

SERMON/HOMILY HINTS

In order for a community to be healthy and attentive to the needs of its constituents, three things must be present:

Law	(Exodus 20:1-17)
Love	(<i>The Velveteen Rabbit</i>) ¹
Justice	(Matthew 20:1-16)

The Reign of God is the point at which true justice will prevail in the world. If we read the modern interfaith version of the Ten Commandments², derived from the writings of Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, and B.A. Robinson, we get a glimpse of how order would prevail in God's Kingdom. This version speaks of respect for all of God's creation, and of giving oneself for the greater good. It speaks of simplicity, truth and acceptance, rather than self-gratification. It delivers a holistic vision of community living where all should have abundant life.

In Matthew 20:1-16, we read of a generous vineyard owner who needed workers to bring his crop to fruition. He offered an honest day's pay for a day of hard labour – and the workers were satisfied with that. Then he hired other workers for half a day, and finally some for only a few hours. Again the workers were happy, believing that each would receive pay according to the time spent on the job. This parable, though, suggests that all receive a full day's pay, regardless of the time worked – even if in life, this just is not so. The parable describes God's justice, not human justice. For God's justice to prevail, each person must receive according to his/her needs. And true enough – human justice caused those workers who had worked the longest to become dissatisfied with their wage in relation to that of the other workers.

So let us take another look at the Ten Commandments. If this is a code of conduct for all to live in God's realm, according to God's justice, what does it tell us? The modern version of the 5th commandment says it very succinctly: *Honour your ancestors, your parents, your society, and future generations. You don't live alone on this earth.* In order for justice on earth to prevail, we must all work together towards that end with respect for both past and future generations. Sometimes this means turning the world upside down to see how it looks from the other side, the other point of view, just as Jesus did in many of his parables and throughout his life – the Messiah, riding on a donkey.

So how have we arrived at this place where human justice rather than God's justice is valued most? Through the ages we have shifted from a more communal consciousness to a more individualistic one. Given the loss of a sense of community and the need to interface positively with the diversity that surrounds us, a logical next step would be to ask: 'What is there within all created beings that is of God, and how can it help us

¹ Williams, Margery, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, (Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group Inc., New York: 1922 & 1991)

² Posted to the Midrash on-line discussion group. Derived from the writings of Thich Nhat Hanh and B.A. Robinson. Excerpted from [Aha!](#) 12.2 January – March 2003. www.logosproductions.com

transcend all cultural and religious diversity to become the basis for a new global community – a community where true justice might flourish?’

As persons with a capacity for the spiritual, we need to experience interiority to become aware of depths of reality that are not immediately apparent. It is through interiority that we have the capacity to feel deep injustices and see great beauty. We also need the will and the ability to act on our convictions with commitment. We must, in addition, develop a more comprehensive notion of the self. Rather than focusing primarily on our individuality, we need to understand our mutuality. Who are we in relation to the other, to the whole?

The way that we, as communities, respond to serious crime is a reflection of our brokenness, our lack of interconnectedness. We are all relational beings: with each other, with God, with all creation, and with the universe. We have lost the sense of our need for interdependence, and hence, our sense of belonging. We no longer think in terms of what benefits the whole community, but what benefits us as individuals. And so crime occurs.

Restorative justice is a way in which we can minimize the harm caused by crime. Ideally this begins in the formation of safe and healthy communities before the crime happens. By definition, we cannot build communities alone; it takes a concerted effort, acceptance and an attentiveness to the needs of all individual members of the whole.

The story of the *Velveteen Rabbit* illustrates how everyone responds to love. Everyone flourishes through acceptance by the other. The Skin Horse says: “Once you have become real you can’t become unreal. It lasts for always.” An old African proverb states “It takes a village to raise a child”. Each person needs a sense of belonging and the secure knowledge that he/she is loved without reservation. So too, it takes a community to ensure that God’s justice prevails within it. Justice must be valued and upheld without reservation if it is to be true justice that benefits all within the community – *that all of life might flourish*.

In order to do this, we need to step out of our own comfort zones and be attentive to the needs and views of others and the common good. We need to draw upon the strengths of all community stakeholders, if we are to create a new perspective on healthy communities.

Matthew 20:1 reads,

*“For the Kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard.”*³ We need to step back and look at this in a new light – not according to human justice, but according to God’s justice. God’s justice is not primarily about equality, but about need. God’s thinking is not the same as ours. We are anxious to know what the Kingdom of heaven will be like? This parable says it all.

³ The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha, Third Edition, Oxford University Press. (Oxford: 2001)

So how can we begin to foster true justice on earth?

- By truly living together in community – caring for the whole as much as for ourselves as individuals.
- By seeing things from a new perspective. We do this by widening the circle to get more diverse opinions and perspectives, and by giving these new perspectives due consideration.
- By turning the world upside down, as Jesus did. In Matthew 20:16 we read, “*So the last will be first, and the first will be last.*”⁴ We take ourselves much too seriously and are personally offended if we believe that life has treated us unfairly.
- By asking the question, “Even if I have not received all that I believe I should, do I have enough?” Is God truly merciful and just?
- By learning more about our neighbour. We can only truly know ourselves through our being in relationship to others. If our immediate circle is narrow, our perceptions of ourselves will also be narrow.
- By forming new, creative partnerships and acting together to ensure that God’s will is indeed done, here on earth – thus bringing the Reign of God, the Peaceable Kingdom and true justice closer to a lived reality on earth.

When we search for God, we do not find God, but find ourselves held in the mystery. “God approaches our minds by receding from them... Wherever we are, we find that he has just departed. Wherever we go, we discover that he has just arrived before us.”⁵ It is our journey into the mystery that leads to an attentive mutuality of existence. It is here that true justice will prevail.

This sermon was prepared under contract for the Correctional Service of Canada by the Church Council on Justice and Corrections. Additional faith community resources on Restorative Justice are available on the web site of both Correctional Services Canada (www.csc-scc.gc.ca) and the Church Council on Justice and Corrections (www.ccjc.ca).

⁴ Idem.

⁵ Merton, Thomas, *No Man is an Island*, in Lucinda Vardey, *God In All Worlds*, pp. 28-29, Random House Inc. (New York: 1995-2006)