

Pat Conover: Walking the Justice Path

Walking the Justice Path

This sermon is about the place of Justice in the life of Seekers, about committing to a community that says it takes justice seriously. It is easy to commit to justice as a generality, a vague good thing. We certainly want justice when we feel **we** have been done wrong. Nevertheless, justice can seem mysterious or distant, or perhaps one of the optional parts of commitment to Seekers, ok for some other folks to focus on. We might think, "Goodness I'm glad **they** are doing that."

After the way David named me last week, all I can say about this sermon is, "It better be good."

Psalms 37 tells us, "Do not be vexed by evildoers, or envy those who do wrong. For like the grass they soon wither, and like green pasture they fade away." Well, what I want to say the Psalmist is that I am ready, long past ready, for some of today's evil doers to wither and fade away. I do not envy today's evildoers, but I sure am vexed. Nevertheless, with the Psalmist, I understand that my commitment to justice has to be deeper than my anger. If it is not, then my commitment to justice amounts to a commitment to **my** interests, **my** feelings, **my** point of view.

Luke 17:7-10 describes the way an oppressive master treats his servants to assert that we should do our duty and not expect any special recognition or reward. I am not too fond of the exemplification, but the point is important. Justice is what we are supposed to do all the time because it is the right thing to do. We can have the satisfaction of doing what we are supposed to do but we should not get any special status, we are not due any special appreciation, from those who have received justice at our hand.

I am appreciative of those of you in Seekers who have long worked for justice in different contexts, for those of you who have participated in demonstrations or written to elected officials, for those of you who have risked yourselves in situations when oppression was present and for those of you who risked your lives during Vietnam, believing you were contributing to at least the hope of justice. The demands of justice show up in many kinds of circumstances and calls for different kinds of responses.

I count myself lucky to have grown up in a family with strong justice commitments. My father was an activist social worker, an organizer, an investigative reformer. He was deeply committed to low-income people and the oppressed. He was a social worker in a prison, led a settlement house for new immigrants, worked in a community center for African Americans, worked with people displaced by the TVA dams, and led a committee that fought corruption in North Carolina and successfully fought for a significant package of welfare reform. He cared about religious liberty and was active in the National Council of Christians and Jews when they were seen as a far-out group. He felt deeply threatened by the McCarthy hearings and outraged at what was done to some of his friends.

As a teen growing up in Tallahassee, Florida, I had to choose where I stood with regard to race relations. Would I claim my family's position as my own or would I accommodate to my culture. I paid for my choice with a lot of fighting and ostracism. I kept a .22 rifle, a sawed off shotgun, and a .45 because I was afraid of the Klan **and** the police. I was angry enough, alienated enough, that I was close to suicide at times and twice tried (momentarily) to kill other boys in fights. I entered basic training in the Army at age 17. One day I was marching behind the only boy in our company who was taller than me, a semi-retarded boy from Mississippi whose great ambition was to be a truck driver in the Army, just like his Dad. He was not able to keep in step and our Sergeant got mad at him, kicked him in the side of the knee and broke his leg. I stepped over his body and kept on marching. I tell you these stories because I want you to know that part of my body spirituality is rage. The pain of oppression is in my bones. It did not feel very hard to do some of the riskier things that I have done for justice, and, even though I have twice lost jobs because of standing up against injustice, even though I have twice been on the wrong side of a gun, even though I was intimidated by a bit of the Chicago Mob, it was never a matter of **trying** to be courageous. If anything, I was cautious and protective in many difficult situations. I had done enough physical fighting as a teen to feel that I had no need to prove anything to anyone. Knowing as I do that oppression really hurts, feeling that hurt in my own body, I had to show up in different places and the courage stuff just took care of itself. With a lot of intentionality, I became a more sophisticated fighter in more complex circumstances, but I hope you will understand that justice is a personal matter for me.

I am telling this part of my story because I want you to know that I always feel partly **uncomfortable** in Seekers. Seekers is

wonderful and I love you. Nevertheless, we are so wealthy, so comfortable. We are doing some very good things about injustice and I treasure them, but I deeply appreciate Luke when he writes in 12:48 that to whom much has been given, much is expected. Therefore, there are times that I am uncomfortable in Seekers; there are times that my body is uncomfortable there are times and even if I don't say anything, many of you are sensitive enough to pick up from my body language that I am feeling discomfort and distance. Perhaps worse, because I am part of you, because I am embedded in privilege with you, because our new home shows off our privilege, it is dangerously easy for me to feel discomfort and distance even from myself. [Pause]

This sermon is about two reasons why I think justice is so hard, two reasons why justice is still hard for me.

A commitment to justice is not the same as caring, not the same as compassion, not the same as stewardship. When I express **my** caring in word and deed, it is still about **me**. I feel good because I am expressing **my** caring and compassion. Furthermore, I express **my** caring and compassion on **my** time schedule and within **my** budget, express it in the ways that feel good and fulfilling to **me**, and express it to the people who elicit **my** feelings of caring and compassion.

When I recognize that all that I am, and all that I have, is a gift of God, that I am a manager, a steward, of my gifts and possessions, when I focus on my generosity and my intentions to be a good steward, it is still all about **me**. I am in control. They are **my** possessions to manage and **I** get to decide how generous I will be, **when** I will be generous, and **who** I will be generous too. I manage **my** possessions, **my** money, to

try to meet all **my** obligations, and I usually start by protecting and supporting those to whom I am closest. My children have had many advantages compared to the children of parents with low incomes. In Seekers, we like to give our money to people with whom we feel a personal connection.

Even when we are at our selfless best in expressing our caring and compassion, when we are being good stewards, we are in **control**. I **like being in control**. I like the financial and personal safety of being in control. I like the feeling of connection when I am generous.

Justice is **dangerous** because it **challenges** my control. If we had a more equitable tax system, the governments would take more money from me, whether I like it or not. If there were a more equitable distribution of oil, I would pay a lot more for gasoline. It costs about \$4.50 a gallon in Ireland, for example. If agriculture workers were paid a living wage and had health benefits I would pay more for the food I need to live.

Those who know that we are getting the best of a whole lot of deals might want to change the deals. People may be grateful for the assistance we provide, both privately and through our government, but, if their consciousness is raised, they want a better bargain in all the transactions that shape our lives. The minimum wage is stuck at \$5.15 an hour and if anything is done about it in this election year, it is likely to happen as a trade off on legislation that increases rather than decreases money inequality.

The second basic reason that I think justice is so hard is because of sin and guilt.

Seekers does not like to talk about sin and guilt. We act as if these are outmoded concepts of an earlier less-sophisticated Christianity.

Well, we are right in one regard. The understanding of sin and guilt that a lot of us grew up with is that we should not want to do bad things and that we know what the bad things are because they are against the law or, more importantly, because they are against Christian doctrine.

When I am thoughtful, I am not very interested in fundamentalist, Roman Catholic, or traditional Protestant definitions of sin, even though there is some biblical support for their disparate positions. Despite their differences, they all focus on interior motive. They all seem irrelevant to me because I do not go around intending to do bad things. Even when I tried to kill Ronnie Childers with a hatchet, it was only in a moment of overwhelming rage, rage that had been carefully and extensively provoked. In that moment, I felt he deserved it. In that moment, I did not care whether I lived or died.

On the other hand, I know that I am deeply embedded in sin, and that is true even when I'm aware of it, even when I hate being embedded in sin, and even when I am doing the best I can to resist sin. I work on legislation and I know that none is perfect. There is nothing that I can advocate for that does not have some downside, some aspect of exploitation and inequality. There are no pure choices. Moreover, the truth is that I think that many of the best choices are also choices

that happen to increase my advantage. The right fixes to the current Medicare mess would make life better for me. Passing the hate crimes legislation would make life better for me.

Rejecting outmoded understandings of guilt and sin is not enough. We need to face up to sin we are part of, and we need to **feel** the guilt that comes with it. I do not like that. I would much rather focus on my self-image as a fighter for justice, as a good steward of my gifts and my resources. I like thinking about myself as a caring and compassionate person. There is enough truth to these self-conceptions that I can effectively ward off feelings of guilt. Maybe I like the old interior motive conceptions of sin after all. I do not want to hurt anybody. I want to work for healing, reconciliation and peace. Isn't that enough? (Pause)

A summarization of these two points is that we do not really like justice because it makes us feel guilty and it challenges our sense of control. We want our good intentions to be good enough and we want to feel ok about fitting our justice commitments into our schedules and our budgets.

How can we come to see justice as a good gift of God, a welcome gift, a gift we are eager to embrace?

First, let us set aside the utilitarian answer that there will be no justice for me if there is not justice for all. True enough, but that does not deal with the dynamics I have been addressing.

I believe that we can find our best path not by trying to reform traditional conceptions of guilt and sin, which have

their place but are inadequate for the lives we live. Instead, I am going to talk about turning away from a justice path that a lot of us like and give weight to. I suggest that we can find a better path by intentionally closing the "romantic gate" to justice and looking for another. A romantic view of sin, reinforced by thousands of novels and movies, is that good people overcome bad people and everyone lives happily ever after. The good people have clear consciences because they meant well and have done the right thing. Moreover, when the movie is over, or the novel is finished, evil has been defeated. You get a bit of the romantic perspective in Psalm 137, where the people who have been wailing in Babylon triumph, take the babies of the oppressors, and dash their heads against the stones. The romantic gate opens to the heroic quest, lures us to strive, to endure, to overcome. Liberals and conservatives alike are sidetracked by walking through the romantic gate. On the romantic path, our awareness is limited by our team commitments. If only my candidate wins... If only we did not have so many bad judges... If only corporate executives were not so greedy...

The romantic view firmly locates evil outside of oneself and misleads us to believe that all we need to do is to be opposed to evil, evil in "them" we mean.

Now let us open the gate of moral humility. If we walk this path into justice, the world looks different. First, we take it as a given that our motives are mixed, our commitments are weak, and our vision is blurred. Secondly, we know that we cannot overcome our limitations by becoming pure, cannot overcome our limitations by making firmer commitments, cannot overcome our limitations by studying harder and becoming more honest, good as all those efforts are. We cannot overcome evil, no matter how good we are as individuals, because all the moral choices are mixed and impure. If we focus our good intentions on the homeless then we have less attention for the

disabled, for the immigrant, or for the addict.

Moral humility is not based on being nice. It is not learned by merely recognizing our individual limitations. It is based first on not being able to solve all the problems at once **and** that we cannot solve them one-at-a-time. Maybe we could do something about homelessness but that does not overcome Evil as a force in the world. You cannot work on homelessness very long before you realize that homelessness is related to disability, to immigration, to addiction and to many other things.

Thankfully, when we walk through the moral humility gate to justice we find that no one is asking us to be a hero. Moreover, we quickly see that the people we meet are not divided into teams. Everyone has limits and everyone needs justice. Once we see that purity is impossible then solidarity becomes possible.

The first thing we have to do when we walk through the gate of moral humility is pray. Confession is not just about admitting to bad motives or failed commitments. It is also about recognizing one's limitations and the difficulty in seeing and taking positive steps. Intercession is not just about wishing well for others. It also arises from the reality that no one can do everything that needs to be done, that so much has to be entrusted to others, entrusted to God. In addition, celebration is not just about all the things that go right, not just about gratefulness for our possessions and privileges. When you walk through the gate of moral humility, thanksgiving is about having companions in the midst of difficult lives, and thanksgiving that if we pay attention, if we listen to each other, we can usually find the next step.

Confession, intercession, and celebration help us to find true companions, help us to see what we have been avoiding, and help us to develop trust without a romantic hope that we will live happily ever after.

You may have noticed that I have slipped back into talking about salvation again. Some of you may remember that I have talked several times about salvation from anonymity, anomie, and alienation. When we walk through the moral humility gate onto the justice path, we get three things that help.

1. We get true companions who can see us, and love us, **with** all our limitations. It is easier to see and be seen when we put down our romantic scripts and our heroic intentions. We get our true names. We are not anonymous.
2. We get landmarks and lures that are enough to guide our lives. It is easier to see what is really going on when we put down our romantic scripts and our heroic intentions. We move from confusion, from idolatry, from tact, from ideological commitments, to **engagement**.
3. We have the chance to find solidarity instead of alienation. We do not find solidarity because everything is all right and evil has been overcome; we do not find solidarity because we are living in "happily ever after;" we do not find solidarity because we have stopped hurting each other; but we find solidarity because we are together and because we are trying; we find solidarity because we are listening; we find solidarity because trust is possible between imperfect people; and we find solidarity because we see that accountability is a gift and not a burden.

Some of us are called to be prophets. I live in the loneliness and anger of such a calling. However, you do not have to be a

prophet to be working for justice. It would be nice if we truly welcomed the prophets among us, but I am not sure that even that is necessary. Prophets tend to call out the heroic and that can be distracting. It is hard to be a prophet without oversimplifying.

However, we **do** have to **care**. We have to care enough to hold our privileges lightly. We have to care enough to be generous because of solidarity rather than charity; we have to care enough to move from ownership to stewardship as a way of living in the world. We have to care enough to take our next steps even when they involve us in all the difficulties of justice: the inconvenience, the confessions, the risks, the hurts. We have to be willing to see enough truth so that humility becomes a necessity like breathing rather than a commitment or an intention.

We have to care enough to get hurt sometimes, to lose things that matter, to go places we would rather not go and see things we would rather not see. We have to meet others with respect and not merely with compassion. We have to care enough to feel the pain in ourselves and in others, and then we have to breathe through the pain. [Pause] The saving word of Jesus is that pain is not the last word; death is not the last word. Following David's sermon of last week, Love is the first word and the last word.

I believe that if we care enough then we cannot avoid the justice part of our journey together. We will have the hard conversations we have been in training for. We will find more solidarity and be more willing to hold hands and walk together. We will live as a confessional people in the midst of our privileges. We will not let our guilt distract us from

doing the things we know to do. We will not wait for pure intentions before we hug each other. We will give thanks that to whom much has been given, much is expected. We will be clear-eyed and less tactful, and still be friends. We will move at different speeds, rest at different places, and still understand that we are on the same path. We will report what we see, look out for one another and become ever more ready to meet other people where they are. We will become ever more thankful for what God has been doing with other people before we show up.

We are in a season of recommitment, a time for intentionality, a time for finding each other and joining up once again for another turn in the path. We can think about commitment to justice in many ways, but if it is reduced to will and good intentions, to striving, then we may be doomed to play out endless romantic scripts. Commitment can sound heroic, but commitment can also be a willingness to open, to care, to notice, to share, to engage. I warn you that the path of moral humility is harder than the heroic path, but it does start where you are, and it is available whenever you are ready.