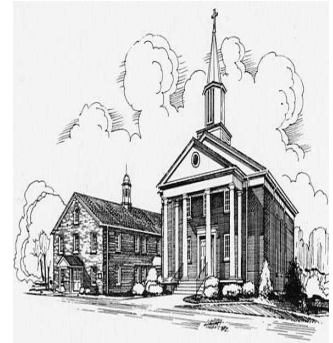


*The Lessons Appointed for Use on the*  
**Sunday closest to October 12**

**Proper 23**  
**Year C**  
**RCL**



Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7  
Psalm 111  
Luke 17:11-19

**The Collect**

Lord, we pray that your grace may always precede and follow us, that we may continually be given to good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

**Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7**

These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

**Psalm 111 Page 754, BCP**

*Confitebor tibi*

1 Hallelujah!

I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart,  
in the assembly of the upright, in the congregation.

2 Great are the deeds of the LORD!

they are studied by all who delight in them.

3 His work is full of majesty and splendor,

and his righteousness endures for ever.

4 He makes his marvelous works to be remembered;

the LORD is gracious and full of compassion.

5 He gives food to those who fear him;

he is ever mindful of his covenant.

6 He has shown his people the power of his works

in giving them the lands of the nations.

7 The works of his hands are faithfulness and justice;

all his commandments are sure.

8 They stand fast for ever and ever,

because they are done in truth and equity.

9 He sent redemption to his people;

he commanded his covenant for ever;

holy and awesome is his Name.

10 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;

those who act accordingly have a good understanding;

his praise endures for ever.

### **Luke 17:11-19**

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” Then he said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

## SERMON

I want you to think about a word we use often and which also appears quite often in Scripture. It is a common word, and like many common words, we rarely think about what we mean by it. Today, I want us to think about “justice”. What do we mean when we speak of justice?

In a case before the United States Supreme Court some years ago which dealt with pornography and free speech, Justice Potter Stewart famously confessed that he couldn’t define pornography but, he said, “I know it when I see it.”<sup>1</sup> Is “justice” something like that, something we know when we see it but cannot define? I hope not, for God’s prophets tell us that we are to pursue justice. Amos wrote:

***“But let justice roll on like a river, righteous-***

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<sup>1</sup> Justice Potter Stewart, concurring opinion in *Jacobellis v. Ohio* 378 U.S. 184 (1964),

***ness like a never-failing stream!”<sup>2</sup>***

Micah, Amos’s contemporary, prophesied:

***“He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”<sup>3</sup>***

Justice is important to God, but how are we to do justice if we can’t define it? Without a working definition, is our understanding of justice the same as God’s?

My experience within the law enforcement community led me to conclude that the common understanding of “justice” has too much to do with vengeance. The most satisfying displays of justice are the ones we see on COPS. After a chase, the bad guy disappears under a ton of policemen, and his car lies a smoking wreck. We lose interest if we have to grind our way through a trial. Justice in the common understanding seems to involve

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<sup>2</sup> Amos 5:24

<sup>3</sup> Micah 6:8

the reassurance that evil has been paid back, stroke for stroke, stripe for stripe. Is this what God means when He tells us to let justice roll on like a river? Is God counseling us to gather up all those who would do evil and destroy them? And who are these people who would do evil if we don't destroy them?

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was a Russian writer, historian, and critic of the social systems he found himself within. After a decade of confinement in Siberia, he had cause to apply himself to the question of who these evil doers were, and he came up with a surprising and troubling answer:

***If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?***

Better yet, we could consult *Pogo* in the funny papers. Pogo the possum said, “We have met the enemy and he is us.” Solzhenitsyn and Pogo are both right, I’m afraid. If we truly are to confine all who would do evil, who is so good that they should escape the jailer’s charge? And if we seek to destroy evil and its minions, which of us is so exceptional that we shall live?

I begin to think that our idea of justice – one which understands justice as the destruction or confinement of evil doers and which marks those who have done wrong with the mark of Cain for all time – might not be the same as God’s approach to justice. As I read the Word, I’m struck by the realization that our conception of justice consigns wrongdoers to a lifetime of failure while God’s conception of justice seeks to lead those who have done wrong to success. It’s a striking difference to my way of thinking.



I'm most struck by the similarity between the sorts of things we punish people for and the ways we choose to punish them. We do awful things to those who have transgressed the law – things we would never permit ourselves to do to an “innocent person”, whatever that is. We kidnap them. We take their property. We confine them without concern for their welfare. Sometimes we snicker at the possibility they may be raped in prison. Sometimes, we kill them. These are the very sorts of conduct we pass laws against, yet they find full flower in the sorts of punishments we inflict upon those who break the law! We seek to defeat Satan using Satan's own methods! Odd, don't you think? We take the view that somebody else's misbehavior grants us permission to act badly in return, and only when we have done so do we feel that justice has been done.

We had a good, close look at that recently. A group

of motorcycle enthusiasts in New York thought it would be amusing to force an SUV with a family inside to stop within a frightening circle of snarling motorcycles. The father, terrified for his family, made a break for it and in so doing, struck one of the motorcycle enthusiasts, injuring him. The injury to one of their own seemed to let slip the dogs of violence of the others. They felt entitled to pursue the SUV and retaliate. They got the SUV stopped, broke out the window, extracted the driver and beat him. This will sound familiar to anyone who has ever watched COPS on TV as virtually every vehicle pursuit presented on COPS ends the same way.

“But”, we protest. “That’s different! The police have to do that to apprehend a criminal so that justice can be done.” Yes, that’s exactly right, but it doesn’t change the fact that the conduct in each case is identical. We just choose to feel that the policemen are justi-

fied in doing so and the bikers are not, and that's the exact muddy spot in the road where our idea of what justice entails deviates from God's.

Take my hand, and let's move back in time to the Sixth Century b.c.e. We recently read from Jeremiah, the "weeping prophet", as he counseled the people of Jerusalem to give up in the face of the Babylonian army because, he told them, the Babylonian forces besieging Jerusalem were acting with God's approval. In today's passage, that which God had told them would happen has come to pass. Jeremiah is still in Jerusalem, but masses of the people have been exiled to Babylon. God has decided that His people have done wrong, and is punishing them.

If God's conception of justice were in accord with ours, He would toss them under the jail and throw away the key. He would stuff them four or five or six to a

cell. He would herd them with pepper grenades and Tasers. Later, he would mark them with a special mark as “convicted felons” so that all who dealt with them thereafter would be warned that they are not trustworthy and are perhaps dangerous. He would see that they never survived as a people, that they could never succeed in having families, or experience the joy of seeing their children grow and prosper, for that’s our idea of justice.

Jeremiah wrote a letter to the captives in Babylon outlining God’s idea of justice.

***Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply***

*there, and do not decrease.*

God's idea of justice isn't destruction – it is restoration. It's not death, it's life! What an idea! God doesn't mark sinners for failure, but corrects them and encourages success. That can't be right, can it? Everybody knows that the wages of sin are death. If we can't see sinners suffer and die, what's the point of being loving Christians? Something is desperately wrong here. If someone does something awful to you, it is only fair that something awful be made to happen to him in retaliation. An eye for an eye! A tooth for a tooth! Well, the Babylonians have done truly awful things to the people to whom Jeremiah is writing. When they besieged Jerusalem the people inside the walls starved. When the city fell, thousands died. The Babylonian army destroyed the Temple built by Solomon, God's footstool Solomon called it, the House of God which had stood

for 400 years. They took everyone of any status and marched them off 700 miles on foot to Babylon where they were made to live by an irrigation ditch.

Suppose someone broke into your house and murdered your children? What would you think should be done with such a one? When God urges us to love justice, he cannot mean the same thing we mean. There is just no way to square Jeremiah's words with our idea of justice. Justice as we understand it cries out for an opportunity to pour hot coals on the heads of the Babylonians in retaliation. We might not be able to define justice, but we know it when we see it, and **that** would be justice. Yet, God's word to them is:

***But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.***

Do you get the impression that by God's standards

we have given ourselves too much leeway to act badly toward those who have acted badly towards us? Do you think when we fancy that we are free to treat those who have offended with cruelty, to brand them “convicted felon” as if that totally defined them, and close them off from participation in our society, we might have been kinder to our own evil nature than we should have been? Or is that too tough a question? Who, indeed, is willing to destroy a portion of his own heart?

In our story from Luke, ten lepers who suffered had their suffering ended by the word of Jesus, but only one recognized his healing as a new beginning. That one returned to Jesus and began again. It is this model of restorative justice which God urges upon us. We all suffer from the touch of evil. We are all in need of healing, but healing is a beginning not an end, an opportunity not a destination. From new beginnings should spring

life, not death. That's very often not how we see it. We lose interest after the offender disappears under a ton of policemen. For us, that's the end of the story, not its beginning. God teaches otherwise. After the offender emerges from under all those policemen, God urges him to make a new beginning, to "Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease."

God Himself does not propose to judge a man until he is dead. So why should you? If those who break our laws are, in truth, our enemies is our approach to such people characterized by love or hate? Beware of being too certain of your ability to recognize justice when you see it. Remember that both Moses and the Apostle Paul



began their work with a homicide.

AMEN

*Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.*

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