



Office of the Presiding Bishop
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

2009 Churchwide Assembly Service of Holy Communion

Tuesday, Aug. 18, 2009

Texts: Micah 6:1-8; Psalm 15; Luke 4:16-21

Sermon by the Rev. Megan L. Torgerson, Augustana Lutheran Church, West Saint Paul, Minn.

Maybe the way you've always heard it is in one of these ways. All we ask is that justice be done. Everyone deserves justice. Don't show mercy, expect justice. Where is the justice in that? Advocate for justice. A just war. A just society. We use it in lofty sayings, give credence to our actions with it, demand it from each other, base whole societal principles on it. There are even people whose job title is "justice" – chief justice, justice of the peace – like that job doesn't have enough pressure without being the personification of justice.

So we've heard the word used – and often. In fact, it has an almost untouchable quality. When faced with a wrong, when what should have happened didn't, when things suddenly seemed unfair, we don't hearken to what we want, or what we need, or what we'd like, or what we think we deserve, we call upon justice. Well, it does sound good, doesn't it? Smart, weighty, inarguable: justice. It's even nice to say: justice. So sibilant. A symphony sliding smoothly across your lips, satisfying and sweet, seeping into psyche and soul, silencing sycophants and securing success: justice. You say justice, and the problem is solved. How can you argue with justice?

We put our hands on our hips and defend ourselves behind the shield of justice, often pouting and snarling like a little kid who hasn't gotten her way. Because the way we use justice has a dark side, a sneaky side, a two-faced lying side, a nebulous zone in which we almost exclusively exist. When we say *justice*, we usually mean *vengeance*. I want justice to be done. I want him to hurt as much as I hurt. I need you to lose what I lost. I deserve to see your death for my death. I want *justice*. But really, I want *vengeance*.

Vengeance just doesn't sound quite as good as justice. Vengeance catches in your mouth, sour and guttural. Vengeance sticks to your teeth and hiccups in the back of your throat. Vengeance vomits forth vile volition, vindictively voiding faithful voices, and veers for vanity. Vengeance exposes you, points its finger at you, condemns you. Vengeance bites the hand that feeds it.

We think justice and we say vengeance. We can't even use the word right. We demand justice and point to Micah as evidence that God wants it too – as if we can assume that our self-centered conception of justice even comes close to what God's justice actually means. Be wary, brothers and sisters, what you ask for when you demand justice as God claims it, because God's justice is dangerous. This justice does exactly what we don't want it to. Listen to the words from Isaiah as Jesus reads them in the temple, declaring the year of the Lord's favor. Listen to what justice actually means. God's justice brings good things to those who have nothing. It gives freedom to those who are locked up. It gives vision to those who can't see. It gives release to those who are weighed down.

Those who face God's justice get not what they deserve, but what they don't. They receive what they cannot even expect. If I have all the expectations in the world, selfishly demanding that I receive all good things, where does that leave me?

He has told you, O mortal, what is good – and you can't do it, can you? Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God. And in your defensive self-interest, you have done vengeance, loved selfishness, and walked proudly on your own down the path paved with good intentions. And God, weary but persistent, is calling after you. Hear what the Lord says. Hear the controversy of the Lord. O, my people, what have I done to you? I have done all I can to bring you to me, saved you, fed you, defended you, glorified you – in what have I wearied you? Why do you insist upon vengeance?

Brothers and sisters, listen. "He has told you, O mortal, what is good." Listen to what our Lord declares: "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Did you hear it? Listen with the ears of one who deserves vengeance, not justice. "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled *in your hearing.*" Not your doing, not your demanding – in your hearing.

God says it, and it is done. Jesus promises it, and it is yours. You cannot even make the word justice into what it must be, but our Lord says "justice," and it is real. We who do not deserve, receive. Radical, ridiculous, redemptive, raucous – we only *hear* it, and it is real. You cannot say it, but God can and God does, and it is as new today as it was thousands of years before. Hear it now, because here and now it has been said to you: this is the year of the Lord's favor.

When God calls us to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God, it is not what we do to earn forgiveness and make ourselves right – it is what we do because we have been granted forgiveness and been made right. It is not for us to decide what justice looks like, sounds like, because we turn the sweet into bitter. Justice is ours to live because it belongs to the God who has made us.

We have simply heard God's promises; we have only been reminded of God's grace which was always there; we have merely realized the mercy given freely to you and to me from the very beginning. We do justice not because we deserve it, but because it is what God gives. We love kindness not because it makes us special, but because God frees us to ignore any other possible response. We walk humbly with our God not because everyone then sees how good we are, but because God has slowed down to be beside us.

May the author of justice work true justice in your life. May the God of kindness grant it to you and your neighbor alike. And may you always know the humility and contentment of following God's path with your Lord alongside you. Amen.