

Christ Presbyterian Church

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"Glad You Asked - Social Justice: 'What is the Church Called to Do?'"

Micah 6:6-8

We are in the midst of a sermon series based on questions you have asked. We received about a hundred or so questions and have whittled them down to a series of 12. What I'm doing today is quickly look at two questions that I'm going to give a cursory, one-minute answer to and then the third question I'm going to expound on just a little bit. All these questions deserve a full treatment but these are the constraints that we have.

The first question I looked at was *How can we find hope for the world during these turbulent and scary times?* This question has particular poignancy in the wake of the double bombing that occurred in Uganda a week ago leaving scores of people dead. What does the Bible have to say to us about the times we live in where economic recessions affect every one of us, where oil spills and earthquakes and other disasters seem to punctuate the narratives of our lives, and where our tranquility or least the tranquility that we thought we had has been disturbed?

As we look at some of the daunting waves of changes that affect and impact people all over the planet, I think it is important to remind ourselves that God has not lost control. Scripture repeatedly reminds us that our God is a God of hope. Our God is a God of comfort and compassion. We are told that in Christ, God intends to make all things new. The prophets use imagery to describe the *shalom* of God as a world of peace, of plenty, in which justice finally comes to the poor and healing comes to the wounded. Over the past several centuries, many Christians, including Presbyterians, have been comforted by the words of the Heidelberg Catechism which asks the question, "What is your only hope in life and in death?" To which the answer, at least in part, is this: I am not my own. I belong body and soul in life and in death to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven. Again, that is a very unsatisfying answer. It's a cursory one that perhaps we can revisit at some other time.

Second question: *"Why is there so much discrepancy between the rich and the poor? Again, this is a very hard one—I am not going to have time scratch the surface of this one. In one sense the answer is very simple. We live in a fallen world where greed and other vices manifest themselves in lots of ways like the huge gap that exists between the rich and the poor. In many countries including the Congo (the country in which I was born), there really is not what you would call a middle class. There are the very rich and then there are the very poor, and the gap is huge. When we are compared with the majority of the developing world, most of us would be*

considered unimaginably rich. Having said that, money and riches occupied about 15 percent of everything that Jesus talked about—more than heaven and hell combined. One-third of the parables were about money.

The prophets of old talked about money in unflattering terms but looking at the overarching narrative of the Scriptures, I would say the prevailing message of the Bible boils down to the great commandment, “Love God with all of your heart, all of your soul, all of your mind and strength.” And secondly, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” When we do this, when we truly ingest these concepts, we loosen the grip our possessions have on us. We realize that, in the end, what we have—our possessions, our riches, our health, our circumstances, our connections—all of these are a gift from God and, therefore, are to be used to bless Him and to bless others. Again, a whole sermon could be preached on that as well and I wish I could spend a little more time on it.

The third question: *Social justice: what is the church called to do?* Please pray with me.

Lord, we ask now that the words of my heart and the meditation of all of our hearts and the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts would be pleasing to You, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

God is described in the Bible as a judge, as a God of justice. Now sometimes people aren't so sure that is good news but it really is good news. I hope that by the time that we've covered this material together and thought about it together, we will all be clearer on the fact that it is good news. These words will be familiar to a lot of you. We have grown up saying these words in school, “*I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.*” Justice for all—what an amazing concept! We love justice and the idea of having a society where everybody is able to live in justice is such a good thing. Not much makes us angrier than when we see injustice and people getting away with injustice.

Some of you have traveled to various places around the world. I've traveled with a number of you. I have a distinct memory of traveling to Uganda with the International Justice Mission and some of you who have been there with me. We met with women, mostly widows who had been thrown off of their land, out of the homes that they had built and where they had nurtured their families and their children over years. Because of the greed of their deceased husbands' relatives and because they didn't know the rights that they had under Ugandan law, they were tossed out of their homes into the street with literally nothing but the clothes on their backs.

I remember sitting with Tim Bettenga across the table from a woman who is here now. We were interviewing her and she was telling us stories of how her husband's relatives shamed her, telling her that she was worthless, that she didn't amount to anything, and that nobody would come to her aid or to her defense because of who she was. This type of thing often happens with impunity because history, really, has tended to be on the side of the powerful, on the side of the oppressor, on the side of the perpetrator. Far too often the bad guys have gotten away with it. It made me angry. It made me so mad, sitting there, hearing this woman telling her story. It is hard to describe.

We have heard all kinds of stories. Those of you who have traveled to the Congo or to other places have heard stories of injustice that have made your blood boil. You have all experienced

this. Somebody looks you in the eye and cheats you on a business deal and then goes home and sleeps like a baby. The head of a company sexually harasses a vulnerable young employee, a young woman who has taken this as her first job out of college. She tries to tell the truth about it, and he gets her fired. That injustice just doesn't sit with us. We want justice. Even at a baseball game we want justice. At a baseball game we hire people whose job it is to maintain justice. That is the umpire. He is supposed to make sure that it is fair play. If you go to a Twins game and Scott Baker throws four strikes right down the heart of the plate and the umpire calls them balls, the traditional chant that goes up from the stands is not, "Educate the umpire." It is not, "Let's send the umpire to remedial training." What do we say? "*Kill the umpire.*" That's right. If the umpire is not bringing justice, let's take him to the back of the house and take care of business ourselves. Let's bring justice. We want justice. Where can you find justice? Is there any place where justice can be found?

Several thousand years ago a tiny little nation called Israel said, *yes, there is*. Little Israel-- nothing remarkable about this nation—not known for its military prowess nor its commerce nor its size, but it was important. It was important because it gave to the world this idea that there is a God, that there is one God, and this God created all things, and this God is great and wants to be known personally. He is the Redeemer. He works to bring good out of bad. He is the Creator, the Maker of everything that exists and He is a just God. He never blows a call. He never bumbles a verdict. This is in Psalm 7, "God is a righteous judge." Or Psalm 9, "God judges the world with righteousness. He judges the peoples with equity." Or another psalm, "The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

There are two words in the Bible that are often paired together: justice and righteousness. Now, of course, everybody loves justice. There were other nations that had this passion for justice as well. The Greeks built statues to justice wearing blindfolds to express the idea that justice ought to be impartial, not catering to the wealthy or the powerful. The Greeks built statues where the figures of justice would be holding scales to signify that justice should be fair, no cheating, no tipping of the scales. But, we know that the Greek gods were not just. Zeus was just as fickle as any human being.

Here is what was unique about Israel... Justice is not simply a human quest due to human frustration. Justice is rooted in the character of God. They said that the day is going to come when every human being will be accountable to God. Proverbs 11:1, "The Lord abhors dishonest scales but accurate weights are His delight." Justice is not, first of all, a human word. It is not, first of all, a human project. It is God's Word. God is passionate about justice and one day justice will prevail. Justice is rooted in the character of God. It is not some arbitrary thing that we came up with. Abraham says in the Book of Genesis, "Doesn't the Judge of all the earth judge with justice?" One day justice is going to come. One day every human being is going to stand accountable before God. No one gets away with anything in God's eternal scheme of things.

Well, this led to a unique development in Israel. It led to a unique class of people referred to as the prophets of Israel. The prophets took on injustice, and not just with other nations. This was quite unique as a development among the cultures and countries there. The prophets took on injustice in their own people but not just inside Israel. They took on kings. They took on the wealthy. They took on the powerful, those who would do them harm. The prophets did this because justice is God's Word.

Now in the Bible the books that are written by the prophets tend to be the ones that are read the least. You know, the ones that we avoid because often the prophets strike us as a little bit eccentric, maybe a little bit cranky. This is from the prophet Amos, "Hear this Word, you cows of Bashan....you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy." He's not making a lot of friends with that language. Or Isaiah, "For your hands are stained with blood, your fingers with guilt. Your lips have spoken lies, and your tongue mutters wicked things. No one calls for justice; no one pleads their case with integrity...The Lord looked and was displeased that there was no justice. He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intercede...."

God is appalled by injustice. Another prophet, Micah, said, "Should you not know justice, you who hate good and love evil; who tear the skin from my people and the flesh from their bones; who eat my people's flesh, and strip off their skin and break their bones in pieces; who chop them up like meat for the pan...." Doesn't that sound like a little over the top? Not Dale Carnegie material there. Prophets are filled with this stuff and we don't like it.

I like happy books. I like happy words. Why should we read the prophets? Well, for one thing because they are in the Bible. There is a reason why God chose 17 Books out of the Bible to be the Books of the prophets. There is a reason why it is a kind of discipline that we need to submit ourselves to, to sit under their words. Often, if we are not the ones who have experienced a great deal of injustice, if we are the ones in any given society who tend to have a little bit more of the power, a little bit more of the wealth, if life is going okay, we can read the prophets and thank them. What's the big deal? What are they getting all heated up about? I mean, I know there is violence in the world and it is, of course, regrettable, but as long as it doesn't touch my life, I'd prefer not to think about it, thank you very much. Certainly it is not connected with my hostility or lack of love. I know cheating goes on every day in the world of business. That is just the way things are.

Every day in Sub-Saharan Africa, 8000 children and young people are born with or infected with HIV/AIDS, where it's now one of the leading causes of death. A few miles from this very room, children are born in poverty and in many cases will grow up without access to decent housing and decent education through no fault of their own but they are not my children. Maybe their parents did something so the family deserves it. At least that would kind of let me off the hook.

So what if in ancient Palestine the poor got the shaft. Where is it any different? Why go off the deep end? Somebody shades the truth a little bit for profit. Somebody ignores the poor. Somebody gets all wrapped up in their own comfort and affluence and gets careless about remembering those in need and the prophets act like the world is falling apart because the Lord is appalled. Jesus, whom the Bible says was also a prophet, said that every time somebody is in prison and doesn't get visited, every time someone is hungry and doesn't get fed, every time somebody is naked and doesn't get clothed, somehow He suffers. He dies a little inside. And the big deal is God loves justice. It is God's Word and the prophet has been given this crushing burden of looking at our world and seeing what a perfect God would see because the truth is, I'd rather not know. I'd really rather not hear. Events that horrify and appall God are everyday occurrences in our world but I don't want to know. It's too much. It's too overwhelming. I don't want to see. I would just as soon nobody tell me about it because it might disturb my tranquility, my comfort. I just—we just—get used to it. It's amazing how we can *just get used to it*.

A while ago one of my kids spilled a glass of milk in our minivan. I think some of you have had that experience. It's the kind of thing that you don't necessarily notice right away, but it kind of

creeps up on you. Fresh milk doesn't smell bad, but after a day or two, you kind of want to drive with your head out the window. It's kind of an odd experience for oncoming traffic but that's the reality that you live in. We would make these plans to take the van to the car wash but we just never got around to it. The smell just gradually faded away or at least we just didn't smell it any more. Then somebody would come and drive with us and they would ask, "What does not smell good in here?" That would remind us that there was a problem and every once in a while when it would rain, the humidity in the air would kind of do something with the molecules so that the smell would rise up again. Well, eventually we took the van in to get it taken care of because it wasn't happening on its own. After a while our capacity to *just get used to evil*.... well, the prophets never got used to it. Prophets really do speak for God. They see what God sees. They speak what God feels and if they sound a little bit over the top, it is not because of them. The problem isn't theirs. I *just get used to it*, a world that is so far off.

God loves justice. God, how am I supposed to respond to this? Should I just walk around feeling guilty all the time? Should I be overwhelmed because justice is so huge, so vast? Knowing the right thing to do is so complex, so difficult. Should I be paralyzed by the hugeness, by the enormity of the problem? No! The prophet Micah sums up the response that God is looking for, in one of the greatest statements that has ever been uttered by a human being in the Book of Micah. I want to set up a context for you, and then we will just walk through the response line by line.

It's real simple. Micah puts our problem this way. He says, "With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of olive oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" What does God really want anyway? You see the escalation in this passage. All the thoughtful people will think about this. Is this beyond my reach? The verse asks, "Does God want burnt offerings?" Anybody could bring a burnt offering before the Lord. It could be a handful of grain. Anybody could do that, anybody could afford that, but that is not what God wants. How about a calf? That would be a more expensive sacrifice. Only the wealthy could afford that. Maybe only the wealthy can give God what He is looking for. How about 1,000 rams? Now only a king could do that. Maybe 10,000 rivers of oil? You see now, that is impossible. This cannot be done. Well, should I sacrifice my own child? In the ancient world, there were people who actually did this. What does God want? Is it possible to know? Then Micah says, he has shown you, oh, 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.**"

If you carry nothing else away, I want you to carry away this, "But to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God." Just do these three things. God helps us as we seek to serve Him so everyone can do this. You know what they are now. We can pretend not to know. We can act like we are confused and that life is really complicated, but Micah says, no. He has shown you, oh man and oh woman, oh child, what is good. God has made it quite clear.

DO JUSTICE—Start with your own world. Ask God for the gift of integrity. Speak the truth. I mentioned before that the Bible most often pairs justice with righteousness which doesn't mean self-righteousness. It means *to do right*. The Biblical notion of justice is way more than just due process or impartiality. It is tied to the way that God intends the world to run. It is the concept of *shalom*, all things in harmony, and it means to live that way, to do right by all people. Doing

justice starts in a really small way with just speaking truth. Justice and righteousness start very small.

In my own relationships with the people that I work with, there can be no justice and this is one of the great illusions of the ideologies of our day. Ultimately there can be no social justice without personal righteousness. There is no system, political or economic, that is going to bring justice that is filled with unrighteous people, people who will *always find a way around it*. Of course, I can't make myself just but I can ask God to help me in this.

Then we have to look at the world around us and ask God, "Where do You want us to be agents of justice?" I would ask you to just get personal with this, ask yourself where is it that you see injustice in the world, where is injustice that makes your blood boil, that makes you cringe and makes you think, this just cannot be? Where is it when you see the world running not according to *shalom*, where you feel this burden in your spirit and you say, "God, it's got to change. Somebody has got to do something." That very well may be the beginning of God calling you to be that somebody. God looks at injustice, and He is appalled that there is no one to intercede. Maybe you could be the one who intercedes. You see, when that happens, a little bit of God's Kingdom begins to break in. A little bit of God's Kingdom begins to be manifested on earth as it is in heaven as God gives us the power to do that.

I learned recently, and this was a surprise to me, that there are 100,000 sex-trafficking victims in this country—not in other countries around the world, just in the United States. It often starts, essentially, with a child, a young person, 12 or 13 years old, poor, abandoned, runaway, and they begin selling themselves because they have nothing else. We live in a society where this happens to 100,000 young people every year. Does that make your blood boil? Does that get you fired up?

Maybe it's housing. The foreclosure crisis has been devastating in the last few years and often it is the working poor who bear the brunt of the crisis. When you look at the maps of where the concentrations of foreclosures are, it is even clearer that there is an imbalance of foreclosures weighted more heavily in poorer communities. We have a couple of maps here that show the progressions of foreclosures in the Twin Cities over the last seven or eight years beginning in 2002 and then in 2005. This is the case in communities across the country, where the poorer the community, the higher the concentration of predatory lenders has tended to concentrate. People are saying, "Well, this is not right. This can't be. Somebody has got to do something about it." So a group of folks, a lot of them from our church, have banded together to try to figure out, "God, how can we bring a new day? How can we make a difference? How can we bring a little bit of *shalom* to these communities that need so much?"

Maybe it is education. There was a young woman at Willow Creek whom I heard a couple of years ago who learned that by the time children from low-income families and communities are in the fourth grade, they are already three years behind other children. By fourth grade! Fifty percent of them will not graduate from high school by the time they are 18 years old. The ones who do graduate from high school will on average function at an eighth grade level. Little children! Somebody has got to do something! So she started an organization called Teach America, and now thousands and thousands of college graduates have given two years of their lives to help make a difference around education.

Maybe it's poverty. Many of you are involved with an organization called Opportunity International. Of course, many of you are involved with World Vision, as well. Many of you have been involved with one of our key partnerships in the Congo. Next month we will be kicking off Hope Walks where we will be focusing on the devastation that HIV/AIDS has caused among children around the world. We are ramping up our Zambia initiative and we are very excited about two partner communities there in Zambia. This fall we are going to be doing an all-church, kind of an all-hands-on-deck invitation to seek justice in our own back yard. Pastor Mike Hotz and the domestic team will be lead us in engaging the question, "What does it take to seek the *shalom* of our city of Minneapolis?" We are going to ask the question, "God, how do you want us to lead our lives to be ripples going out on a pond of compassion and justice and caring and blessing to the Twin Cities and beyond?" You will hear more about that later but I just wanted to make sure you are aware that these are some of the conversations that we are having.

LOVE KINDNESS—Kindness is such a simple thing. It is a word most associated with God. It is a word that get's used here for the love of God that has always expressed itself in action. Notice people and do something about it. Last year many of us heard this incredible story that I think is worth repeating, so I just want you to check out this video clip.

(Video clip begins)

Without fail three days a week every week, Sherry Hanson would wake up early, leave her south Minneapolis home, and head to dialysis. "I'm tired. It takes a lot out of me."

What this mother of six needed was a kidney donor, which would come, not from someone beneath her roof, "I'm Sherry's landlord," but rather from the man who gives her a roof. "I honestly kind of thought, 'What are the chances that I am going to be compatible?'"

Dan Hunt is housing director at Urban Homeworks, a faith-based housing organization. Last month he became more than Sherry's landlord. He became her kidney donor.

This was Sherry the night before their transplant at Hennepin County Medical Center, and this is Sherry now, "No more dialysis, thank God. Thanks to him." After a couple of weeks recovering at HCMC, Sherry is adjusting to her new life, "So I'll be out jogging pretty soon...." as she likes to call it, her second chance. "I can't even say what I would call Dan. I mean He has given me a life again."

For Dan the cost was two days of hospital food, five days off from work and, of course, a kidney. "It was so easy for me, honestly, that it makes me wonder why more people don't do this." His reward is seeing Sherry live her life dialysis-free. "I am here."

This is Joe Fryer, KARE 11 News.

(End of video clip)

I think Dan has taken this whole landlord thing too far, what do you think, eh? What does the Lord require of you? You know! Do justice, love kindness, then, I love the third one, walk humbly before your God. I think Micah puts this one last because it's hard work to be a prophet and not get self-righteous about it. Have you ever seen somebody in a church who loves to go around correcting other people? There is this kind of person who loves to pass judgment in the spirit of

superiority which they then cover up by saying, “But, of course, the Lord has given me the gift of being a prophet.” John Ortberg says there is a very important theological distinction between being a prophet and being a jerk—I love that.

Part of what Micah recognizes is that one day God’s judgment will be made clear. Nobody is getting away with anything. One day every deed done in the darkness is going to be coming to the light. Every lie and every act of thievery and cheating and violence and aggression will be made clear. One day everybody will be accountable before God. This is what we are taught about our God. That is the really good thing, especially for anybody who has suffered injustice.

When the people of Israel thought about God being a judge they did not consider it bad. It was actually enormously hope-producing for them. Justice is coming, and here is the thing, what about when justice comes *my way*? Micah says, “Nations will see and be ashamed....they will come trembling out of their dens; they will turn in fear to the Lord our God....Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression...? You will again have compassion on us....and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.”

This is our God. He loves justice. I love justice. I want justice to come but, generally, I want justice to get handed out to the bad guys, right? Who are the bad guys? Well, not me, not me! Justice is going to come my way some day. What about my sin? This is what we have to understand about God. He loves justice. He is a just God. A lot of what gets talked about and written about spirituality in our day is kind of vague and talks as if spirituality is a kind of asset, a kind of thing that helps me to achieve my agenda and my dreams. Not much gets said about the fact that God is a just God but He is. We wouldn’t want a God who is anything but just. He has revealed Himself fully in Jesus Christ. Jesus takes the sentence, the penalty that all our sin deserves on Himself on the cross. Scripture says, “The wages of sin is death,” and that death, that spiritual death, by every right all of us, you and I, should have died, but Jesus died in our place on the cross. So the cross becomes this miracle, this mystery where all God’s justice and all God’s suffering and mercy, meets together in the love of Jesus. **WALK HUMBLY** before your God because He is a God of forgiveness.

What does the Bible say about social justice? Well, one thing we need to remember is that justice is a process not an event. In these closing moments let me just walk you through a part of that process.

The first step of the process is **education**. Justice is an education about what is going on in our world. Keep your eyes open. A great first step is to learn, to read more. I recommend a couple of great resources that have helped me in this. One of them is a book by Gary Haugen called *Good News About Injustice* that has now become a classic. It is a good Biblical look at how justice is treated in the Bible. Another book was written by a former colleague of mine, now a seminary professor, Mark Labberton, called *The Dangerous Act of Worship: Living God’s Call to Justice*. It is a wonderful book that treats the whole subject of seeking justice. Another book I’d recommend has a local slant to it, *Linking Arms and Linking Lives*; Ron Sider, John Perkins, and others have contributed to this book. It is a look at suburban/urban partnerships; a very helpful book.. And finally, a film, a short film directed and produced by a man who attends CPC, Chad Amour. The film called *The Shadows of Virtue* is a wonderful look at what it means to seek Biblical justice, social justice. So the first step is education—just learn about what is going on.

A second step is **exploration**. I would encourage you to look at the CPC web site and just navigate through and see what opportunities there are for rolling up your sleeves and getting involved.

The third step is **engagement**. One of the greatest things about working at this church is that it is a church that is very involved. It has been a privilege for me to be involved with many of you. So I want to encourage you to get involved.

Three simple steps: educate, explore, and engage.

Our God is a God of Justice. Our God is a God of Mercy, and our God is a God of Compassion. His Son, Jesus Christ, went to the cross so that we could be free and also so that justice might some day become a part of God's gift to the world. That day could be today. What a great God we have! What a great God we serve!

Let's pray.

Father, we thank You for this time, the time that You have given us. We pray right now that You would be magnified in this place, that You would be exalted in our hearts, and that Your beauty and Your glory and Your majesty would break the bonds of fear and pride that sometimes grip us and keep us from engaging in the hurt of the world. Lord, we pray that You would send us forth and that we would respond like Isaiah, who said, "Here I am. Send me." In view of Your majesty, may we be repairers of *shalom* and doers of justice as You have called us to be. We pray this in Christ's great Name. And all God's people said,

All: Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.