

Holy Lent: Holy Justice

Mark 11:15-19 & Amos 5:18-24

March 10, 2024

First Presbyterian, Luling

I drop the girls off every morning at school, high school first and then middle school. The secondary schools are not on the main drag through town. Sort of like here in Luling, it's a residential area. So the traffic pattern is sometimes a little much for the roads we have to work with. That has led to all sorts of markings on the streets, and one way signs, and turn in here but not there instructions. As the cars exit the middle school driveway, there is a very clear sign. It really couldn't be misinterpreted in any way. No left turn, it says. You know what it looks like. A white, square sign. A black arrow showing a left turn, with a red circle and a slash through it. Words and pictures. No left turn. Anyone can understand why, too. There's too much traffic for a quick and easy left turn. You have to wait for a break in the traffic, which means that all the cars behind you would have to wait, too, and pretty soon the line of exiting cars backs way up into the parking lot, preventing teachers from parking, preventing other cars from dropping off their students. It would quickly be a mess if left turns out of the driveway were allowed.

And, yet. You know what I'm about to say, right? You'll never guess what happens. Some people think the sign doesn't apply to them. They sit there at the stop sign, blinker blinking, waiting ever so patiently for a break in the traffic so they can turn left. They're apparently oblivious to the rest of us stacking up behind them, waiting not so patiently to make our obedient right turns, even though we too, are in a hurry, even it would be more convenient for us, too, to turn left out of the parking lot. Those left-turners, I mutter under my breath, think the rules don't apply to them, think they have the right to be inconsiderate jerks.

I don't really hope for justice to roll down like a mighty stream upon the left turners, but I do wish...well, *something*...would happen to them to cause them to change their ways and turn right in order to keep the flow of traffic moving. They need to get their comeuppance.

We like the idea of justice when it applies to other people. It's easy to see the extenuating circumstances that might cause *us* to disobey the sign and turn right, but it's equally as easy to assume that the jerk left-turners don't have any extenuating circumstances and they're just inconsiderate rule breakers.

When we turn to Scripture and read about God's justice, we make the same assumptions. Let justice roll down like mighty waters on those other people who are inconsiderate rule breakers, let justice roll down on those other people who work so meticulously to have perfect worship offerings and ignore the greatest commandment of love, let justice roll down on the people who don't keep the rules we find easy to follow. Jesus is turning over someone else's tables in someone else's temple. Jesus would be perfectly pleased with us and not cause a ruckus here.

That's how we like to think of holy justice, as God's justice directed toward somebody else and somebody else's sins and struggles and shortcomings. God's justice is holy, we like to think, when it lines up exactly with the way we would distribute justice.

It hardly needs to be said that such an idea of holy justice is a quick and direct route to trouble. That gets us

The people in the Temple, the ones who had set up the system, the ones who had arranged for the tables moneychangers to be there, so that the Roman coins could be exchanged for coins without graven images, the people who allowed the merchants to be present so that the poor could purchase their sacrificial doves—those people believed with all their hearts that they were being holy, that they were following the law that God had prescribed, that they were being holy both to please God and to reflect God's holiness and to protect God's holiness from defilement. They were working hard and diligently and carefully to worship correctly. And they weren't even wrong about that.

And then comes in Jesus and turns over their tables and drives them out and tells them they aren't holy, that his justice is holy. Jesus is standing in a long line of prophets who said that right justice is more important than right worship. Amos is one of those prophets. Hosea, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah. According to a re-read of a book we studied several years ago, *The Last Week*, God repeatedly rejects the people's worship because of their lack of justice, but never rejects their acts of justice because of a lack of worship.¹ God rejects their idea and protection of holiness. But God does not reject their acts of justice.

I think that's what Jesus is doing in the Temple, and what holy justice means. Holy justice looks out for the poor and marginalized. Holy justice looks out for those who have been set aside. Holy justice is willing to question the systems we have in place, systems that seem good and holy in themselves. Holy justice is God-initiated, not human-initiated.

¹ Crossan, John Dominic and Marcus J. Borg. *The Last Week*. Pg 44-45.

And holy justice may just mean that Jesus is going to turn over our tables, tables that we thought were good and holy in and of themselves. Jesus may turn over our ideas of what holiness even is. The mighty waters of holy justice may roll down and take out things that we have forgotten to question.

God's justice is holy justice, because God is holy. God's justice is not the same as human justice. And it is so easy for us to forget that one simple thing. God's justice is not the same as human justice. To my dismay, God may not care that those folks are turning left when the sign says not to. God may not care that the person coming to worship at the Temple doesn't have what the rules say is the proper sacrifice in the proper format. God may not care that those people don't vote or believe or pray like we do. God may not care that we think we're protecting and reflecting divine holiness. God's justice is God's, and God's justice is holy, and we are not God. God's justice may mean that we are to be judged, and God's justice may turn over our favorite tables, and God's mighty waters might wash away what we thought was precious. And we won't like any of that. But it is God's justice, and it is holy, and we stand before God's holiness in awe and reverence and humility.