

Do Justice: Sunday, 1/26/20

1 Just last week we observed the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday, especially appropriate given the last verse of that passage from Amos 5 was the most quoted Bible verse by the civil rights leader in his speeches. More than fifty years after his death, has America finally become the shining city on a hill that Doctor King dreamed of?

According to the organization Human Rights Watch¹ as well as the American Civil Liberties Union,² in 2019 the United States continues to be a world leader, but not necessarily in the ways Dr. King would have hoped. For example, we have the largest rate of incarceration of any other country in the world, with over two million in jail or prison and twice that on probation and parole. On any given day in our country, 50,000 children are held in confinement. Racial disparities exist in American incarceration rates, traffic stops, and the use of force by police. Black students are suspended and expelled from school three times more often than white students are.

Some 40 million people in our country live in poverty, where there are racial disparities as well. The median wealth of white households is 20 times that of black households and 18 times that of Latino households. Fewer and fewer people are holding more and more of our nation's wealth. As environmental protections are being rolled back, the poor are disproportionately suffering health impacts because affordable housing tends to be located near industrial polluters. And despite being a wealthy nation, the United States makes an unjust contribution to the world's pollution problem, producing fifteen percent of global greenhouse gases, while only comprises four percent of the world's population.

The list of justice issues in this country alone is seemingly inexhaustible. America's elderly, a rapidly growing portion of our population, continue to face abuse and neglect in nursing homes. Hate speech, hate crimes, and acts of mass violence have become a regular staple of our weekly news cycle. Where oh where is the "mighty flood of justice" that Amos called for? When will we see Dr. King's dream become a reality. And why isn't God doing something about it?

2 It turns out that God is doing something about it, including creating you and the

¹ <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/united-states>

² <https://www.aclu.org/issues/racial-justice>

church! You've heard it said, "Be the change you wish to see in the world." In fact, *Be the Change* is the theme we've adopted for our summer mission projects, when we go out into the community with Curtis and offer acts of mercy to people who need help caring for their homes and yards. We know in theory that the Church is the Body of Christ. What we often fail to appreciate is that the Church isn't a faceless institution, it's you and me. And that means that unless you and I are each leaning into the task of ushering in God's justice to bring healing to a hurting world in real, concrete ways, we're more like broken bones or atrophied muscles than the hands and feet of Jesus. If not us, then who? If not now, then when?

I suspect that we all know this in our heads, because whenever these words from Amos reach our ears, or the words from some other prophet of God, we feel convicted, guilty, and perhaps a little shameful that we aren't taking a more active role to address injustice in our daily lives. Tell me I'm not the only one who feels that! It's a real dilemma for me as your pastor, because I do want to exhort you to do justice, but what I don't want to do is heap condemnation upon you when you've come here today to hear good news! Are we doomed to live in this awful tension between the "ought to" directives from God and what we feel we need to and want to do with our time and resources?

3 More and more, I'm convinced that we should be focusing on our heart condition rather than our behaviors. I was reminded of this yet again as I was reading a book by J.D. Greear called *Gospel: Recovering the Power that Made Christianity Revolutionary*. In the book, he points to the futility of trying to serve God by following a list of rules- do this, don't do that. That's like trying to live as Christians, not in the New Testament but in the Old Testament, trying to follow Jesus without Jesus! What we need more than a list of rules is a changed heart, and in particular, a broken heart. I'm not saying that we have to be broken-hearted to be Jesus followers. What I mean is that our hearts need to break for the same people and situations that the heart of Jesus breaks for. God's mighty flood of justice won't be coming through grit and determination by a Church filled with well-meaning list makers. We need changed hearts that compel us to walk in the way of Jesus.

There's a great *Switchfoot* song that includes the lyric, "If it doesn't break your heart, it isn't love." That's what we're really talking about, isn't it? Think about the last time you

showed God’s loving kindness, what we also call “mercy,” to someone. Did you do it begrudgingly, or did you do it with God’s love in your heart, poured into your heart first and then overflowing into the life of that person you helped? Acts of justice work the same way. We can episodically rise to the occasion and show up for a shift at the foot shelf once a year with little more than good intentions. But when our heart begins to look like the heart of Jesus, breaking with love to see the suffering of the other, that’s an entirely different thing. It’s life-changing. It’s world-changing. It’s what God really wants from us in worship. Not repeated words, rituals, and songs that are disconnected from everything outside of this sanctuary. God wants to change our hearts, so that the list of “ought to” acts of mercy and justice is replaced by a compelling desire to somehow be an instrument of healing in this broken world.

4 What breaks your heart? What injustices do you see in your church, school, neighborhood, or world that make you say or feel that someone needs to do something? There are a great number of ways to do justice, and people of all ages and abilities can all do something. Stop bullying. Stand up for someone who’s weak. Mentor someone younger than yourself. Pray for the left-out, excluded, downtrodden, and disenfranchised. Feed the hungry. Become a foster parent. Commit to reduce your carbon footprint. Sponsor a child through compassion international. Invest in international microloans. Support the Terebinth Shelter. What we do matters far less than why we do it. What God really wants from us is an offering of our hearts in love. We can’t manufacture a flood of justice by force of will and habit. What we can do, however, is to humbly offer our hearts to God and ask God to show us what love really likes in the Kingdom of Heaven. That’s a prayer God loves to answer.

We’re going to close with a music video, and as you watch it, I want you to notice the faces of the people. They’re smiling and laughing! They look to me like people who are experiencing the joy of the Holy Spirit. They look like people who are stepping up to do justice, not because they have to, but because they want to. They look like people with new hearts. Open your minds and your hearts to the movement of God’s Spirit now as we watch the video. [{Play 1.26.20 Do Something.mp4}](#)



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