

READINGS: 11/11/2018 ~ Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time ~ Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost ~ (Proper 27) ~ Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17; Psalm 127; 1 Kings 17:8-16; Psalm 146; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44 ~ Stewardship/Enlistment Sunday ~ Veterans Day on the Secular Calendar.

### *Finite We Are*

In the translation of the Psalm you read earlier in the New Century Hymnal these words were in verses 3 and 4 of Psalm 146: “Do not put your trust in nobles, / in mortals, / in whom there is no help, / When their breath departs, / they return to the earth; / on that very day their plans perish.” — Psalm 146:3-4 [NCH]. I need to say the translations used for the Psalms in our hymnal was done by my Seminary New Testament Professor, the late Rev. Dr. Burton Throckmorton.

In the November Newsletter there was an article by our Director of Music Ministries, Mary Williams. She touched on the idea that we strive to have some unity in our services among the Scripture readings, the hymns, the anthem, the prelude and postlude.

Mary noted she and I meet and review the lectionary readings for each Sunday. As you may be aware, we use and follow what is known as the Revised Common Lectionary.

Many Main Line Protestant churches and the Roman Church follow a three year set of readings. Each denomination has some variations built into the lections but the readings are, for the most part, at least similar. We're kind of saying or hearing the same things in a lot of churches.

Why follow set readings? Certainly part of the point is so parishioners can experience a range of readings over time.

I would also suggest using a lectionary places a helpful constraint on a pastor. You see, when the lectionary is followed parishioners are not being subjected to what may simply be the favorite readings of a pastor week after week after week. Equally, with the discipline offered by following a lectionary the pastor is, in a sense, obligated to deal with readings which may be obscure or difficult to understand when initially read.

Coming back to what Mary said— we strive to have unity in the course of worship. How does that work? How do Mary and I come to that place?

Well, I gather some thoughts based on the readings and send them to Mary. Then we sit together, discuss a general direction, a message, and find hymns that support the readings, as we work on refining a direction for the service.

So, rather than take a look first at the Psalm we read today as happens in my remarks often, I'd like to make a comment or two about the work known as the Book of Psalms, the whole book. The first thing to say is it's organized into five sections, five books. A lot of people don't know that.

Second, the words found in Psalms are not just poetry. I think even in translation we can discern these words are lyrics, words meant to be heard with music. Do we know what that ancient music in the Temple might have sounded like? No, we don't.

Now, as you know, I write lyrics on occasion and I have over time written lyrics with and for three composers. And we, the composers and I all agree: lyrics are not simply poetry. Lyrics are different, take diversions, paths poetry might not, discover and uncover rhythms in syllables and words and sentences.

In any case, the bottom line is the Book of Psalms is a hymnal filled with lyrics. In fact, over time you may have heard me say this Book is the hymnal of the Second Temple in Jerusalem.

Which brings me back to the topic of organization. One glance at our New Century Hymnal should tell you it's organized in several ways. To name two, it's organized thematically and theologically.

The same is true for the Book of Psalms—it's organized. And I want to stress the theological organization. You see, Psalm 146 is the opening work in the last book, Book 5, of the Psalms.

Hence, it has a task. And the task Psalm 146 tries to accomplish is to illuminate the entire work, the entire Book of Psalms. It recalls the beginning of the psalter—Psalms 1 and 2—which orients the reader to hear the *Torah*, the “instruction” found in Scripture. This is one instruction emphasized: we need to trust God. Do not trust human

rulers.

Psalm 146 also recalls the message at the theological heart of the psalter Psalms 93, 95 and 99: God reigns. It recalls that message with one phrase. In Burt Throckmorton's translation it says (quote:) "Praise be to God." Often that phrase is translated with only one word: "Alleluia!"

That one word is a proclamation which praises God *because* God reigns. This analysis that I've just offered is a simple concept. The hymnal known as the Book of Psalms illuminates and is in service of the *Torah*, the instruction, the learning.

Now, if Psalm 146 is a hymn from a hymnal that brings up an interesting issue. What *do* music and lyrics say to us? How do we hear music and lyrics? Do we really, deeply listen? Or do we go on auto pilot, not pay attention to what is being said by the music and the lyrics, especially when the hymn is familiar? (Slight pause.)

Today for the *Postlude* Bob will play an arrangement of the well known hymn *My Eyes Have Seen the Glory*. In our hymnal this is # 610. Needless to say, this hymn is also known as *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*.

To see this work as a patriotic piece of music is to completely and utterly misunderstand what it says, what it means and is a violation of the Biblical context in which it was written and the Biblical message about which it was written. It is a hymn about the justice God seeks, not a hymn about nationalism or patriotism or any justice sought by a human entity.

Julia Ward Howe, a suffragette, an abolitionist, wrote the text to a camp meeting tune, a religious revival tune, when she witnessed a parade of Union troops near Washington, D.C. This was after the election but before the inauguration of Lincoln, just before the onset of the Civil War.

The hymn was intended to express not patriotism but a clear sense of a religious call to action. It was a summons to proclaim freedom not just for the privileged in society but for all people, the outcast, the downtrodden, the enslaved.

The hymn, if we are true to the sense of what the words actually mean, remains a call to action, action which might ensure the freedom offered in the reality of the dominion of God. Therefore, to treat this hymn as a call to nationalism or as a call to patriotism entirely misses the point of the sentiments being expressed.

This hymn, if you look at it carefully, is not even about specific nation or country. It is a call to humanity to work for peace, freedom, justice— God’s peace, God’s freedom, God’s justice. It is a call to humanity to do the work of God not the work of governments.

Indeed, as Christians, we need to pay particular attention to the last lines which read, “As Christ died to make us holy, / let us die to make all free:— all free— “all free” / While God is marching on.” If looked at in any light, this hymn should be looked at as sobering. After all, does God’s peace, God’s freedom, God’s justice prevail now, here, today?

If this work stirs up emotions in us, those emotions should inform us that injustice exists in our world, that injustice it is real, that injustice is pervasive and that we need to work at countering it. Indeed, I invite you to examine the insert in today's bulletin with quotes about justice. <sup>1</sup> I might even say it is important to look at that insert. (Slight pause.)

As you know, today is our Enlistment Sunday. What does that have to do with justice? One of the things we try to accomplish here with our giving is making sure it has nothing to do with paying for the heat or electric bills. We try to ensure what we give is used to further the Dominion of God, the Reign of God, the justice of God.

What does that mean? In a real sense, it means our pledges are lyrics— lyrics which say we trust God, not human rulers. Our giving acts a lyric which says, "Alleluia! Praise be to God!"

One last thing: in making a pledge we need to understand the rulers of this world, the governments of this world are finite. And, yes, we too are finite. We are all here for a limited time.

In that time, in our time, we are called to seek and to do God's will and God's work. If what we offer to this church helps just a little in doing what this Psalm calls us to do— seeking justice for the oppressed, giving food to the hungry, setting prisoners free, lifting up those who are bowed down, upholding orphans, widows, then we *are* seeking to do the will of God, to do the work of God. Amen.

ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: “Earlier I said we are finite. I hope that’s obvious. However, the Christian apologist C. S. Lewis addressed both our being finite and the possibility of our infinite life with God this way (quote:) ‘You don’t have a soul. You are a soul. You have a body.’ Since we are a soul I want to suggest our souls need to strive to do God’s will which encompasses justice, mercy and freedom for all people no matter what their station. Where do we need to place our trust? We need to place our trust in God. Why? We are souls.”

BENEDICTION: Let us lay aside anxious toil. Let us give our lives over to the One who grants life. Let us be open to the possibility that the whole of our being should rest in the will and wisdom of God and that the whole of our being should rest in the ways of love taught by God. In short, let us trust God. And may the face of God shine upon us; may the peace of Christ be among us; may the fire of the Spirit burn within us this day and forevermore. Amen.

## 1. THOUGHTS ON JUSTICE

“The way of radical Christianity is to stay outside of unjust systems— insofar as possible— so they cannot control your breadth of thinking, feeling, loving, and living out universal justice.” — **Richard Rohr**

“As mankind becomes more liberal, they will be more apt to allow that all those who conduct themselves as worthy members of the community are equally entitled to the protections of civil government. I hope ever to see America among the foremost nations of justice and liberality.”— **President George Washington**

“Justice is the grammar of things; mercy is the poetry.” — **Frederick Buechner**

“The work of divine justice always presupposes the work of mercy, and is based on it” — **Thomas Aquinas**

“I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.” — **Theodore Parker, *Of Justice and the Conscience* (1853)**

“Charity is no substitute for justice withheld.” — **Saint Augustine**

“In the absence of justice, what is sovereignty but organized robbery?” — **Saint Augustine**

“[Rebellion’s] most profound logic is not the logic of destruction; it is the logic of creation... the logic of the rebel is to want to serve justice so as not to add to the injustice of the human condition.” — **Albert Camus, *The Rebel***

“Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought.” — **John Rawls (1921–2002) Harvard University**

“Rats and roaches live by competition under the laws of supply and demand; it is the privilege of human beings to live under the laws of justice and mercy.” — **Wendell Berry**

“If you hate injustice, tyranny, lust and greed, hate these things in yourself.” — **Mahatma Gandhi**

“Politicians who profit from exploiting hate, from fanning it, must not be tempted by this easy way to profit from fear and misunderstanding. And my fellow clerics, of all faiths, must stand up for the principles of universal dignity and fellowship. Exclusion is never the way forward on our shared paths to freedom and justice.” — **Bishop Desmond Tutu**

“‘Resurrected’ people prayerfully bear witness against injustice and evil— but also agree compassionately to hold their own complicity in that same evil. It is not over there, it is here.” — **Richard Rohr**

“Justice cannot be for one side alone, but must be for both.” — **Eleanor Roosevelt**

“We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself.” — **Dietrich Bonhoeffer**

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” — **Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.**

“We shall awaken from our dullness and rise vigorously toward justice. If we fall in love with creation deeper and deeper, we will respond to its endangerment with passion.” — **Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179)**

“Justice is truth in action.” — **Benjamin Disraeli**

“We cannot seek or attain health, wealth, learning, justice, or kindness in general. Action is always specific, concrete, individualized, unique.” — **Benjamin Jowett**

“Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable. Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate



concern of dedicated individuals.” — **Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.**

“If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has his foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.” — **Bishop Desmond Tutu**

“There’s nothing more radical, nothing more revolutionary, nothing more subversive against injustice and oppression than the Bible. If you want to keep people subjugated, the last thing you place in their hands is a Bible.” — **Bishop Desmond Tutu**

“Liberty, equality— bad principles! The only true principle for humanity is justice; and justice to the feeble is protection and kindness.” — **Henri F. Amiel**

“Truth and justice interweave with all good things.” — **Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179)**

“May we, in our dealings with all the peoples of the earth, ever speak the truth and serve justice.” — **Dwight D. Eisenhower**

“My voice would like to have the strength of the voice of the humble and lowly. It is a voice that denounces injustice and proclaims hope in God and humanity. For this hope is the hope of all human beings who yearn to live in communion with all persons as their brother and sisters and as children of God.” — **Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, Nobel Lecture**

“In many parts of the world the people are searching for a solution which would link the two basic values: peace and justice. The two are like bread and salt for mankind.” — **Lech Walesa, Nobel Lecture**

“If you desire peace, cultivate justice, but at the same time cultivate the field to produce more bread; otherwise there will be no peace.” — **Norman Borlaug, Nobel Lecture**

“I have always found that mercy bears richer fruits than strict justice.” — **Abraham Lincoln**

“If we want a beloved community, we must stand for justice, and have recognition for difference without attaching difference to privilege.” — **bell hooks, American writer and professor**

“Over and above all movements for social justice is God’s movement, [which is] the creative origin of any movement toward human liberation and solidarity.” — **Welcoming Justice, by Charles Marsh and John Perkins**

“If we ask why the God of the Bible cares about politics, about systemic justice, the answer is disarmingly simple. God cares about justice because the God of the Bible cares about suffering. And the single biggest cause of unnecessary human suffering throughout history has been and is unjust social systems.” — **Marcus Borg**

“If we are to keep democracy, there must be a commandment: Thou shalt not ration justice.” — **Billings Learned Hand, Jurist**

“Philanthropy is commendable, but it must not cause the philanthropist to overlook the circumstances of economic injustice which make philanthropy necessary.” — **Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.**

“Never pray for justice. You just might get some.” — **Margaret Atwood**

“I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states.... Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.” — **Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Letter from a Birmingham Jail***

“Charity is commendable; everyone should be charitable. But justice aims to create a social order in which, if individuals choose not to be charitable, people still don’t go hungry, unschooled, or sick without care.” — **Bill Moyers**

“To take usury for money lent is unjust in itself, because this is to sell what does not exist, and this evidently leads to inequality, which is contrary to justice.” — **Thomas Aquinas, (1225-1274).**

“Ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have.” — **James Baldwin**

“Justice is like the Dominion of God— it is not without us as a fact; it is within us as a great yearning.” — **George Eliot, *Romola***