

Means of Grace: Justice

Rev. Cameron D St. Michael – September 15 2024

17th Sunday after Pentecost

Readings: Isaiah 58:6-10; James 2:1-10; Matthew 23:1-7,13,23-24

Reflection: Psalm 112

Greeting: With what shall I come before the Lord and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you? The Lord calls us to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God. (Micah 6)

Prayer: Lord, we seek your grace as we join together in worship. Grant us wisdom that we may better follow your ways and help each other to do your will. Grant us understanding so that we may better love you and better love our neighbor as ourselves. May you help us to be a people who seek to establish your justice in all that we are and all that we do. By your Holy Spirit, guide us that we may continually serve each other in your name. Heavenly father, grant us peace of mind and assurance in our hearts. And let us celebrate the life, death, and resurrection found in your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Help us to see all that is good when we put our trust in your steadfast love and faithfulness. Amen.

Reflection: Psalm 112

Praise the Lord! Those who honor the Lord, who adore God's commandments, are truly happy! Their descendants will be strong throughout the land. The offspring of those who do right will be blessed; wealth and riches will be in their houses. Their righteousness stands forever. They shine in the dark for others who do right. They are merciful, compassionate, and righteous. Those who lend generously are good people— as are those who conduct their affairs with justice. Yes, these sorts of people will never be shaken; the righteous will be remembered forever! (Psalm 112:1-6 CEB+)

We read the words of Psalm 112, and we hear of doing what is right by following God. That we should follow the example of justice that the Lord has shown to us. Do you look to Christ as an example of how to treat others? Do you turn to God to help you seek justice for others? How do you share the love you've been shown? Who can you lift up in prayer this week? Who can you join in prayer to strengthen in God's grace? How will you seek God's peace and love in your life this week? How will you share that love and peace with those around you? How does God's grace change the way that you live your life in Christ?

Prayer: God, we thank you for always listening when we pray. We thank you for your steadfast love and faithfulness that are ever before us. Help us to remember your example of strength

and justice in all that we do to be closer to you, Lord. We come to you now with the causes that we have to rejoice. We lift up our prayers of thanksgiving together as a congregation. We also lift up the worries that weigh on our hearts. We turn to you with the joys and concerns that we have lifted up with one voice. We also turn to you with the silent struggles and celebrations that we hold in our hearts. Though they go unspoken, we know that you hear our prayers, Lord. We ask now that you be with us in our laughter and our tears, in our dancing and our mourning. Be with us so that we may know your presence and your peace. Help us to celebrate that by faith you are with us always, in this life to the next, and forevermore. Amen.

Now let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Sermon:

Our scripture readings for today come from the Common English Bible. Our first reading is from Isaiah chapter 58, verse 6 through 10.

⁶Isn't this the fast I choose: releasing wicked restraints, untying the ropes of a yoke, setting free the mistreated, and breaking every yoke? ⁷Isn't it sharing your bread with the hungry and bringing the homeless poor into your house, covering the naked when you see them, and not hiding from your own family? ⁸Then your light will break out like the dawn, and you will be healed quickly. Your own righteousness will walk before you, and the Lord's glory will be your rear guard. ⁹Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and God will say, "I'm here." If you remove the yoke from among you, the finger-pointing, the wicked speech; ¹⁰if you open your heart to the hungry, and provide abundantly for those who are afflicted, your light will shine in the darkness, and your gloom will be like the noon. (Isaiah 58:6-10 CEB+)

Our next reading is from James chapter 2, verse 1 through 10.

¹My brothers and sisters, when you show favoritism you deny the faithfulness of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has been resurrected in glory. ²Imagine two people coming into your meeting. One has a gold ring and fine clothes, while the other is poor, dressed in filthy rags. ³Then suppose that you were to take special notice of the one wearing fine clothes, saying, "Here's an excellent place. Sit here." But to the poor person you say, "Stand over there"; or, "Here, sit at my feet." ⁴Wouldn't you have shown favoritism among yourselves and become evil-minded judges? ⁵My dear brothers and sisters, listen! Hasn't God chosen those who are poor by worldly standards to be rich in terms of faith? Hasn't God chosen the poor as heirs of the kingdom he has promised to those who love him? ⁶But you have dishonored the poor. Don't the wealthy make life difficult for you? Aren't they the ones who drag you into court? ⁷Aren't they the ones who insult the good name spoken over you at your baptism? ⁸You do well when you really fulfill the royal law found in scripture, Love your neighbor as yourself. ⁹But when you show favoritism, you are committing a sin, and by that same law you are exposed as a lawbreaker. ¹⁰Anyone who tries to keep all of the Law but fails at one point is guilty of failing to keep all of it. (James 2:1-10 CEB+)

Our final reading is from Matthew chapter 23, verse 1 through 8, 13, and 23-24.

¹Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and his disciples, ²“The legal experts and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat. ³Therefore, you must take care to do everything they say. But don’t do what they do. ⁴For they tie together heavy packs that are impossible to carry. They put them on the shoulders of others, but are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. ⁵Everything they do, they do to be noticed by others. They make extra-wide prayer bands for their arms and long tassels for their clothes. ⁶They love to sit in places of honor at banquets and in the synagogues. ⁷They love to be greeted with honor in the markets and to be addressed as ‘Rabbi.’ ¹³“How terrible it will be for you legal experts and Pharisees! Hypocrites! You shut people out of the kingdom of heaven. You don’t enter yourselves, and you won’t allow those who want to enter to do so. ²³“How terrible it will be for you legal experts and Pharisees! Hypocrites! You give to God a tenth of mint, dill, and cumin, but you forget about the more important matters of the Law: justice, peace, and faith. You ought to give a tenth but without forgetting about those more important matters. ²⁴You blind guides! You filter out an ant but swallow a camel.” (Matthew 23:1-7,13,23-24 CEB+)

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Our final message in our series about the means of grace brings us to our communal acts as works of mercy as we find ourselves with justice. Now as I noted last week, our personal acts of compassion are the things that we do person to person, whereas our acts of justice are aimed at changing the way society operates. This is because when we think about justice, it's not about how we help one person, though each person we help is important. It's about setting up a system that is fair, a system that benefits all people, a system that does not play favorites. And it is about having a society that values every person and sees every person as someone with worth. It means the rules for that society help everyone. It is about system-wide change to help those in need. Not just a one-time act but making it so that whenever a need arises in society that help is there. And we do it because it is what God calls us to do. This can be hard to express. Because justice can end up covering such a wide range of topics and ideas. Our readings for today highlight how we seek justice and how we avoid the things that cause us to lose sight of God's justice.

We begin with the prophet Isaiah. From Isaiah we hear about setting people free, that the fast we should choose is abstaining from persecuting others, that we release evil restraints, that we untie the yoke that hold other people back, that we help those who have been ill-treated, and that we smash these systems of oppression that allow people to be mistreated. Because we're called to do good, to feed the hungry, to cover the naked, to house the poor. Because when we do these things, we are a light to the people, that we shine a light on God's justice. And when we do so, we walk with God as our protector, that God will be with us when we go to do what is right. Because when we walk with God, we can call out to God and God will answer. But to do that, we have to turn to God. We have to be willing to help those in need so that our light shines in the darkness. The darkness that we find in society today is selfishness. The darkness we find today is hatred. Because we have finger-pointing, we have people blaming others for all the world's ills, and too often we play favorites, blaming the afflicted for their affliction, and blaming the persecuted for their persecution.

How does this happen? Well, one way is what we hear from James. It happens when we show favoritism to others. And when we show favoritism to them, we allow that favoritism to blind us so that we cannot see Christ. And James asks us to think about how we would treat different people if they showed up. If someone is dressed nicely, are you going to put them in a seat of honor? But if somebody shows up in rags, will you tell them to go sit by the door? To stay out of the way? How often does this happen in society? When a problem arises, how likely are we to blame those with the means to change the situation? Or do we instead overlook those with the power to change things and blame those who are hurting? Do you blame the starving man for stealing a loaf of bread or do you blame the people that make bread so expensive that people are starving? Too often we are more ready to blame the poor for being poor than we are to ask why those who have more than enough don't do enough to help those in need. It is easier to tell the person struggling to make ends meet that they are lazy than it is to say that we need to change society so that everyone can thrive. James notes that God looks with favor on the poor by our standards by making them rich in faith. Didn't Christ say that the poor would be blessed in the kingdom of God? So, shouldn't we be able to see them that way now? James notes that it isn't the poor and the powerless that stir up trouble and turn us against each other. So how do we break the spell of favoritism? If we can truly love our neighbor as ourselves, we see things differently. When we fulfill that command, we cannot have favorites. We treat each other with respect, we help each other, we inspire each other, and we build each other up in Christ when we love one another. When we love each other as ourselves, we can understand our failings with what we have done and what we have left undone. Because we understand that we all fall short of fulfilling the entire law. I have yet to meet anyone who has ever fulfilled every point of the law. Which means we are all in need of Christ in our lives. We are all in need of the guidance of the Holy Spirit. And we all need God's grace. Which means we should be able to help each other by that grace. But that means we have to try to do what is right.

We hear that in our reading from Matthew. Because Jesus notes that some of the leaders can teach the right thing but don't bother to do it. Jesus reminds us that knowledge of the right thing to do is not the same as putting that knowledge into practice. That we do have to practice what we preach so that we are not hypocrites. And Jesus points out that the Pharisees and the legal experts of his day are hypocrites. Because they place burdens on others but won't lift a finger to do anything themselves. They are willing to tell others what they have to do to fix the problems of the world, but they won't do anything about it themselves. They will complain about the problems that people are facing and do nothing to make changes to help those in need. They want to be noticed and they want to be heard. They will do everything they can for others to see that they are out and about, but they will do nothing to actually make a change. And it's gotten to the point that Jesus calls them out for not even wanting the kingdom for themselves. They are so busy telling others what to do that they don't think about what they are doing. That they discourage others from accepting God's grace in their lives and don't bother with accepting it in their own lives. It's like they are standing at the door of salvation

yelling that no one is worthy, not realizing they too have turned their back on God. They make a show of what they give but never give to the poor. They'll focus all their hate on one person for one thing they do, ignoring all of the wrongs that they do because they can't acknowledge their own failings. All they can do is see the failings of others. They filter out an ant but swallow a camel. Because they care so much about what other people do they are blind to the ways they have failed the people that they are in charge of helping. They don't seek justice because justice would mean change, and it might mean they lose the power they enjoy.

Now, when we talk about justice in this sense, it is about changing the way that we live. Not just the way that we live as individuals, but we change the way that we all behave because it changes society. And that change comes in many different ways. It can be changing the way that people treat each other in your neighborhood. It can be opening a food pantry so that there is a system in place to help those in need. It could be putting laws into place to open up shelters for people escaping from domestic violence so that there is always a place for those who are in need to be able to go. Because it spreads the responsibility around so that we share it together. It is no longer on one person but on us all to support each other as a community that seeks justice. When we come together as a church and we raise money to help those in need and we support missions to help people around the world with whatever problems they may face, that is seeking justice because we want people to be treated equally in the eyes of God and for everyone who needs help to find it. That we don't want help just to be for those who can afford it, for those fortunate enough to be in a position of privilege. We want help to be there for all people because we share in all things together in Christ.

We destroy the barriers that keep people from getting the help they need because we share in the vision of God's kingdom. We start by loving our neighbor as ourselves. Because even if you aren't sure what the next step is, loving your neighbor and loving God will guide you to where we need to be. Justice is the light that will shine because justice comes naturally when we are willing to care as Christ cares for us. So, I encourage us all to reflect on God's grace. That we reflect on Christ's invitation to follow him. That we think about our personal devotion and the ways that we grow closer to God in our daily life. That we think about our acts of worship, the way that we come together to celebrate God's presence with us. That we remember our compassion in the way that we help each other. And that we remember God's justice when we fight for the needs of all people. That all may know love and that all may know peace because we celebrate the grace that was brought to us by Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Prayer of Confession and Pardon: God, you are with us even when we turn away from you. Guide us back into your loving arms. Judge us not by the perfection of our actions but show us mercy and love. We have strayed like lost sheep from your ways, failing both in what we have done and what we have failed to do. Bring us back into your fold that you may guide us and lead us in all things. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us and forgive us. May we walk in your love and trust your ways. Amen.

Almighty God have mercy upon you. May the Lord forgive all your sins and lift you up in love through Jesus Christ our Lord, and by the Holy Spirit keep you in life eternal. Amen.

Offering: If you are so moved to make an offering, you may send it to the church treasurer, or you may send it to the PO Box listed below. We are still the church, and the church still needs your support to keep doing all the important work that we do.

Lord's Prayer

Dismissal with Blessing: May we go forth reflecting God's love in our lives as we go forth in the peace of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Current Series – Season of Plenty

This series is a reflection on the work we are called to do as the body of Christ. In it, we explore how we invite others to the table and how we share in what we have. God's love as our shepherd acts as an example that we can follow. We are called to share in the harvest as we care for others and act with the Holy Spirit. In this season of plenty, how will you share the peace of Christ with others?

9/22: Harvesting

9/29: Shepherding

10/6: Inviting

10/13: Sharing

10/20: Timing

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Toledo UMC

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Worship 8:15am

Etna UMC

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