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“A Matter of Justice”

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Deuteronomy 16:18–20; 2 Corinthians 8:1–15

Let me take a moment, and only a moment of personal privilege and say what a special occasion it is for me to be preaching here today. I have known Joe Harvard all my life. I sat at his feet for children’s sermons and peppered him with questions, as he taught the children at North Decatur Presbyterian Church about who Jesus is and the nature of his message. Joe has been a pastor to my wife Helen, who is proud of the fact that she went to medical school down the road where they wear Tarheel Blue, since we first started dating. Joe performed our wedding and continues to be a mentor and friend to my family. His kindness, loyalty, and seasoned pastoral skills are a model for effective ministry. We used to come here a lot in the early 80s when Joe was first starting out at First Church, and I have been friends with Rebecca and Bankston as long as I can remember. I know this is often repeated, but the spiritual heart of Durham is in this place because of Joe’s love for this church and because so many of you here maintain an abiding commitment to serving Jesus Christ and looking out for the least of his flock. So thanks for having me.

As we seek to serve the church and figure out how best to do so, the events of the last week prove once again that we live in a divided country. We have all been hashing over the election results, wondering about the implications of voting patterns among 18-39 year olds making \$40,000-\$80,000 in rural Pennsylvania, and trying to discern what the results mean for our country during very uncertain times. The divisiveness of the electorate continues to astonish all of us. If you walked into a crowded restaurant in Durham and simply shouted “MSNBC” or

“Fox News,” it is safe to assume that this would provoke a number of sarcastic responses. Like many of you, I worry about the nature of our current discourse: much of the shouting on cable news and in the blogosphere seems counterproductive to good public policy and healthy debate over the substantive issues facing our cities, states, nation, and world. While cable news and the Internet undoubtedly have allowed more voices to the table, too often invective and innuendo trump the interchange of ideas. The discussion centers on who is up and who is down, who has made the most verbal gaffes, and the sordid details of private lives.

Sometimes the public discussion often ventures into the realms of theology and church. It has been very interesting to monitor the use of theology and the Christian tradition as we have weathered the economic turmoil of the past two years. Regardless of one’s political persuasion, the subprime mortgage crisis, the loss of jobs, and the discussion of tax policy are not just secular issues. For people of faith, these events have forced us to consider the complex relationship between our current economic system and what our sacred texts have to say about money.

Now I told Joe I was going to be apolitical, and I might be breaking that promise by invoking the following name: Glenn Beck. There are few names in American public life that provoke a more visceral reaction, whether positive or negative. We have read about his rally on the National Mall a few months ago, and many of us watched and some of you may have even attended the “Rally to Restore Sanity” weekend before last. Of all the things Beck has said, no remarks have been more volatile or generated more controversy than the ones he uttered in March of this year. I will quote him directly so as not to misrepresent what he said: “I beg you, look for the words ‘social justice’ or ‘economic justice’ on your church website. If you find it, run as fast as you can. Social justice and economic justice: they are code words. If you have a priest who [sic.] is pushing social justice, go and find another parish.” He then argued that “social justice” is a code word for communism or Nazism and a perversion of the Christian message.

Christian leaders of all political stripes were quick to denounce Beck, including those in the Southern Baptist convention, Beck’s fellow Mormons, Catholic leaders, and most vocally Jim Wallis, the editor of the magazine *Sojourners*. All of them suggested that even a cursory reading of the Old Testament and the Gospels leads to an undeniable conclusion: the biblical writers have an abiding interest in economic issues and the distribution of wealth. In

seeking to construct a society in which God is glorified and all have sufficient wealth, the Bible returns repeatedly to the idea of “social justice.”

Despite his ill-formed statement about social justice and churches, Beck’s rant a few months back actually sparked an interesting national discussion on this topic. And even if the rhetoric was overblown, he actually made an important point. Too often mainline Protestants use the words “social justice” in a touchy-feely way, or we do not clarify what we mean or what the Bible says about justice. Our discussion of justice often seems to have a “kum-ba-yah” sentimentality to it, where we all nod our heads that this is something we ought to be doing but we are not entirely sure what “this” is. It is the intention of this sermon to probe a bit deeper and think about the connotation of “social justice” in our contemporary discourse, and more importantly, what Scripture has to say about it.

The “social” part is easy. When used adjectivally, “social” describes how we relate to one another. It refers to our various forms of public life. We say someone is “socially adept” or has good “social skills” when they handle their public duties with decorum. Conversely, an individual who has trouble fitting in with his peers is “antisocial” and a potential problem to the cohesion of a particular group or society.

If “social” is relatively straightforward to define, “justice” is more complex, what we might call a *thick* term. “Justice” in Scripture often means more than simply punitive measures against those who have done wrong. The Hebrew word translated as “justice” is *mishpat*, and it can indicate the act of deciding a case or the place of judgment, the court. But it can also mean “equity,” “fairness,” and “kindness” to those who are poor. Not taking more than one needs. In the well-known passage from Amos, where the prophet proclaims, “But let justice roll down like water, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24) or in Micah’s famous question, “What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Mic 6:8), the goal is fairness and equity in the social realm, such that the gracious mercy of God can be reflected in the actions of humans towards one other. It means not taking more than one needs and looking out for those on the margins.

Within the pages of Scripture, the biblical writers refer repeatedly to our Deity as the God of “justice and righteousness.” One of the more stirring examples is Psalm 99:4: “Mighty King, lover of justice, you have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob.” Notice in this verse from Psalm

99 that justice is present where the Lord has established “equity.” Because God’s primary qualities are justice and righteousness, prophets like Amos and Micah remind us that it is necessary for us to work for justice in the earthly sphere, however short we might fall.

And there is no more comprehensive blueprint for justice in all of Scripture than the book of Deuteronomy. The laws and principles in Deuteronomy, which are the source for much of the ethics in the New Testament, give numerous and concrete examples about how to work for social justice, or fairness for all persons. As my Union colleague Dean McBride, who devoted much of his career to Deuteronomy, points out, the goal in this text is a sphere of genuine autonomy for every individual. What this means is that each person should have access to basic resources and be able to function in their community without shame. Some economists have also noted the same goal for our contemporary landscape. The Harvard economist Amartya Sen cites the ability to appear in public without shame as a basic right for all human beings, and yet so many individuals in 2010 cannot achieve this fundamental goal. Think about how many people in Durham or Richmond or Washington, DC, or in rural areas throughout North Carolina and our country cannot appear in public without shame.

Today’s passage from Deuteronomy encourages a system predicated on justice: “You must not distort justice; you must not show partiality; and you must not accept bribes, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of those who are in the right. Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, so that you may live and occupy the land that the Lord your God is giving you” (Deut 16:18-19). The middle of the book is a constitution, one of the earliest of its type that strives to offer inalienable rights to each and every person. Deuteronomy provided a comprehensive polity long before any Presbyterians came on the scene. The covenant people are to worship only God, the power of the king and officials is limited, and the worth of every person is affirmed repeatedly. For example, Deuteronomy 24:17-18, and note again the mention of *mishpat* or “justice”: “You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow’s garment in pledge. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this.”

The message of the Bible can be difficult and unclear for certain issues, as we seek to determine God’s will for our lives today. Yet the concrete advice in Deuteronomy about social justice does not fall into that category. In his speech to

Moses, God hammers the point home: “Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?’ . . . No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe” (Deut 30:11-14). There is nothing mysterious or unclear about the message: “Justice, and only justice, shall you pursue.”

The justice concept in Deuteronomy does not make room for payday lending. Just as Deuteronomy condemns the charging of high interest rates on the backs of subsistence farmers who made up the majority of the population, unfair loans that test the solvency of poor citizens in Durham and throughout our country are unacceptable. Many of you know the statistics about the inequality between rich and poor in places like Richmond and Durham. My wife Helen just went to a training event for Girl Scout leaders at a struggling school in Richmond, and she came home wondering how those kids could learn or even develop self-esteem when they have to venture each day to classrooms in dilapidated buildings that lack the necessary supplies. The justice concept in Deuteronomy forces us to work for better public education and more funding for schools. The justice concept in Deuteronomy forces us to continue our outreach ministries at places like First Presbyterian Church, to work tirelessly until each person in our society has a place to go, the ability to appear in public without shame, with a sphere of genuine autonomy about them. The justice concept in Deuteronomy forces us to look at the recurrent problem of hunger in America, especially for those families struggling with recent job losses.

Now there is an undeniable tension between our capitalist system and the vision for justice in Deuteronomy. For the engines of our modern economy run on the basic premise that each participant acts out of his or her own self-interest. Whoever makes the best product at the lowest price does so in the pursuit of profit. This point was made most famously by Adam Smith in his landmark work, *The Wealth of Nations*: “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantage.”ⁱ

That the baker acts out of self-interest, that each of us participates in the economy out of our own self-interest, is not in and of itself a bad thing, as many

economists have pointed out. If it is in the interest of a seller to make the best product available at the lowest price, the savings from this self-interest can and often do carry over to the consumer. Productivity, efficiency, and a competitive market can lead to better prices and a better standard of living for many people. In market theory, a frequent assumption has been that things will hum along as individuals and businesses get more and more efficient, always searching for innovation and an edge over the competition. In the 1970s, the noted economist Milton Friedman claimed that glitches or bumps in a capitalist system like ours will be rare and minor. Modest self-corrections might briefly stall the upward spiral of prosperity, but the system will always self-correct. Now of course the assumption of unending, upward prosperity has been debunked by the events of the last two years. The recession has forced us to reexamine the market economy in which we place so much stock, both literally and figuratively. And it has provided a moment for reconsidering the relationship between our religious tradition, which calls us to be other-interested and our economic system, which all too frequently encourages us to be self-interested.

So how do we proceed with this pursuit of justice? This is certainly an ongoing and fundamental question, and one sermon can only begin to address it. It is going to take a rebirth of mutual trust in our society. And the divisive election has shown that we cannot necessarily rely on our political leaders to reclaim trust. The reclaiming of justice will not be achieved in the halls of Congress or among the President's team of advisors, but at the local level, in our interactions with each other. As the novelist Margaret Atwood explained in a *New York Times* op/ed piece a few months ago, mutual trust is not going to be regained if we just sit patiently and watch the Dow creep back upward: "The wounds go deeper than that. To heal them, we must repair the broken moral balance that let this chaos loose."ⁱⁱ The economic crisis is not going to be solved on the cable networks or even the Internet, but in pursuing justice and solidarity with one another and perhaps valuing what we own and have attained a bit less. Atwood wonders whether "Things unconnected with money will be valued more – friends, family, a walk in the woods. 'I' will be spoken less, 'we' will return, as people recognize that there is such a thing as a common good."ⁱⁱⁱ

Of course our model for justice in this and all other pursuits is the life and witness of Jesus Christ. A focus on social justice pervades the entire New Testament, and it is an emphasis born from the experience of observant Jews

familiar with the principle of *mishpat* (“justice”) in the book of Deuteronomy. In our New Testament reading from 2 Corinthians, Paul encourages all believers to give according to their means and to do so following the servant-leader model of Christ. The Apostle declares, “I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need” (2 Cor 8:13). Paul’s statement here calls the early church to act with a generous spirit, to give during the season of stewardship, to seek a fair balance between one’s needs and justice in the larger society. In the tradition of Deuteronomy, Paul seeks a world in which there is a sphere of genuine autonomy around all of the early believers in Jesus, and every person has the ability to appear in public without shame. The last line from our lesson encapsulates this goal: “The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little” (2 Cor 8:14).

These are tough issues and contentious ones. Even if it is stewardship season, I have broken a cardinal rule of Southern etiquette today that one should not talk too openly about money. Moreover, people of faith can disagree on the best policy prescriptions for achieving a fair society, and neither the left nor the right have a monopoly on the truth. There is need for honest debate on all complex issues relating to our economy. And I know it is unlikely that any of us is going to go home and sell our possessions after hearing the passage from Corinthians this morning. This would make us vulnerable to destitution and homelessness, unable to support and be present for family members and friends. And many on the right have pointed to the need for personal responsibility in how we make decisions. The Bible certainly endorses personal responsibility in both Testaments.

Yet Paul’s message about earthly treasures is very relevant to the contemporary pursuit of justice and the tension between our own self-interest and altruism. This passage and others like it call us to question aspects of our consumer culture, to make sure that we provide for everyone in our midst and value the type of person we are in community with others more than our status in society. Sometimes when I am preparing sermons various lines from country music songs pop into mind, and I wisely resist the urge to include them. But this week I will throw caution into the wind and cite the chorus of Randy Travis’s recent ballad, “Three Wooden Crosses” for its relevance to the message about justice: “I guess it’s not what you take when you leave this world behind you, it’s what you leave behind you when you go.”

One of the best things about Deuteronomy and this morning's lesson is that it focuses on small, everyday acts of kindness. Very few of us have the resources to be philanthropists on the level of Bill Gates, but what we can do are little things that add up to justice. Here in Durham, this church can continue with your many vital ministries: Habitat houses, Urban Ministries, and your other outreach programs. Seemingly small, persistent acts make all the difference. On a personal level, being present with friends and loved ones who are out of work, and trying to ease one another's burdens during stressful times: all of these deeds fall in line with the pursuit of justice.

May we go forth from this place committed to mutual solidarity, to the knowledge that "social justice" is at the heart of our shared faith, to the belief that gratitude to God prompts a generous spirit, to the model for fellowship or *koinonia* espoused by the earliest followers of Jesus, and let us go forth emboldened by the knowledge that our greatest earthly treasure in life is each other. Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Clarendon Press, 1976) [London: Strahan and Cadell, 1776], I.ii.

ⁱⁱ Margaret Atwood, "A Matter of Life and Debt," *The New York Times*, October 21, 2008.

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