but this year the line we're trying to walk feels razor thin. What can we say? What can't we say? What should we say?

I've asked those questions to a number of people in our church and gotten a wide variety of answers. At our last Elders lunch, I asked our spiritual leaders, "What do you want or expect to hear from the pulpit leading up to the election?" One Elder said, "I hear enough about politics in my daily life, I don't want to hear it from the pulpit." Another said, "I expect you to tackle the issues head-on. We need to be talking about these things." My guess is all of you fall somewhere along that continuum. So, you see the challenge, right? A pastor once asked the chair of the Elders, "Will this church still love me if I preach a political sermon?" The Elders chair responded, "Yes, we'll still love you, but we'll miss you."

So, if this is such a mine field, why step in it? It seems like this year, more than any other, the political discourse around this country is electrically charged with hatred and vitriol. We can't have a civil discussion about the issues and the truth is incredibly elusive. To reflect this current climate, Steph and I considered doing a dialogue sermon this morning where we just called each other names for 15 minutes. Seems fitting, right?

Instead, I'm choosing to follow the advice of Dr. Ron Allen, my preaching professor. In our Intro to Preaching class, Dr. Allen encouraged us not to shy away from talking about controversial topics, recognizing the importance of adding spiritual commentary to the affairs of our world. But he also warned about inserting too much of ourselves in the sermon. So, Dr. Allen said, our best course of action when preaching in a time like this was to "hide behind Jesus."

That's what I'm going to do. Instead of trying to make sense of the complexity and absurdity of our political situation, I'm going to let God do the work, turning to God's word to see what it has to say about fundamental issues about justice and love and how we exercise our right to vote. I can guarantee that in the next few weeks I'll probably say something you won't like. I hope you'll listen with grace, but if not, I'll miss you.

We start today with justice. As you can imagine, the Bible has a lot to say about justice. In fact, that word is mentioned 139 times in the Bible, many of which are in reference to God's character. Psalm 10 says, "O Lord, you will hear the desire of the meek; you will strengthen their heart; you will incline your ear to do justice for the orphan and the oppressed, so that those from earth may strike terror no more." Psalm 33 says, "For the word of the Lord is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness. He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord." And then there's the famous passage read by Kelly/Clara. What does God want from us? God wants us to do justice.

Jesus preaches a similar word in the gospels. For example, in Luke he warns the religious leaders, "But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and herbs of all kinds and neglect justice and the love of God." Beyond his words, Jesus lives out this call for justice in his treatment of the poor, the oppressed, the outcast. As followers of Christ, our focus should be on pursuing justice in this world in the same way.

What is this justice the Bible talks about? At the core, it's the fair treatment of everyone, regardless of any of the social boundaries we have constructed between ourselves. Some politicians paint people different than us as "others," stoking fear and resentment toward people who are not like us. Walls are constructed and accusations are made and lies are concocted and lines are drawn between who is safe (people like us) and who is unsafe (people not like us). When they do that, they are splintering God's call for justice. Coretta Scott King said, "Freedom and justice cannot be parceled out in pieces to suit political convenience. You can't stand for justice for one group and deny it to others."

But that's exactly what we do. We decide who is worthy of just treatment, and that decision is based on whether or not they meet the criteria we set. I remember my seminary professor preaching a powerful sermon in which he acknowledged the enormous resources that were being poured into the case of a missing white girl named Jon Benet Ramsey, but then he lamented the thousands of African American children whose disappearances or murders never made the news. Who do we believe deserves justice? Who do we exclude from that?

I know we're all good people and we don't actively oppose justice for anyone. Here at Crestwood, we write a lot of checks to some worthy organizations who are working for justice in our community. We put together food boxes and buy Christmas gifts for underprivileged kids in our schools. We do a lot of good outreach here. But there's a difference between outreach and justice. The best way to distinguish them is to tell the well-known story of a group of villagers who notice a baby floating down a river and rush over to rescue it. In the subsequent days, they find more babies floating down the river and rescue them. The villagers become exhausted from the never-ending task of pulling babies out of the water, feeding, clothing, and housing them. Then, one day, a villager suggests going upstream to find out why the babies are ending up in the river. Outreach is pulling the babies out of the river; justice is going upstream to find out why they are there in the first place.

For me, that begs the question: "Is outreach enough?" We do a great job of pulling people from the river, but that's not enough. In our world today people of color, immigrants, those of other faiths, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, women, and children are oppressed and discriminated against and demonized to the point that they can be talked about as less than human and have their basic rights challenged. But we have the luxury of not addressing those things because they don't affect us. We have what my friend Erin Wathen calls "the privilege of not seeing." We can afford not to see the injustices of race if our skin color has never been a liability. We can afford to not see the injustices of gender inequality if we are a man. For many of us, our justice isn't threatened so we are not compelled to pay attention to those who live with injustice every day. Here's what Archbishop Desmond Tutu thinks about that: "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor."

I cringe at the language of choosing sides when it comes to justice, because that implies that if one side wins, the other side loses. That zero-sum thinking creates division instead of fostering unity and the recognition that when one side receives justice, everyone wins. As Dr. King said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." The more injustice that exists in our country, the weaker we all are.

That's what Isaiah is getting at in the reading today. People were assuming that if they just go through the motions of worshipping God, doing things like giving and fasting, then God will bless them. But God told them their worship only served themselves. Instead, God says, "This is the fast I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let

the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them and not to hide yourself from your own kin?" God doesn't only want our worship on Sunday; God also wants our work for justice on Monday.

What happens when we commit to seeking justice in our world, when we match our Sunday words with Monday actions, when we take what we receive at this table – unconditional love and unending grace – and share it with those who need it most? The Message translation of Isaiah 58 puts it this way: "If you get rid of unfair practices, quit blaming victims, quit gossiping about other people's sins, if you are generous with the hungry and start giving yourselves to the down-and-out, your lives will begin to glow in the darkness," I love that! I want to be a glow-in-the-dark Christian, shining a light into the darkness of this political season. But it takes more than my words. I can't be neutral in the fight between right and wrong. I have to be willing to stand up for the right against the wrong.

As is often the case when you are the one with privilege, that starts with listening. Civil rights activist and author James Baldwin wrote, "If one really wishes to know how justice is administered in a country, one does not question the policemen, the lawyers, the judges, or the protected members of the middle class. One goes to the unprotected — those, precisely, who need the law's protection most! — and listens to their testimony." We need to put ourselves in the uncomfortable place of listening to the testimony of those not in power. It is the unprotected and the vulnerable who have the clearest sense of the injustices in our society and who can offer concrete solutions to keep the babies from being thrown into the river. And we should put our faith into action by voting for candidates who we feel are listening to those voices.

That's hard work. It takes time and energy and resources. It would be easier to do our own thing and not actively contribute to the problem. That feels like enough, right? I wish it was. But we can't trust our political system to seek justice. It's just too self-serving and messed up. We are the ones who are called to stand up for what is right, to loose the bonds of injustice, to be repairers of the breach, to glow in the midst of the darkness. Not someone else. Not Kamala Harris. Not Donald Trump. Us. "Is this not the fast I choose?" says God. "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor." So, what side do we choose?