

## Called From Judgment Into Justice – Hannah Marshall

Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36

Growing up in a conservative church, surrounded by traditional American evangelicals, I learned the term “social justice church.” These words were accompanied with a dark tone and a look of scorn, sadness, or fear. I came to understand that churches who practiced a “social gospel” had abandoned Jesus in favor of some world-conforming view that called for wholesale acceptance of the culture at large, and denied the existence of any knowable truth. It became conflated with the postmodernist movement my youth pastor so abhorred, what he described as a worldview in which any way is the right way and all truth is relative. The notion of relative truth was threatening to his idea of the Bible as an inerrant, historical document that held every answer and every knowable truth. In some ways, as I watched my elders judge “social justice” Christians, I learned to be driven by fear: fear of hell, fear of the other, fear of the contagion of sin.

In my twenties, I finally visited a “social justice church,” and it became my family’s spiritual home for five years while we were living in Madison. I was surprised to learn that these Christians were still interested in pursuing truth, and I discovered that their desire to transform the world felt, to me, more holistic than anything I’d experienced before. They weren’t so worried about defilement through contact with those considered as *living* defilements by the culture (the secular culture *and* the Christian culture); rather, they were concerned with reaching into the life of, and caring for, the outcast, listening to their story and helping where help was needed and welcome. The church members weren’t driven by a fear that science might discredit their faith by disproving Noah’s flood or explaining that seven-day creation was nothing more than a myth. In fact, they acknowledged the presence of myth in the Bible and freed me from the fear that *sola scriptura* had buried in my heart, allowing me to finally be at peace with the errancies and inconsistencies of the historical, fictional, artistic text of the Bible.

I left Madison and First United Methodist Church, but the expansion of what Christianity can be remains within me. As I was looking over the Jeremiah passage in preparation for this sermon, I was grateful to no longer feel that I must spend my time defending this passage as a prophecy for the coming of Jesus. Certainly, many readers have considered this passage to be pointing to a Messiah, a savior of their people, a great ruler who would finally bring justice and stable rule to the Jewish nation—perhaps also to the entire world.

But if Jesus was the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s words, then he was not what the passage seems to suggest: where, in Jesus’ lifetime, was this promised safety for Jerusalem? And even thousands of years after his death, we are still trying to reform Jesus, to make him be the savior we feel we most need; in my teen years, he was a savior of individual souls, a club you join so that one day you can go to heaven. Today, I would like him to be the champion of my political leanings, uplifting the afflicted and punishing the oppressor.

But like any real person, Jesus is not a cliché. And in order to enter into the mystery of his life, we must be willing to accept that Jesus is everything we never expect him to be.

Jesus did indeed *execute justice and righteousness*, but this justice was not sweeping social change, and it wasn't the downfall of the oppressor. Jesus' justice also wasn't an altar call to the promise of heaven; it wasn't a doctrine of suffering through life with your head held high until you are called into your well-earned glory.

How easy it is to confuse judgment for justice. But judgment is punitive, whereas justice is inclusive. Judgment seeks to preside over others, to decide right and wrong, and mete out punishment. Justice seeks to right wrongs, reset imbalances.

This is the justice Jesus brought: truth, followed with an invitation to love. For those hungry for power or personal gain (like the Pharisees), truth came as a bitter pill. For those who weren't from the right people group (like the Samaritans), or who weren't the right gender or social class (like Mary Magdalene, the bleeding woman, the disfigured or sick or disabled), this truth came as grace, relief from societal pressures.

We are often drawn to judgment through what we think is righteous anger, but in Jesus' anger, he chose to act out of love-infused justice. In anger, Jesus overturned the tables of the self-serving moneychangers in Matthew 21, but in Matthew 7, he declared, *Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.* In the overturning of the tables, Jesus was not punishing the moneychangers so much as acting on behalf of the poor, the outcasts, and the foreigners who were essentially barred entrance to God's house. As such, his was an act of justice, not judgment.

Consider also all the times Jesus interacted with the Pharisees and scribes. Jesus criticized and opposed them, but he continued to engage with them, answering their entrapping questions, telling them stories, even as he knew how unlikely he was to persuade them to make any change to their comfortable systems of oppression. In Jesus' continued patience with their scorn and judgment, he displayed great love for them. Jesus had hope that they could be made to see the need for justice in their dealings with others, hope that they would turn away from the dismissive judgment that was their usual tactic.

God shows a preference for a love-infused justice in the psalm today, too. David wrote this psalm—David, my least favorite person in the Bible, the man who has continued to be revered even as we read how he used and discarded Michal, how he raped Bathsheba, slaughtered the hero Uriah, sentenced Michal's sister's children to death in judgment for their grandfather's crimes. Is this the kind of judgment God models for us? No. *Remember your mercy, O LORD, and your steadfast love, for they have been from of old. Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for the sake of your goodness, O LORD!* God's love is certainly more steadfast than my own, because I can't bring myself to forgive David, Lord help me.

So how does God instruct us toward a life in the service of love-infused justice? Through the practice of goodness, humbleness. Goodness. Engaging those who we see as wrong, listening to them, never giving up on them. Humbleness. Making space for those who are pushed to the margins of our culture.

We are not called to a message of damnation and scare-tactics, to a message of “save yourself” and keep yourself righteous, apart, clean, “holy.” We are instead called to true justice, which can never be separated from love. The deepest root of our faith, and of Jesus’ teachings, is love; that is what *establishes our hearts as blameless in holiness before our God*, as we read today in Thessalonians. Jesus’ earthly life models love for us. Love, which stayed his terrible power to all purposes but healing, forgiveness, new life. Love, which broke into the lives of abused women, foreigners, social outcasts. Love for one another. Love for all, even unto death.

Love can mean holding your tongue or speaking out. It can mean telling truth that offends, or telling truth that heals. Love is never the thing that makes you look better than those around you, the thing that elevates you and others like you. Ultimately, love is going to be that which offers healing, friendship, a path to togetherness.

It feels like this love, though, will never be enough to heal the world. How many of the Pharisees came around under Jesus’ teachings? For every person Jesus healed, how many continued to suffer, to die? If Jesus’ world wasn’t 100% healed by his love-infused justice, how can our small days of going to and from work, donating time or money on occasion, writing the sporadic letter to politicians or note of condolence to friends—how can any of that matter in the face of our ever-sick world, where the most needy continue to be in need? Consider the thousands just south of our nation’s border, enduring filthy, crowded conditions—and for what? They are not in need of judgment, of our righteous desires to stay clean, to keep our country “holy,” set apart, for the arbitrarily chosen few. They seek true justice, the justice that acts for the oppressed in love, that seeks good for *all*.

The injustice rampant across nations and between neighbors can make us feel like we’re living in a Margaret Atwood post-apocalyptic world. I think Jesus understood that life on earth can feel like this. In this morning’s Luke reading, Jesus is speaking of scary things: war, natural disaster, fear and foreboding. I don’t think I can fully parse out this cry of the terrible, other than to say, yes, the terrible was upon those in Jesus’ lifetime, as it inflicts us still today.

What does Jesus instruct us to do in the face of our hopelessness? *Watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap. For it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth.*

Perhaps Jesus was imagining his own coming trials, imagining the war within himself as he considered the judgment that would be heaped upon him, the suffering of his death, the earthquake that followed. If we can expect days of terror to beset our own lives, too (and we can—Jesus promises that that day *will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth*), how can we be ready for such sorrow in our own lives? How can we keep from being weighed down? Perhaps all we can do is be present in the sorrow of others, even as we know pain awaits us all. And when it’s our turn to walk through the valley, we must be willing to accept the comfort of others, to take a breath and take care of ourselves. The world can be a kinder place if we can stand with sufferers in love, hold them and refuse to judge them, demonstrate goodness through generosity, humbleness in sharing what we’ve earned with others in equal measure, their well-being as important as our own—their well-being tied to our own.

I don't think Jesus wants us to sit upon a throne of judgment. Jesus called us out of judgment. God asks not for penance but for us to look honestly at our own sins in order to abolish our notions of superiority. God doesn't want us to try to prove we're right, but rather to act faithfully in love, to embrace people whom others have rejected, and to speak truth to people who judge and reject and hate, never giving up on winning them into a love-infused justice.

And when we fail, when we judge when love is in order, when we remain silent in the midst of injustice, may we cry out alongside the fickle, detestable, and somehow still redeemable David:

*Remember your mercies, O LORD, your love—  
your ancient and unwavering love!*

.....  
*how good and upright you are, O LORD!  
You instruct sinners in the path,  
you guide the humble in what is right,  
and teach them your way.*

(Psalm 25:6, 8-9, The Inclusive Bible)

This year, as we remember again Jesus entering our world of inequity and judgment, where the idea of a stable, just, kingly reign is still no more than the unfulfilled hope of so many nations, let's seek out the love-infused justice of Jesus. Seek it in the living rooms of families that listen rather than judge. Seek it in women's shelter waiting rooms. Seek it down streets where protesters rally against racism, mass incarceration, or harsh immigration policies. Seek it between neighbors who set aside politics in times of crisis, death, or disaster.

Seek with me this season the unexpected Jesus, the Jesus of the powerless *and* the powerful, the Jesus of *all* political parties, the Jesus of the hated *and* those who hate, the Jesus who never gave up on the least of these, and who never gave up on his enemies, either.