

Sermon – April 3, 2022  
“The Justice of Jesus”  
The Rev. John C. Wright

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them a blessing for your people that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we join with you to work in your harvest on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen*

Good morning! I hope that we are enjoying the early spring weather and the warmer days of spring. I noticed this week that my long missing, deeper, bass voice is returning, so the effects of spring pollen are growing and warm summer evenings cannot be far behind.

This week as we seek to grow into the image of Jesus, we are focused on the justice of Jesus. When we think of justice, what comes to our minds? Several years ago, Kay and I spent a couple of evenings felling a large red oak that had died at the turn into our farm in King George. It was just a few feet off of the highway, but I was able to keep it from falling in the highway and dropped it across our driveway and then cut it up into fire wood sections and moved it out of the driveway, planning to pick the sections up later in the week to split for firewood. We came home a couple of evenings later to discover that all of the wood we had cut up was gone. Someone had backed into the drive and loaded up the fruit of our labor and taken it away. I found myself more than a little irritated that someone would be so bold as to help themselves to the wood we had worked to cut. I wanted justice, but there was little I could do to find the guilty party. I later remembered the tree was covered in poison ivy and I began to think that justice would be for whoever took the firewood to have gotten a nasty case of poison ivy. I wanted justice; I wanted them to pay for their unjust act.

Today, we don't have to look far to find injustice playing out in the world as Russian troops continue their invasion of Ukraine and our news feeds continually give us updates. We hope for justice for the people of Ukraine. We pray for peace, but it seems the guilty are yet unpunished and the strong continue to take advantage of the weak. We cry out for justice for the people of Ukraine, but the invaders are still present.

As followers of Jesus, we are to be those who pursue justice because Jesus is just. Let's see if we can develop a deeper biblical understanding of what it might mean for us to be those who are

pursuing justice. Let's turn to our Bibles this morning and begin to look at some verses about justice. Let's start with a couple of verses from Matthew chapter 12, looking at verses 18 and 20. "Here is my servant, whom I have chosen, my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles. ... He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick until he brings justice to victory." Matthew points out two aspects of Jesus' justice: he will also proclaim justice to the Gentiles, the non-Jewish community, and he will do so without actions that are even a minor use of force, such as the breaking of a bruised reed or the extinguishing of a smoldering wick. We may not be very familiar with bruised reeds or smoldering wicks. A reed was used for measuring and once damaged or bruised it would be bent and not usable as a measuring tool. It would be discarded. Likewise, the wick mentioned was a small strip of cloth for a lamp, but once it would give a flame, it also would be discarded. Jesus is one who will not quickly toss aside those who are weak as he brings justice to those in need. In the context of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is portrayed as a meek and mild source of justice and not as a mighty warrior coming to the rescue through the use of great force.

We can continue to move into a deeper understanding of God's concept of justice by looking for the biblical definition of justice. Let's start in the Old Testament and look at Zechariah 7:9-10 to gain insight into God's view of justice. "Thus says the LORD of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another." Zechariah identifies groups of people in the time of the Old Testament who have no power. They are the widows, fatherless, foreigners, and poor. They were vulnerable to exploitation, and God's command was to show them mercy and compassion, not to overlook them, ignore them, or hope for their best. Let me suggest that we might think of biblical justice as defending the vulnerable. These same groups of vulnerable people exist today. Think of the fatherless children we have known in our lives or we know today. They are vulnerable and need our mercy and compassion.

Let's look now in the New Testament for additional guidance on God's definition of justice. As we do, we will begin to discover that justice can be defined as love made visible. If we love those in our lives, we will do whatever we can to help them in their time of need. We will sacrifice our own life for our spouse or child if that need were to arise. But the biblical concept of love goes far beyond just our family members whom we love. Let's turn now to James 2:15-17 and see how James links justice to our faith and social action. James writes, "If a brother or sister is naked and

lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” Do we see how James connects faith to action? We are not to simply advise our brothers and sisters in Christ to care for themselves and leave them if they have physical needs in their lives and we are able to meet those needs. Instead, we are to act in love to help them. In our modern times of instant worldwide communications, we see these needs frequently in real time. Ukraine and the many refugees are examples in front of us today. There are many Christians among the refugees who are our brothers and sisters and there are many Gentiles among them. We are to respond to their needs in love and action.

The Lord’s Prayer found in Matthew 6 gives us insight into the broader reflection of heaven on earth. In verses 9-10 Jesus teaches us to pray: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Do we realize that when we pray this prayer, we are asking God to bring heaven to earth? In heaven, God’s will is perfectly done. There is no sin in heaven and God’s original intent for relationships is fully in place. When we pray the Lord’s Prayer, we are asking for this aspect of heaven to become a reality where we are, around us and through us. Have we stopped to think about what it means for God’s will to be perfectly done where we are? In heaven, no one treats another unfairly because of the color of their skin. When we pray the Lord’s Prayer, we are praying for this part of God’s will to become a reality here in this place, and when we understand that God’s will is not being carried out around us, we are to act to bring God’s will to reality. This prayer guides us to think about justice in an even broader sense as justice reflecting heaven on earth.

In heaven, no one goes to bed hungry at night and no one wakes up to an empty food pantry and starts their day without their hunger being removed. If that is not the case where we live, then we are to act and work towards that end on earth. God is not sending manna from heaven to care for the hungry; God is sending us. God is blessing us that through us bread may be given to those in need in all of the places where the body of Christ is found.

There are many issues of justice that we are confronted with today: racial inequality, human trafficking, abortion, poverty, climate concerns, human sexuality, and many more. As we begin to become aware of justice issues, many will make the claim that we are becoming “political,” as these issues are often associated with ideological camps of political thought. Let me speak briefly to this idea. The justice of Jesus Christ is not political; it is biblical. If we were to take time to count all of

the verses in our Bibles that speak to justice, we would find more than 2000 verses. Verses with justice themes are second only to verses addressing idolatry. God speaks to justice in God's Word. To associate God with our politics is not appropriate. Someone long ago pointed out that: "God is NOT a donkey or an elephant. He is a lion and a lamb. He is the King of kings. We are citizens of His kingdom first." As followers of Jesus, we need to recall that we are not American Christians; we are Christian Americans. Followers of Jesus Christ are first citizens of the kingdom of God who are blessed to live in America. We see this blurring of faith and politics too frequently in the history of the church, and whenever we do, the outcomes are not good. In the current struggle in the United Methodist Church over the authority of God's Word, we are about to witness the emergence of the Global Methodist Church. This new church is not seeking to become a Methodist wing of either political party. It is seeking to be a church living fully under the authority of God's Word as understood in all places for all time.

As Christian Americans, we are called first to be citizens of the kingdom of God. Citizens of the kingdom of God seek to live with God fully in charge of their lives and their interactions with other lives surrounding them. In Matthew 6:33, we find Jesus calling us to "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness . . ." If we seek first God's kingdom, we don't form our position on an issue based on a political party's platform or stated ideology. We form our position based on the Word of God. No political party fully represents the kingdom of God. That is not the purpose of a political party. The kingdom of God is not the endpoint or primary focus in politics. Can God use a political party to bring about good? Yes, but God can also bring good out of evil circumstances. Doctor Larry Hurtado was a scholar who studied and wrote about the history of early Christianity. He studied the writings of the early church, seeking to identify how this very small group of believers emerged in history, overcoming paganism of the first century, and the Roman empire's efforts to suppress this new religion. First, Hurtado gives credit that the power of the Holy Spirit was active and was an integral part of their emergence. He also contends that a great part of the reason the church grew is that among all of the communities of the world there was no other community like it. He identifies five distinct features that made it stand out from all other 1<sup>st</sup> century communities. Let me list them for us this morning: 1. It was multiracial and multiethnic, 2. It cared for the poor, asking the wealthier to share with the poor, 3. It stood against infanticide and abortion, 4. It held that marriage and sexuality were between one man and one woman for life, 5. It was nonviolent, advocating pacifism both personally and nationally.<sup>1</sup>

The point of listing those features is that in our current political landscape, the first two features are liberal positions. Those features deal with race and class. The second two features are considered by many people as conservative positions, and the last feature, pacifism, does not fall directly into either of these categories. The early church could not be considered either liberal or conservative. This small community was not trying to find a centrist line of thought to live by as all of these features or positions were unusual at the time. The real reason that the early church doesn't fit into our thought categories of today is that it based its features not on those of the culture, but on kingdom principles. Lives were lived following Jesus, not based on political platforms or the norms of society, but on the biblical values that Jesus revealed to us found now in Scripture. Simply stated, there is no single human ideology that mirrors the values of the kingdom of God. Those values come from God's Word and are lived out in the power of the Holy Spirit by the citizens of the kingdom of God. Our goal is not to advance a political ideology, but to live as Jesus taught us to live, to follow him on the "Way."

Our challenge becomes not to discern how to align with those in the world, but to approach justice as Jesus taught. We are to approach each issue of justice we encounter in our lives by first asking the question, "How can I express love in this situation?" This question will drive us to a different response in most situations. Take justice issues with race. There we ask ourselves, "What is the most loving response to those of a different race from me?" We ask this in prayer, opening ourselves to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures for our response. Think about this approach for dealing with hunger as a justice issue. If we will act out of love, then we will change our response from the causes of hunger to a focus on how we can love people who are hungry. With that mindset, we can be led to act in love towards people.

Another question we will find helpful in shaping our response to justice issues is "What will the resolution of this issue look like in heaven?" If we will begin to think about how living in God's will resolves justice issues and seek to apply the understanding we receive where we are, we will begin to be more open to kingdom of God values and less focused on bringing resolution to issues that are outside of our immediate influence. We will also need to keep in our minds that the most loving response will not always be immediately apparent in every situation, but if we will ask these questions and let the Holy Spirit guide us as we seek to respond as Jesus would have us respond, we will find the acts of love we are to use to bring justice.

Think about some of the past responses that Christians have brought to the world community. There are hospitals and orphanages to care for the vulnerable, schools to educate, and churches established across the world to bring the love of Jesus into communities. Some amazing aspects of the culture have been changed by loving acts of Christians. The abolishment of slavery in the western world is an example of Christians leading the way to address justice issues.<sup>2</sup> There are many Christian based organizations at work today in the world that are still acting in love to address justice issues. I was blessed a few weeks ago to find myself with the opportunity to pray with a woman who was working with victims of human trafficking in the Midwest. Her ministry makes clear the point that justice will not be perfect until Jesus returns. Until then, we as followers of Christ are to be the body of Christ loving others right here, right now, with what God has placed in our hands. We are not to be those who see injustice and simply give up and claim that there is nothing we can do to change what we see. Love acts, and there is injustice for us to respond to in the world and in our community today. How is the Holy Spirit prompting us to respond to injustice we see? Are we called to go and work in a refugee camp for Ukraine? Are we called to go and meet young Africans fleeing oppression in their home country and coming ashore in Greece or Italy? Will we let our hearts be more than stirred? Will we empty our pockets and send resources to support those who called to those places? Will we roll up our sleeves and help our neighbors clean up from storm damage? Will we pray that Jesus will open our eyes and send the Holy Spirit to guide us into loving acts right here, right now or wherever we are led?

*Pray with me: Father God, we confess that we have not always responded to injustice with loving acts. Lord, teach us to pray and to allow the Holy Spirit to guide our steps that we might love people and let you work through us to bring your justice through our loving acts to those in this place and all places you lead us to act. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit we pray.  
Amen*

<sup>1</sup> Bruce Strom, "Should Christians be involved in doing justice?" Feb. 8, 2021, Administer Justice; <https://www.administerjustice.org/2021/02/08/justice/>.

<sup>2</sup> Both Tim Keller and John Mark Comer (in his book *Live No Lies*) make this observation.