

The Advent theme that I'm going to focus on today is JUSTICE. It is a topic that's near and dear to my heart. When I was in seminary, I found a card in a Christian bookstore with the first verse of today's OT lesson from Isaiah printed on the front of it: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me, he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

I was struck by this scripture passage, I bought the card, framed it and put it up on my wall. I kind of adopted it as my mission statement in ministry. It has been on the wall of my office in every church I've served over the past 35 years until I came here. When I was unpacking my office boxes, I opened up the box that it was in, and found that the glass in the frame had shattered into many pieces. I still have the battered and yellowed card, but think I will replace it when I have a chance.

Later in this same passage God says: I the Lord, love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and will make an everlasting covenant with them. Here, when God talks about giving them their recompense, he is referring to giving a reward or restitution to those who have been wronged and treated unjustly, the oppressed, the brokenhearted, the downtrodden.

The Biblical understanding of "justice" is "what is right" or "what is normal" — the way things are supposed to be. The fairness of laws coupled with fair and equal treatment under the law are common biblical concerns. Throughout scripture, God is the defender and protector of the poor, the alien, the debtor, the widow, and the orphan. Justice can also mean "deliverance," "victory," or "vindication," — but for all, not just for a few. Justice is part of God's purpose in redemption.

One of the most holistic words for justice is the Hebrew *shalom*, which means both “justice” and “peace.” Shalom includes “wholeness,” or everything that makes for people’s well being, security, and, in particular, the restoration of relationships that have been *broken*. Justice, therefore, is about *repairing* broken relationships both with other people and within institutions and structures. All of us have seen or experienced injustice in our lives and it hurts. It is not the way God intends things to be.

We’ve been hearing a lot about injustices in the news lately, especially all the sexual harassment and misconduct allegations that are coming out in every sector of our society: in our government, Hollywood, and television to name a few. The Metoo movement has grown and given women the courage to speak up after years of keeping silence, for fear of losing their jobs or not being believed.

My niece, Noelle, who is in her 20’s courageously stepped forward for the first time, encouraged by these women’s testimonies, and put on Facebook recently that she too had been sexually harassed several times during her young life. I can add my name, too, that long list of those who have experienced sexual harassment and other kinds of discrimination, and my experiences happened while I was serving churches.

Those experiences have caused me throughout the years to feel less than, put down, disrespected, afraid, angry, hurt, confused and isolated. Because of this, I feel deeply connected to others who have been victims of injustice and feel a passion to fight for justice in our world.

Last Sunday I talked about hope and being hope bearers in the world where we live, work and play. On the back of your bulletins, you'll see some of the suggestions I gave last week for how to do this. I suggested praying for the people we read about in the newspaper and see on the news, especially our elected officials. In today's second lesson from Thessalonians, Paul says to pray without ceasing, hold fast to what is good and abstain from every form of evil.

Injustice, in any form, in God's eyes, is evil. So when you pray for your elected officials and when you contact them about what they are doing on our behalf, pray and ask them to work for justice in the world and if they are not doing that, call them out on it and tell them what you'd like to see them do instead and why. Pray that they will be agents for God's justice and if they aren't doing that, pray that they either repent and have a change of heart, or have the courage and the conscience to leave their office. Just as we are called to be hope bearers in this world, God also calls us to be champions for justice in our every day lives.

The biblical words for justice all relate to the fairness, love, and healing of God. The prophet Amos says: "Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!" (Amos 5:21-24 NIV)

So justice, most simply, means putting things right again — fixing, repairing, and restoring broken relationships in our lives, in our community and in our world. And doing justice also restores our relationship with God and helps us fulfill our calling as God's people.

May we all be granted the courage and the strength to work for justice, to work for what's right, even though it might be uncomfortable or unpopular. Jesus was the ultimate champion for God's justice: He was

anointed by God, and in the words of today's scripture, "he brought good news to the oppressed, he bound up the brokenhearted, he proclaimed liberty to the captive and he released the prisoners. How are each of us going to follow in his footsteps?"