

Justice and Solidarity

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Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

It is the season of Recommitment, but we have not been talking about that much. Last week, Paul began his brief sermon with a reminder that our commitment statements as Seekers include a promise to “work for the ending of all war, public and private.” Today, I want to focus on another of our promises.

However, before I get into that, I want to point out that each week this season, when Ken sends out the reminder and zoom link for the Sunday service, he attaches a PDF of the Recommitment Preparation folder. If you regularly come to church in person, you may not have even opened the email, let alone downloaded and read that document. It begins with a quotation from Nadia Bolz-Weber, reflecting on the passage in Mark 9 in which Jesus opens the ears of man who cannot hear. Bolz-Weber writes,

If I'm honest, if I pictured Jesus' Holy and unwashed fingers in my own ears – if He touched me, sighed, looked to heaven and said Be Opened. I'm pretty sure I'd said "oh. no thanks". Because, let's be honest, it's usually easier to not change and it's painful to be open and healing can hurt. ... It can actually be more comfortable to allow parts of ourselves to die than to feel them have new life.

Nadia Bolz-Weber, "Oh good, now we know who the REAL problem is:

a sermon on healing for inside a women's prison"

on her substack blog The Corners for August 18, 2024

<https://thecorners.substack.com/p/oh-good-now-we-know-who-the-real>

In fact, in case you've missed it, I encourage you to download and read the whole sermon, which Ken is helpfully attaching to the Sunday emails, as well.

This week, I have been painfully opened to our commitment to "foster justice and be in solidarity with the poor." In linking justice with poverty in that way, we are saying that there is something unjust about poverty itself. One of the ways that is true is that, in general, persons with few financial and material resources are unable to hire good lawyers when they find themselves accused of breaking laws. And people who live on the edge are often accused of breaking laws. I've had both justice and poverty on my mind a lot this

past week.

This week, we begin a four-week sequence of reading excerpts from the book of Job. In both the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament, God is often described as just, punishing the wicked and rewarding the virtuous. As I read the book of Job, it suggests that the definition of justice is not always clear. In the first verse, we read that Job was "honest, a person of absolute integrity; he feared God and avoided evil." Later on, we learn that he was generous both towards those who worked for him, and towards the poor people who gleaned in his fields.

Despite Job's well-recognized virtue, God somehow allows the Adversary to test him. All of his oxen and donkeys and camels are stolen, his sheep get burnt up in a freak fire, all of his servants are murdered, and his oldest son's house collapses while all of his sisters and brothers are there for a feast, killing all of Job's children in one fell swoop. And while Job is reeling from losing all of his children and his possessions, today's reading tells us that in addition to all these disasters, his body is now covered with painful sores. When his equally grieving and traumatized wife tells him to curse God and die, Job says merely, "Shall we receive good from God and not receive evil?" and the storyteller praises him again for not sinning even in the midst of all these disasters.

Over the next three Sundays, as we read further excerpts from Job, we will discover that Job is not as patient as his reputation makes him out to be. In fact, when his friends start suggesting that he did something bad to bring all these calamities upon himself, he maintains his innocence and decides to put God on trial for being unjust. And God's answer is something like, "Where were you when I made the world?"

What are we to make of this story? As the story of Job and our own experience makes abundantly clear, in ordinary life, God

does not punish the wicked and reward the virtuous. Rather, people who do all kinds of wicked things seem to get away with it, while others seem to be punished merely for who they are. And, of course, human beings are, even at best, a mixture of good and evil and just plain bumblng.

So let me tell you another story in which poverty complicates the definition of justice.

One of the responsibilities of a United States citizen is to periodically be called to jury service. As a resident of the District of Columbia, every two years pretty much like clockwork I get a notice to report to Moultrie Courthouse for one day or one trial. Most times, I've gotten to the end of the day without being picked to sit in the jury box. Last Thursday was a different story. By the end of that day, I – along with 11 other jurors and 2 alternates – had been sworn in to decide a criminal case “upon the law and the evidence” and been instructed by the judge not to discuss the case with anyone until the verdict was rendered and we were released from our obligation to the court.

The following Monday morning, we began to hear testimony against a poor, young, Black man accused of possession of a machine gun and three related charges. As we listened to the testimony of a parade of police officers and expert witnesses, we were repeatedly presented with evidence in the form of body camera footage, showing us the outside of the apartment block as the police arrived to serve a search warrant; and the small, cramped, apartment in which the defendant lived with his mother and two younger brothers. We were shown a loaded gun hidden in a box of breakfast cereal that had been on top of the refrigerator, another extended magazine filled with 41 bullets hidden under a pile of blankets, and another live bullet on the floor in a hallway. We saw the defendant and his family sitting on a mattress in the living room as a police officer asked them questions. When one of the officers told her that they'd found the gun.

we heard the defendant say to his mother, "it's mine."

On Tuesday morning, expert witnesses explained how a legal semi-automatic handgun can be turned into an illegal machine gun and told us how DNA testing is done and what it means. In all this testimony, the defense lawyer remained virtually silent, asking virtually no reasonable questions of the prosecution's witnesses and calling none in defense of her client. In her closing testimony, she offered no theory or explanation that might exonerate or even mitigate the interpretation of the facts that we had heard and seen.

Through Tuesday afternoon and early Wednesday morning, the jury discussed the charges. With tears in many of our eyes, most of us wished that we could have doubted the evidence that we had been presented or that we could find some loophole in the instructions we had been given. Was the defendant protecting his brother? Was he (or both of them) set up? Might the evidence have been planted? The defense attorney never suggested anything that might help us come to a different conclusion than the one presented by the prosecution, so we were on our own. Eventually, although several of us tried hard to articulate a reasonable doubt on one or another charge, the facts presented and the judge's instructions about the law made our doubts impossible to sustain. Back in the courtroom, the foreperson delivered a guilty verdict on all four charges, each of us were asked if we agreed with the verdict, and we were dismissed by the judge with a short speech about having done our duty in serving the cause of justice.

So I am left with frustration and guilt, feeling forced to help send yet another young Black man to prison for a long time. For whether he was set up, or the gun and all those bullets belonged to him or to his teenage brother, this young man has been failed by a society that led him to believe that a hopped-up 9mm Glock semi-automatic handgun with a 17 bullet magazine and a "giggle switch" that made it fully automatic was a good answer to his problems.

Yes, he broke the law. Yes, he possessed the means to kill a lot of people and might have done so if the police had not intervened. But I cannot believe that locking this young man away instead of helping him discover better solutions than violence to deal with his problems will help him or society in any way.

I don't know what I might have done differently, given the constraints of the situation. I suppose that I and some of the others could have insisted that we had reasonable doubt that the firearm in question was his, but that would have just resulted in a hung jury. Even if we had passed the buck that way, eventually 12 other DC citizens would have found him guilty, and I would still feel that I am on the hook of being complicit in an unjust system.

Either way, instead of feeling proud of having lived up to my commitment as a citizen, I feel like I have been used by the judicial system to make it seem that justice has been done. As I see it, this was not a work of justice, but rather a way to perpetrate more injustice on a person who thought he had run out of choices and that violence was the only way out. Like so many other poor kids, this young man has been used by the gun lobby, by the people who turn "regular" semi-automatic weapons into machine guns, and by those who scream for harsher laws and longer sentences rather than help to make a truly just society.

As I ask myself why I am telling you this story, I suppose it is to ask for absolution.

It is also to say that, as the story of Job suggests, justice is not always what we think it is or should be.

Even if you have already spent an hour or more pondering your commitment to God through this church, and are certain that you will (or will not) recommit as a member or a Steward for another year, I suggest that you take some time over the next

couple of weeks to think about what you mean when you commit "to foster justice and be in solidarity with the poor." As I have discovered, sometimes it is hard to do both at the same time. And so I pray,

Holy One, help me to know how to foster justice while being mindful that what it means to me might be different from what it means to a person who lives in poverty, and give me the strength and courage to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with you. This I pray in the name of Jesus, who is the Christ.