

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST in SIMI VALLEY
Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost - October 17, 2004
Anne G. Cohen

Luke 18:1-8

For Our Reflection:

Justice is that side of love which affirms the independent right of persons within the love relation.

– Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology (1951)

Justice – Truth is its handmaid, freedom is its child, peace is its companion, safety walks in its steps, victory follows in its train; it is the brightest emanation from the gospel; it is the attribute of God.

– Sydney Smith, Lady Holland: Memoir (1855)

Getting Away With Murder

I've been watching way too much Law and Order on television: Law and Order, Law and Order: Criminal Intent, Law and Order: Special Victims Unit. There are the Crime Scene Investigation shows: CSI: Las Vegas, Miami and New York. And then there are the shows I don't watch but flip past on occasion: Divorce Court, People's Court, Judge Judy, Judge this and that, live action C.O.P.S., and so on.

Television will beat us to death with Law and Order if we're not careful. But I have learned SOMETHING from watching some of this on television – which I might have learned from real life, if I'd been paying attention.

* I've learned that judges, lawyers, police officers and forensic experts – dedicated to the common good, the objective truth, the facts and the evidence – these people are human beings alongside of the rest of us.

* I've learned that guilt or innocence in a courtroom can be a matter of the veracity of an eyewitness, the reliability of a chemical experiment on a tiny thread or thumbnail, the politics of the District Attorney or the bias of a judge – and it can have nothing to do with actual guilt or innocence.

In our world – not just on television – in real life – no one is innocent until proven guilty, really. We are judged on our appearances and attitudes, the probability of our alibis and the social power we wield.

How many of us think that "OJ" Simpson got away with murder?

How many of us were there when the murder was committed?

So – REALLY – we don't know, do we?

There was no video tape as there was in the Rodney King beating case.

OJ was black, Nicole and the waiter were white.

The race issue was as alive in this case as it was in any Southern trial in the last century – as acted out for our memories so accurately in TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD.

OJ was a dead man before the police got to his house.

Was evidence planted? Probably not – but we don't know for sure.

How were the tables turned on all of us? OJ had social power.

He had fame and money and a jury of his peers – at least his racial and cultural and pre-fame economic peers.

To my mind still, he got away with murder. But I don't know for sure.

And how many others – mostly white – have gotten away with murder – without society batting an eyelash?

How many of US have gotten away with murder, extortion, kidnapping, rape, embezzlement, unjust imprisonment, just plain lying – merely by our complicity with an unjust JUSTICE system made up of corrupt, very human judges, lawyers, police officers, forensic experts, jury members, witnesses, prison guards, presidents, CEOs and famous people?

A colleague served on a jury last month. In the first moments of deliberation jury members were saying, "He's SO guilty – did you see the way he looked? Did you hear the way he talked?" There was apparently enough evidence beyond looks and speech to convict on two counts. But my friend had to lead the rest of the jury to understand that count three was NOT beyond doubt and therefore must be dismissed. That was just WEEKS ago.

A few years ago, because of DNA evidence, a number of men on death row in Illinois were found innocent of crimes for which they'd been convicted and sentenced to death. Then Governor George Ryan put executions on hold while investigations went forward. Until the 11th hour, Gov. Ryan was ready to leave the death penalty in place anyway. In that last hour he realized that, if even one innocent person was executed, HE would be guilty of murder. So he ended executions in Illinois for the duration of his term – hoping that the system could be reformed enough to keep governors from getting away with murder. (PBS "Deadline" Shevane and Johnson)

Whether or not we support the death penalty for gruesome offenders - until our justice system is infallible, silence in the face of the death penalty is tantamount to murder on our part. And I have grave doubts that infallibility is a human possibility.

Because we are human, there will always be people who need special protections – by the law and from corruption within the law. In Jesus' time and culture it was widows and orphans – who were poor and had no advocates – and strangers or aliens who were far from home and had no advocates. There is ancient scriptural evidence of people believing that God had particular interests in those without advocates. And there were laws that bound judges to God's special interests.

In our time and culture who needs protection the most?

I suggest it would be poor people, those without advocates, foreigners.

As in our time and culture, I'm guessing that the judge in Luke 18 was under pressure to solve cases, to maintain reputations and social norms, to make the public feel safe.

The judge in Luke 18 didn't change. He was not reformed, did not repent or get saved. He grew tired of being accosted in the gate by one dreg of society who was persistent and annoying. He probably wanted others to THINK he was a God-fearing man. So, although widows were the least of his concern, in this ONE case he did the right thing – finally – to get rid of her.

I believe that to compare this judge to God – in any way – is a misuse of the parable – even though Luke does it. What is understood here is that if the judge had continued to ignore the widow's concerns and allowed her to be victimized repeatedly – which was likely – she would have eventually died. She would have then left him alone, of course. And he would have gotten away with murder because, in his society, no one cared about her – except God.

And that is the key – EXCEPT GOD. If we are going to pass ourselves off as good Christians, good Jews, good Muslims, good God-fearing, ethical humans, then we have a responsibility to care about what God cares about. We ARE the advocates for those who have none – and we are called to be as persistent as the widow on behalf of justice. If we do not fulfill our obligations in this area, then we are as guilty as Luke's judge.

It has been said that "Love does not last long without the element of justice." And this brings our obligation home to our daily lives. Until we have learned how to love each other – to be trusting, trust-worthy, fair and just with one another – we have nothing to teach - or to demand from - those who are enacting justice on our behalf.

How many of us can say – really – that we are completely trust-worthy in all that we do?

Out of that self-knowledge:

How many of us can say – really - that we have complete trust in each other? In our motivations?

Are we guilty of convicting each other of incompetence or special interests or negligence – with no evidence of this – only suspicion – and knowledge of our own short-comings?

Think about it...

Do the Boards and Committees and Volunteers of this church get the benefit of the doubt?

I think not – at least not always.

And this is a HEALTHY church – imagine an unhealthy church!!!

How many of us can say – really – that we have complete trust that God is truly present in all ways, places and times in our lives – communicating in and through us –

speaking the truth, advocating fairness, promoting equitability, passionately persevering on behalf of justice?

What would it take to get there?

We murder each other's spirits daily with our lack of trust, our instant judgments, our unacknowledged biases, our tendencies to find fault before seeing and praising the good.

Justice is hard, incessant work.

Justice comes with sacred guidelines for behavior and communication. Indifference to those guidelines is a crime in itself.

Justice demands vigilance and intentionality, congruence and self-awareness.

It is a consciousness of the effects of our words and actions on others, consciousness of our gut responses to the words and actions of others.

It is a whole lot more than money, social power and self-protection.

Justice is a core value, a spiritual discipline, a widening of perspective, a profound responsibility.

It starts with trust in God and belief in God's priorities:

The defense of the weak, the poor, the stranger...

The necessity for diversity for the survival of life itself...

The fact of our Interbeing at every level – for good or for evil...

The need for justice for the survival of love – in any context.

I don't know about you, but I have a lot of work to do – so that I can stop getting away with murder.

I leave us all with some words from John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement, a man who earned trust and trusted God to be just:

Do all the good you can
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as ever you can.

(Brussat p.360-61)

TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
Children's Sabbath

October 17, 2004

10:00 a.m.

The cross marks (+) in the order of service are an invitation for those in the congregation who are able to stand to do so.

The New Century Hymnal or "Hymnal" has a black cover; prayers are in the back.

The Chapel Songbook or "CSB" is a blue, looseleaf notebook.

When the bell rings you are invited to engage in reflection and quiet listening.

FOR OUR REFLECTION

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Sydney Smith, Lady Holland: Memoir (1855)

WE GATHER FOR PRAYER AND CELEBRATION

Musical Call to Worship

Welcome and Perspective on the Day

Please give the minister your announcements in writing before the service.

Music for Reflection – A Time for Centering

+ **Call to Worship** (unison)

O God, you are Hospitality. You are Welcome. You are the Invitation, the Table, the Feast. By your spirit may we learn to receive and offer grace, to share from the sustenance of our lives and not simply its crumbs. Embolden us as we serve as the voice of those who continue to ask the church for justice and bread. In Christ we pray. Amen.

+ **Opening Hymn**

Turning of the World

CBS # 54

+ **Prayer of Confession** (unison)

O God, our reconciler, we come before you as a people of folly, who have sought the wisdom of the world. We have built arms and prepared for war, thinking that will bring us peace and security. Yet we find ourselves an anxious people, isolated from one another and from you. We have sought to make ourselves great by pointing out the evil in others. Yet we confess that we, too, are stained with evil. Help us, O God, to know not the folly of the world by the wisdom of Christ, who is our hope. Amen.

+ **Our Common Prayer** (unison)

Creator God who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, And forgive us our debts As we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil, For Thine is the kingdom and the power And the glory forever. Amen.

Time for Silent Reflection (you may be seated)

One: My soul waits in silence.

All: God is my rock and my fortress. I will be at peace.

Silent Reflection

The Assurance of Good News (unison)

God is at work in the world.

It is not we who hope, but God who hopes in us!

Sung Response "Hallelujah... God be praised!" (CSB #5 Refrain)

WE TEACH, REFLECT AND PROCLAIM

The Just Peace Reflection was introduced to our worship service by our Just Peace Committee.

It is a weekly reminder of the need for social justice in order to create a peaceful world.

Just Peace Reflection

Conversation with Our Children

Reading from the Christian Gospels Luke 18:1-8

Sermon Getting Away With Murder

WE RESPOND TO GOD'S INVITATION

Intercessions, Celebrations and Encouragements

Our Joys and Concerns

Call to Prayer *Be still and know that I am God* Hymnal # 743

Time for Silence

Offering of Prayer

Solo *Summer Again* by Linda Steen Spevacek.

We Offer Our Gifts So That Our Lives May Be Our Prayer

Offertory *Etude ("Aeolian Harp")* by Frédéric Chopin

Prayer of Dedication (unison)

Accept our gifts, O God, because we need to give. Use our gifts to the greatest good they can accomplish here in our midst and far beyond our individual reach. We present them in thanksgiving for all you have given us and in gratitude for the privilege of sharing in your work. Amen.

+ **Sending Hymn** *A Song Must Rise* CBS # 76

+ **Commissioning** (unison)

We are a new creation. As we have received God's grace, let us go now and dare to reach out to others, to help others reconcile and make new. May the presence of God the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer be with us all.

+ **Sung Response** (You are welcome to form a circle) Hymnal # 236

Halle, halle, halle – lu – ja, Halle, halle, halle – lu – ja,

Halle, halle, halle – lu – ja, Halleluja, halleluja.

+ **Postlude**

WORSHIP NOTES

Call to Worship is from the Reconciling Congregation Program, Shaping Sanctuary Ed. by Kelly Turney p. 134

Prayer of Confession is from Central UMC, Ibid. p.107

The Assurance of Good News is from Central UMC, Ibid. p.107

Prayer of Dedication is from Holy Covenant UMC, Ibid. p.130

Commissioning is by Kelly Turney, Ibid. p. 95 (adapted)