

## Let Justice Roll Down

I came of age during the Civil Rights struggles of the late 1950s and early 1960s, and I have lately come to recognize that I am a recovering bigot, engaged in my own 12-step program of recovery.

I grew up in the San Fernando Valley, attending church and schools that were segregated because only whites lived in my neighborhood. This was due to restrictive covenants that had prevented African and Mexican Americans from renting or buying in certain areas. We watched from our sheltered existence as Central High School in Little Rock was desegregated in 1957, not realizing that we would experience much the same process when the Los Angeles Unified School District was found guilty of intentionally segregating city schools in 1972.

Activists have spent the years since then struggling for civil rights for African Americans across not only the South but in cities such as Boston, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles, all of which have experienced race riots. And New York saw the Stonewall uprising by the LGBT community. Today's Pride events mark that unofficial beginning of the struggle for civil rights for the LGBT community.

Here in Battle Ground, during Julie Reinholtz's tenure as our pastor, we began the journey toward becoming a reconciling congregation. Julie often said that we were already such a congregation; we just didn't call ourselves that. We studied the prospect seriously and eventually made the decision to officially call ourselves "reconciling" during Rachon Hanson's tenure. And during the past year, we have begun the process of advertising just who we are.

Perhaps my favorite Bible verse is one that we heard today, Micah 6:8 – "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?" It has been said that this single sentence sums up the legal, ethical and spiritual requirements of religion. Note that all of these requirements can be fulfilled without ever setting foot in a temple or church. All three deal with our relationships with each other and our God.

In a parallel passage, Amos has God saying, "I hate your feasts . . . I will not accept or even look upon your offerings . . . I will not listen to your music . . ." Rather, God tells Israel to "let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." (Amos 5:21-24)

Let's look at what these prophets meant by "justice" and "righteousness."

While "justice" **can** be used to mean retributive justice, in which a person is punished for his or her wrongdoings, most of the time in the Bible "justice" is used to refer to restorative or rectifying justice, in which those who are hurt or wronged are restored and given back what was taken from or denied them.

Two Hebrew words for justice are found in hundreds of places in the Old Testament. The first – *mishpat* – refers to rectifying justice. If you look at virtually every place the word *mishpat* is used in the Old Testament it describes taking up the care and cause of the vulnerable members of society, those with no social standing or power. According to the Bible, God loves and defends those with the least economic and social power, and so should we. That is what it means to “do justice.”

Another Hebrew word that can be translated as “being just” – *tzadeqah* – can also be translated as “being righteous.” It refers to a life of right relationships, day-to-day living in which a person conducts all relationships in family and society with fairness, generosity and equity. Primary justice, or *tzadeqah*, is behavior that, if it were prevalent in the world, would make rectifying justice unnecessary, because everyone would be living in right relationship with God and thus would have right relationships with all people.

These two terms – *mishpat* and *tzadeqah* – are found together scores of times in the Bible, where we, along with Israel, are charged to “welcome the stranger” and “love our neighbors as ourselves.” And Jesus told us that even those we despise are our neighbors, that “even as you have done it to the least of these, you have done it to Jesus.” Note that we are not told to “tolerate” our neighbors; we must love them.

Why am I recalling this history and explaining Biblical concepts? Because they seem to be especially pertinent to what is happening today as our post-truth society descends further into tribalism, as we demonize those with whom we disagree, as we engage in a politics of grievance and resentment, all while turning the vulnerable into scapegoats.

I am part of the “All Means All” ministry because I see our being a reconciling congregation as an important part of our witness and ministry to this community at this point in history. My part in this ministry is an important part of my 12-step program of recovery.

At annual conference last month, pastors were told they were ordained to be disrupters for Jesus. Just as Jesus hung out with the marginalized, the outcasts and the vulnerable members of his society, the church is called to recognize that “All Means All” in the eyes of God. As followers of Jesus and children of God, we are called to live a life of *tzadeqah* in which we are reconciled to God and to all persons. This means that we all need to participate in recovery from our various prejudices and outright bigotry, recognizing that while there are differences between us, the kingdom of God is not a zero-sum game. Advances and justice achieved for some do not subtract from the rest of us. Jesus’ message, in contrast to the Roman dogma of achieving peace through victory and conquest, was that God’s kingdom, God’s peace, would be achieved through doing justice.

One of my guilty pleasures is reading espionage thrillers, and I recently finished the latest James Patterson novel, *The President Is Missing*. The President in question (for

whom I would vote in a New York minute) tells the nation that we must shrink the definition of *them* and expand the definition of *us*. **That** is the mission of a reconciling congregation and why I signed on to this ministry.