

JUSTICE AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

By Douglas Mitchell

What is spirituality? And what is a “practice” in this setting?
What does the Bible have to say about any of this?

These sound like theoretical, abstract questions about spirituality, but Joyce Hollyday, a long-time member of the Sojourners community in Washington DC, reminds us that the answers have very real, concrete outcomes for our life together. She writes,

More and more as I travel and listen, I hear materially comfortable Americans articulating a deep longing for spiritual roots and rhythms, for rituals that will infuse their lives with new meaning and bring them closer to God. At the same time, I hear the desperate pleas of those who cry to us from the streets and the soup kitchens, from the shacks and the shelters, for compassion and justice. These are not unrelated pleadings. They are in fact two sides of the same problem—and of the same hope. At heart, the crisis that divides our nation is a spiritual one. And only spiritual transformation will make us whole again. (1)

There is a lot of talk currently about spiritual practice. William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas have written two recent books, *Resident Aliens* and *Where Resident Aliens Live: Exercises for Christian Practice*, in which they talk about Christianity as a set of practices that help us act out Christian discipleship. They are trying to distinguish between Christianity as something we do rather than as something we believe or experience. Willimon, however, is having second thoughts. The language of practice can be too general and applicable to all religious experience.

As an alternative, Willimon points to Søren Kierkegaard (*Practice of Christianity*, 1850) who also emphasizes that Christianity is more than the intellectual acceptance of a particular set of beliefs. (2) Kierkegaard calls on Christians to obey Jesus more than to understand a philosophical system of beliefs based on Jesus’ teaching. (3) Willimon sums up Kierkegaard’s definition of discipleship as “practices... one must live [out] if one is convinced that Jesus Christ is the full revelation of God.” (4)

His conclusion: “The question to ask... is, ‘who is the God being served through this practice?’.” (5)

Our mission to be faithful Christians, therefore, is shaped by our understanding of the God we serve. The writers of Deuteronomy end their historical review of the Hebrew people with a wonderful picture of who God is and what God wants from us.

So now, O Israel, what does God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in God’s ways, to love God, to serve your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments. For the Lord your God is God of gods, and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphans and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Deut. 10:12-22)

What God does, God also requires of us:

- Show truthfulness and honesty.
- Execute justice for the poor and those at the margins of society.
- Practice hospitality for strangers.
- Provide basic needs such as food and clothing.

There is a lot to say that follows from this picture of God we get in scripture, but I wish to focus on the category of justice.

First, let me distinguish between two closely related biblical terms, justice and righteousness. They are very similar in meaning, and are at times interchangeable. Righteousness is the fulfillment of the requirements of a relationship, whether with other people or with God. Righteousness, as right relationships, preserves or restores community and makes communal life possible. I use the term justice in a more institutional setting, to define the institutional structures and patterns of power that shape our lives externally. Biblically, there is no hard and fast distinction between the two concepts, but I want to make clear how I use them. The description of the characteristics of God above (Deut. 10) encompasses both concepts as a part of the nature of God.

For the Bible Tells Me So

Now then, what does the bible tell us about God's call to do justice?

The answer starts on the very first pages of scripture in the story of creation!

Then (on the 6th day) God said, "Let us make humankind (Adam) in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth. So God created humankind in (God's) image, in the image of God (God) created them; male and female (God) created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." ... And it was so. God saw everything that (God) had made, and indeed, it was very good. (Gen 1:26-31)

Every person, EVERY PERSON, is created in the image of God. Each person has the dignity granted by the Holy One simply as a part of his or her creation as human. Doing harm to a person, any person, fails to respect this image of God. Failure to help any person to thrive, not just survive, is an affront to this dignity and to the God who is the origin of that gift. This belief is picked up directly in Wisdom literature:

Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honor God (engage in an act of worship). (Proverbs 14:31)

The biblical demand that we seek justice is directed both at individuals who are trying to follow God's guidance for their lives and also at leaders of all kinds, including public officials, and

leaders of communities of worship and of denominations. In the book of Jeremiah, God passes a judgment about kings that can be extended to all faithful leaders.

Woe to him one who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbors work for nothing and does not give them their wages; who says ‘I will build myself a spacious house with large upper rooms,’ and who cuts out windows for it, paneling it with cedar, and painting it with vermilion. Are you a king because you compete in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is this not to know me? Says (God). (Jer. 22:13-16)

Doing justice, therefore, is a very direct way to know God. Simply put, doing justice is knowing God.

The Social Order of Shalom

Throughout the Older Testament, there is a close connection between the presence of justice and presence of *shalom*. The desire for wholeness (*shalom*) is stated explicitly in Jeremiah:

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; ... multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (Jer. 29:1-7)

Over and over, there is a divine charge to work and pray for the wellbeing of all, and especially of those least well off in the society. This reflects God’s will for *shalom* {wholeness} for the whole creation, and in particular for the human community. *Shalom* is a social and communal term which indicates well-being and wholeness. It is a corporate condition signifying good relations among persons, families, nations and the physical environment, and between each of these and God. It is not only the absence of conflict, but it also includes active faith, adequate material prosperity, joy, physical health, justice and peace.

In Jeremiah, God tells the people that only when the entire community was whole could the Hebrews be whole. That included even their enemies, the people who had defeated them and held them in captivity and slavery. One group cannot have *shalom* at the expense of other groups in the community.

The desire for *shalom* has, throughout the biblical record, led God to show special concern for the poor, the oppressed, and the enslaved. This concern has been expressed in two basic ways. On the one hand, the poor are to be cared for and protected individually. On the other hand, scripture invokes the religious task of calling attention to any breakdown in the ability of public institutions to meet human need. Throughout the Older Testament law codes, poetry, and prophets, and the Torah itself, there are mandates for the protection of widows and orphans, strangers and sojourners, slaves and others who are weak and distressed. As Matthew 25 makes clear, how we respond to the least of our brothers and sisters is the basis for our salvation. On the

other hand, scripture also mandates that we structure our social, economic, political and military institutions in ways that serve the needs of all people.

The Exodus is our central model for the biblical call to justice. In the story of the call to Moses at the burning bush, God calls one of the chosen people to expose social and institutional failures with the intention that change would occur. Here, the call is not for food bags for the people to make their slavery more comfortable. The demand from God is that the people *no longer be slaves!*

Public Justice: Rising above Our Individualism

God desires justice in the public arena. That is the message that comes to us from every part of scripture.

In the commandments of the law, the protection of the poor is a major focus of the public establishment of justice. From the Psalms we hear,

Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son. May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice... May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor. (Ps. 72:1-4)

Isaiah 58:6-8—true to the prophetic tradition—talks about advocating for justice as worship pleasing to God.

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

To stay with Isaiah a while, the question before him is, “What is God’s intention for God’s creation, and especially for God’s people?” What are the values God calls us to live by? Isaiah answers that God calls us to be guided by the covenant responsibilities of justice, righteousness, and peace. As always in scripture, the answers to the right moral and political questions are to be measured by looking at how the most vulnerable in the social order are affected by those answers.

Looking to the Newer Testament, both Matthew (23:23) and Luke (11:42) record this saying by Jesus,

But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and herbs of all kinds, and neglect justice and the love of God; it is these you ought to have practiced, without neglecting the others.

Over and over again, the parables of Jesus emphasize God’s ongoing commitment to the poor and to those at the margins of the society. Jesus does not talk much about governance. Events such as his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well (Lk. 4:7-26) and his meals with tax collectors, however, clearly indicate that Jesus refuses to be bound by cultural arrangements that limit the inclusiveness of all ethnic, civic, and faith communities. Consistently, Jesus stood against the right of some to have power over others by virtue of wealth, political rank, family position, or the use of violence.

Comité de Alegria: The Committee of Joy

If you remember, one of the marks of wholeness (*shalom*) was joy. To follow God we are to be a joyful people. This is really important for those who seek after justice, where change comes slowly and victories are few and far between. The importance of joy as a key attitude for working for justice is highlighted in a story told by Joyce Hollyday:

On the days leading up to Christmas a Honduran refugee camp was filled with Salvadorians who had fled the violence in their own country. Members of the National Guard were killing members of the community, and others were dying of starvation and disease... Despite the sorrow, when Christmas Eve came, the camp burst into joyful preparation. Women baked cinnamon bread in an adobe oven, while men butchered hogs for... special pork tamales. The children made figurines out of clay from the riverbed for the nativity scene... They painted beans and kernels of corn in bright colors and strung them into garlands. They made ornaments from small medicine boxes and shaped figures from the tin foil that wraps margarine sticks and hung these on a tree branch.

The children dressed as shepherds and passed from tent to tent, recounting the journey on Maria and José in search of shelter. "This Christmas we will celebrate as they did," said one mother, "looking for a place where our children can be born."

A refugee woman asked Yvonne Dilling, a U.S. church worker from Indiana in the camp, why she always looked so sad and burdened. Yvonne talked about the grief she felt over all the suffering she was witnessing and her commitment to give all of herself to the refugees' struggle.

The woman gently confronted her: "Only people who expect to be back to the United States in a year work the way you do. You cannot be serious about our struggle unless you play and celebrate and do those things that make it possible to give a lifetime to it."

She reminded Yvonne that every time the refugees were displaced and had to build a new camp, they immediately formed three committees: a construction committee, an education committee, and a *comité de alegria*—'the committee of joy'. Celebration was as basic to the life of the refugees as digging latrines and teaching their children to read.

(6)

This does not mean our work is not serious. Martin Luther King reminds us from his cell in the Birmingham city jail:

(W)e have not made a single gain in civil rights without determined legal and nonviolent pressure. History is the long and tragic story of the fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily... We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed... We must come to see that human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of (people) willing to be co-workers with

God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation.

But working for justice over the long haul requires hope, a quality of joy.

Jim Wallis defines hope as “believing in spite of the evidence and watching the evidence change.” He tells a powerful story that took place when, to all outward appearances, *apartheid* still had a strangle-hold on power in South Africa and Nelson Mandela was still in jail. During an uprising, a public rally that had been planned by the religious community was canceled by the government, so a church service was held instead. Government police encircled the sanctuary as the service proceeded. At one point, Bishop Desmond Tutu stepped in front of the pulpit and pointed at the police presence, saying “You are very powerful, but I serve a God who will not be mocked, and I am telling you that apartheid is wrong and it is dead.” And then he said to the police, “Since you have already lost, I invite you to join the winning side; come into the midst of us and join in the dance.” The church’s congregation stood and began to dance and celebrate. At Nelson Mandela’s presidential inauguration, Jim Wallis asked Bishop Tutu if he remembered that earlier day, and Tutu said that indeed he did remember. Wallis’ reflection was that apartheid did not die on the day Mandela was released or inaugurated, but that it died the day of the celebration in the church. The government and culture of South Africa were changed by the hope in freedom as people of faith watched the evidence change. This is the hope that sustains us as we work for the Realm of God in our midst.

A Current Occupation Requiring Hope, Joy, and Justice

About a year ago, I visited a partner congregation in Palestine: the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem, a place living under the evil of occupation. The minister there is Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb who joined with over twenty other Christian leaders to write the Palestinian Kairos Document that was published in December of 2009. (7) They begin with a wonderful statement of hope and faith in the face of occupation:

We, a group of Christian Palestinians, after prayer, reflection and an exchange of opinion, cry out from within the suffering in our country, under the Israeli occupation, with a cry of hope in the absence of all hope, a cry full of prayer and faith in a God ever vigilant, in God’s divine providence for all the inhabitants of this land. Inspired by the mystery of God’s love for all, the mystery of God’s divine presence in the history of all peoples and, in a particular way, in the history of our country, we proclaim our word based on our Christian faith and our sense of Palestinian belonging—a word of faith, hope and love.

The problem is not just a political one. It is a policy in which human beings are destroyed, and this must be of concern to the Church.

We are back to the first benchmark of justice, that the image of God gives every person a dignity and a right to wholeness. The Kairos Document goes on to say,

We believe that every human being is created in God’s image and likeness and that everyone’s dignity is derived from the dignity of the Almighty One. We believe that this dignity is one and the same in each and all of us. This means for us, here and now, in this

land in particular, that God created us not so that we might engage in strife and conflict but rather that we might come and know and love one another, and together build up the land in love and mutual respect.

“Hope,” they say, “is the capacity to see God in the midst of trouble, and to be co-workers with the Holy Spirit who is dwelling in us. From this vision derives the strength to be steadfast, remain firm and work to change the reality in which we find ourselves.”

Bishop Tutu, Dr. King, Dr. Raheb, and so many others have stood up for justice for all in the face of ferocious opposition. They stood in the tradition of the good King we hear about from Jeremiah,

Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is this not to know me? Says (God). (Jer.22:13-16)

All of us are called as well to know God by seeking justice and serving the poor.

Notes

- (1) Joyce Hollyday, Then Shall Your Light Rise: Spiritual Formation and Social Witness, Upper Room Books, Nashville, 1997, p.14
- (2) *Christian Century*, “Too much practice”, March 9, 2010, p. 22.
- (3) “Too much practice”, p. 22.
- (4) “Too much practice”, p. 23.
- (5) “Too much practice”, p. 24.
- (6) Hollyday, pp. 91,92.
- (7) Kairos Palestine Document available at <http://www.pcusa.org/media/uploads/oga/pdf/kairos-palestinestudy-guide-final-6-14-11.pdf>