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OMC/WMC

Restorative Justice:

1 Kings 17:8-16; Mark 12:38-44; Psalm 146

Good Morning Everyone,

This weekend MCC hosted their annual Peace conference, centering themselves around the theme of Restoring Justice: exploring how to do justice better. Yesterday they held workshops on the social constructs of crime, restorative and indigenous justice, restorative justice in the church, as well as anti-racism work and programs. Heather Peters reached out to our church back in August to see if we would be open to having our worship service today continue this exploration of Restorative Justice. Heather also named that this creates a space for attendees of the conference to join in our worship service this morning and continue deepening their contemplation of justice as people of faith. So, if you are joining OMC for the first time, as a continuation of the MCC conference, welcome. We are honored to have you worshiping with us this morning. And for those of you who find your faith home here at OMC, thank you for opening this space today to invite others in, and to take part in MCC's call to hold justice as a grounding point in our faith.

Our scriptures are full of different stories centered around justice, revealing the brokenness of how things are and a vision of how things can be. As Christians we are a storied people; we are people of the book. We look for guidance in the narratives we find in our scriptures, and through the lived experiences of those who come before us. To have stories as our teachers, our scriptures must include testimonies about the challenging, heartbreaking, unjust systems of the world – alongside radical rejections of these systems. Many of you probably know today's Gospel story by heart. It's a story that I always heard growing up as an easy lesson from Jesus. The poor self-sacrificing woman is a hero, a person to emulate and strive to be like. The rich pompous scribes were to be scorned - easy lesson; nobody likes a show-off. Now, this scripture story reminds me of a story in my own life and a woman whose actions challenged me to look again at what justice means to me in my faith.

A few years ago, I spent time living in Vancouver's downtown eastside in a house that was committed to community and outreach ministry. We didn't host a Sunday service, but it was clear that this was a place of 'church' for many of the people who came to share life with us, most of whom were living in urban poverty. One day after we had a few women over for dinner, my friend Terry came up to me and set a toonie into my hand. At first, I was very confused, but then she explained to me that this was her tithe, and that she had just received her welfare cheque for the month so she was dividing up all her money between the different places she had 'church.' She wasn't bragging in her explanation, just trying to alleviate the confused expression I was making, which was quickly being replaced by a look of shock.

This story may sound familiar. As I lived it I was struck by how familiar it felt - here I was living in the middle of a biblical story. Terry was quite literally giving me the last two dollars she had divided out from her month's cheque. Terry is not someone who had money to spare. She always ate meals at service kitchens (and twice a week at our house), whenever we created something artistic she would save her piece to try and sell on the street later that day. She had multiple barriers in her life that place her within the same social capital of the poor widow in Mark 12. And here I was, also a part of this narrative. Floored at how different the lived reality of this moment was, compared to the simple story line I had always understood.

The book of Mark is always circling back to the topic of exploitation and in this story Jesus is using this narrative for more than condemning bad actions and praising good ones. Gazing back into Terry's eyes I realized how my version of the gospel story leaves us with a widow made destitute by her tithing obligation. I couldn't speak to form a response to Terry, as I realized where I was sitting in a system of church, of community that thought it appropriate to praise the widow who gives her two coins and then leaves her with nothing. Yes, Terry's actions here - beautiful, selfless, and humble.

But I had a whole new fury towards why Jesus was condemning the scribes. Earlier in Ch. 7 Jesus criticizes piety as a mask for robbery saying **“you have a fine way of resetting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition!”** This story is not just a criticism of the individuals who take advantage of other people, but also of a religious tradition, a societal structure that is held in a manner that decimates the resources of the vulnerable only to further benefit the wealthy.

Jesus is opening up space for all of us to recognize where we can look to right the violence that is taking place within this story. Not just the violence of pride but the systematic economic oppression. In the opening verses, Jesus warns the disciples to **‘beware,’** which is a term that meant ‘to look closely at and discover, to see with open eyes.’ Jesus was never about a simple peace, but instead shalom.

This is what it means to be a storied people. We are living in the messiness of real life, where peace is hard to comprehend and harder to live for. And instead of being given easy lessons, we are given a God who is going to walk with us through this messiness. A God who will make a record of the noble actions of the widow, while still revealing the work left to do in undoing the system that put her in that situation. The lesson leaves us uncomfortable; it is not neatly wrapped up. We are left wondering: what will happen now to the widow left with nothing surrounded by scribes who exploit widows? What is her tithe going to be put towards – more fancy robes for the religious elite? This woman did everything right, but is stuck within the constraints of a broken system – so where is the restoring justice here? Where do we turn to now, that our eyes are opened?

We turn to another story, this time from our Old Testament scriptures. Our Kings story takes place during a time of extreme famine brought on by years of drought in the area. Here we meet another religious leader, the prophet Elisha. Elisha is also looking to benefit from the gifts of the widow, the same way the scribes were benefitting off of the widows in our gospel story. The difference is that Elisha has no wealth to flaunt. He has chosen a life on the margins to follow God, which has left him dependant on the others in

his community. So, Elisha arrives in town and happens upon a widow I will call Ann. And he asks Ann for some food. Here is where our eyes are opened to the brokenness in this system. We learn that Ann has nothing left to give and is in fact gathering kindling so she can return home to cook for her final meal before dying along with her child. Elisha instructs her to make him food anyway.

I want to pause here because this is where the story changes from our Gospel lesson. This is where the example of empowering, restorative justice that we are invited into appears. Because, in 1 Kings, Elisha doesn't give in to a broken system, he doesn't simply continue on with instructions to be generous and hospitable to the point of death because that's the 'good' thing to do. He tells us we can change all the rules. He has bound his life to the provisions of Ann, and so the answer to this dilemma is to empower Ann, to find a sustainable way to move forward. To bring light and hope and miracles in the form of endless oil and flour, because that is the call. To refuse the constraints of a broken system that continuously fail the most vulnerable. To instead look closely and discover the flaws and failings, and declare that we are going to choose a different way forward.

The scripture stories are not step by step instruction books on what justice work looks like. They call us in to keep exploring a future of love, and peace can be found and held within the lived reality of violence. Because God refuses to gloss over the stories of those who are suffering in this world, or to pretend that systems in place are working. Instead, our scripture stories make room for the people who the current justice system fails, they bring them to light on Sunday morning, and stare back at us from the eyes of the suffering during our week. They remind us that we are not going to accept a shallow definition of peace, that we will wade into the messiness of this world, continuing the work of restoring justice. And along the way these stories will continue to give us the why and little glimpses of the how we are going to try and bring this about.

The MCC workshops this weekend are part of a continuing conversation we need to have as people of faith. They take the lessons in today's scripture stories and translate them to the world we live in every day. They remind us that there are many ways we have become complacent to a broken system, unable to see the violence built into the structures around us that make it impossible for restorative justice to take place. In our bulletin this morning we highlight the 7 Calls to Climate Action, another group who is inviting individuals in MCCCanada to join them in going outside the typical church structures and processes we have in place in order to have a more immediate response to the climate emergency that is happening around us. They are seeking to follow Jesus' call 'to lovingly disrupt the routines of church with dramatic calls to life and action through both audacious word and strong deeds.'

In our call to restorative justice as Mennonites, we continue asking ourselves MCC's question, 'how can we be doing Justice better?' Where can we look closely and discover a new way forward that seeks justice in the immediate and pursues shalom in the long term? A way that builds a more empowering society for those who have been marginalized, and dares to boldly demand a sustainable peace. Where do we enter into our world thoughtfully, radically, filled with a fervent belief in a world that can be better?

We go forward from here with our minds filled up with stories of prophets who believe in a God who can provide endless oil and flour to meet the needs of the hungry. We nourish our souls with the words of our call to worship, a Psalm that reminds us we take refuge and strength in a God who makes us bold enough to keep building a more just society. We lift our voices in song, whose tunes and lyrics dance in our hearts as we go out from here, a constant calling of the Spirit to a deep remembrance of a vision of what this world can be, and to strengthen us to continue stepping up to the work of restoring justice. May we always be open enough to see where God is leading us, and bold enough to follow in this way. Amen.

Sources: New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Wisdom Commentary Series, New Believers Bible Commentary, Binding the Strong Man, MCC Peace Workshop 2021 Resources

Benediction: *VT #1058*

May god bless you with a restless discomfort about easy answers,
half-truths, and superficial relationships,
so that you may seek truth boldly and love deep within your heart.

May God bless you with holy anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people,
so that you may work tirelessly for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with the gift of tears to shed with all who suffer from pain, rejection,
and starvation, so that you may reach out to bring comfort, and transform pain into joy.

May god bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you really can make a
difference in this world, so that you are able, with God's grace,
to do what others claim cannot be done.