

## 29<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time – 2020A

St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, church patriarch, and according to his own words, the classic "bad boy" turned good, or at least turned toward God, was also arguably the church's greatest theologian in the tradition of justice. In both his **Confessions** and **The City of God**, Augustine found the theme of justice a recurring one. While he denied that social justice was necessary simply to maintain order, Augustine the expert rhetorician also wryly noted, in words that have become famous, "remove justice, and what are kingdoms but large-scale gangs of criminals?" In Augustine's commentary on today's gospel text, he immediately focuses on the real point of Jesus' words, giving to God what is God's. Augustine insists that when we truly succeed in "giving to God what is God's," we are, in his words, "doing justice to God."

"Doing justice to God." What a strange phrase. What could it mean? How is "doing justice to God" different from doing justice to others through our carefully calibrated legal system with all its checks and balances? In many cases, the end results may look the same. One big difference is that chasm that divides the "letter" of the law and the "spirit" of the law.

Doing justice to God requires that we return to God, with dividends, that which God has entrusted to us. This is paying our dues to the Divine. "Doing justice to God" are the dues humans owe to God. Here are three examinations into what doing justice to God means. "Doing justice to God" means returning to God the creativity, care and compassion God has lavished on us.

### **Dues #1: Creativity**

The first thing the Bible tells us about God is that God creates. Without the creative urge and impetus that God celebrates, you and I would not be here. That we are told God created us in God's own image (Genesis 1:26) is the reason "doing justice to God" demands that we mirror God's creativity in our own lives and continue to multiply creation. Genesis started the ball rolling. We and God together must keep going what Genesis started. The creative genius within us is an unfolding of God's creative genius itself.

If doing justice to God means doing justice to the image of God we embody, then unfortunately we have let our dedication to creativity become increasingly selective. Today, we are eager to be creative in the fields of technology and science, fields where the most creative concepts "pay off" the most financially, professionally, etc. Why is it that we can be so creative in other areas of our lives, and so positively resistant to creativity in the church? The same brilliant people who spend Monday through Friday sharpening the cutting edge in their chosen fields of endeavor suddenly shut down and

turn off their creative juices on Sunday morning, leaving their creativity at the church door.

"Doing justice to God," the God of all creation and creativity, doesn't mean always worshipping the same way, feeling secure in the knowledge that no surprises are in store for you Sunday morning. Nor does it mean that tradition is the real God you worship or that there is only one solution to the challenges facing our church. The lockdowns and restrictions placed upon us, due to Covid 19, is forcing us to look for creative ways to worship. Doing justice to God means being open to the creative power of God within us.

### **Dues #2: Caring**

The biblical witness also reveals that our God is a caring God, a God for whom kindness and mercy warm the breath that the Holy Spirit breathes on us.

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin served the Synagogue of the Performing Arts in Los Angeles. In his book, *Words That Hurt, Words That Heal* (New York: William Morrow, 1996), he tells how he began his presentations. He asked his audience how many of them could go for 24 hours without saying any unkind words about, or to, anybody.

Many people raised their hands "Yes." But many people admitted the truth. "No," they could not go 24 hours without saying at least one negative thing about somebody.

Rabbi Telushkin then brought the point home. He challenged his congregation in words to the effect that "If you can't go 24 hours without a drink, you're an alcoholic. If you can't go 24 hours without a fix, you're a druggie. If you can't go 24 hours without cutting someone down or saying unkind words about others, you've got a serious, serious problem with your tongue. You've lost control over your mouth." He told this story to illustrate the amount of damage we can cause with our tongue.

A Jewish folk tale, set in 19th-century Europe, tells of a man who went through a small community slandering the rabbi. One day, feeling suddenly remorseful, he begged the rabbi for forgiveness and offered to undergo any form of penance to make amends.

The rabbi told him to take a feather pillow from his home, cut it open, and scatter the feathers to the wind. The man did as he was told and returned to the rabbi. He asked, "Am I now forgiven?"

"Almost," came the response. "You just have to perform one last task. Go and gather all the feathers."

"But that's impossible," the man protested. "The winds have already scattered them."

"Precisely," the rabbi answered.

The Pharisees and Herodians who challenged Jesus' opinion with the question on taxes are described by the text as being filled with "malice." They did not care about the result their confrontation may have on others watching and listening. The image of God they embodied was not one of justice; rather they presented a snarled lip and a surly attitude. Christians, seeking to genuinely "do justice to God," should never have to celebrate an "I'll speak no evil day." Caring and kind believers make every day a "Speak no evil" day.

### **Dues #3: Compassion**

The most public face God puts before us in the Scriptures is that of a compassionate God. This is the God who delivers the hard-headed, stiff-necked people of Israel over and over again, who comforts the weary, weeps with the broken-hearted, longs for a lasting relationship with creation. "Doing justice to God" means opening our own hearts and souls to a compassionate ache that brings about committed acts on behalf of others.

Since the killing of George Floyd, in Minneapolis, and the death of Joyce Echaquan, in the Joliette hospital, the news outlets and social media have been flooded with information about inequality and the maltreatment of indigenous peoples, people of colour, Muslims, and minorities. The issue of systemic racism is a hot topic under debate. Given the overwhelming amount of information being projected towards us at this time one can't help but ponder some difficult questions in light of this disturbing drama. Am I paying my dues to God? Do I practice compassion towards everyone regardless of race, creed or colour? Do I speak out and step in when I see injustice or do I remain mute and unresponsive? While pondering these questions the beatitudes, as outlined in Matthew's Gospel, came to mind. In particular I was drawn to the fourth beatitude which says, "Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied." The word 'blessed' or 'happy' is translated from the Greek word **makarioi**. An additional nuance of this word which the English words fail to convey is 'congratulations.' Now isn't that an interesting word! "Congratulations to they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied." We are being congratulated for having the right mind set, namely the mindset of God. If one has this mindset, he/she will undoubtedly be congratulated when he/she is persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven." (8<sup>th</sup> Beatitude). I believe it is fair to say that anyone who speaks out and steps in to defend justice for **all** of God's children will be persecuted. Pope Francis, in his encyclical *Gaudete et Exsultate*, says, "The Christian life is a constant battle. We need strength and courage to withstand the temptations of the devil and to proclaim the Gospel. What temptations might we have to fight against you may ask. Here is one example. Most of us here today, if not all, are reasonably well off, comfortable and secure. As a result we may become complacent and not resonate with compassion nor moved to action for those who are being singled

out for abuse because of their skin colour, race, culture, or faith. This comfort driven disposition may result in us failing to **hunger** and **thirst** for righteousness. Take note of the words 'hunger' and 'thirst' in the beatitude. These are very powerful words to use in this context. This comfort driven disposition may prevent us from recognizing our need for God to enter our hearts to help us change and grow into intimacy with God and thus be compassionate as Jesus was compassionate. So, we must keep asking the following questions.

Are we paying our dues? Are we keeping our dues paid up? Or are we falling behind, as is our culture, in "doing justice to God"?

Deacon Gerry

