

Focusing on Justice

(2 of 2)

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Justo: For our Bible study today, we would like to begin with the last verse of the second text printed in the program. This may seem strange, to begin at the end. But then, when we look at the text itself, we see that in some ways the text does the same thing: "strive *first* for the *reign* of God." The reign of God, what in more traditional language is called the "kingdom of God," is the goal of all creation; it is the *end* for which we hope. And yet, this text tells us that it is precisely that reign, which is the *end* of all things, that must be the very first thing for which we strive. In other words, we are being told to begin at the end!

Once you stop to think about it, this is not so strange, for quite often in life we begin at the end. When I leave my driveway, what determines whether I turn right or left is not my whim, nor the weather at the time, but where I intend to go. My goal, the end of my journey, determines every turn. Thus, there is a sense in which the end is first. I consider the end first and then make the proper turns.

This is what we are being told here. If the reign of God is really our end, our goal, it cannot be simply something which we expect in the future. It cannot be something that we do not take into consideration until it happens. On the contrary, it must be the starting point of all we do

and all we seek: "strive *first* for the reign of God"; or, as another version says, "seek ye *first* the kingdom of God."

What we seek, where we intend to go, determines the steps that we take and the turns that we make along the journey. And conversely, the steps that we take, and the turns that we make, confirm or deny our commitment to a particular goal.

If when I leave Ames, I am bound for California, I will seek a westward bound highway as soon as possible. And conversely, if I say to you that as I leave Ames I am heading for California, and then you see me taking the interstate going East, you will begin to doubt my resolve.

Or let me give you a different example. Suppose I were to tell you that as soon as I am able to retire I plan to move to Japan. There is no country in the world as interesting or as beautiful as Japan. Japan is my dream and my goal. I can hardly wait till I retire! Then you ask me, what are you doing in the meantime? And I say I am studying Italian! Laughable, isn't it? Ridiculous! If I tell you that my future is in Japan, but meanwhile, instead of Japanese, I am studying Italian, you will not believe what I say about the beauty of Japan, no matter how eloquent I may be in describing it.

If I really intend to move to Japan someday, and I am as enthusiastic as I claim, I will begin to practice now for that expected future; I will begin to study Japanese; I will learn about the

customs of the country and become comfortable with them. I will take every opportunity to eat Japanese food, to gather with others to join in that journey. If I do not practice *now* for the future that I expect, when that future comes, I'll not be comfortable in it.

So often in the church we talk about the coming reign of God; we say that we yearn for that reign. But, do we practice "reignese"? Do we seek to live as a community that really looks to a new day, to a new heaven, and a new earth? If we do not, we have no reason to complain when people do not find our testimony credible, when our evangelistic efforts bring scarce results.

If we say that we look forward to the coming reign of God, we must begin practicing *now* for life in that new order. The new order may not be fully here. But we can begin to learn the language, to taste the food, to join with other travelers along the same route, to invite others to join us on the journey. If we do not practice *now* for the coming rule of God, when that rule comes, we shall not be comfortable in it.

It is for this reason that we must begin at the end, and from the end look back at our present situation and what is required of us. Our first commitment must be, as our text says, to strive for the goal which God has set for creation: "Strive first for the reign of God."

Catherine: When we begin at the end, the earlier part of this text from Matthew--verses 22-24--is easier to understand. These verses speak of not being able to see clearly, and of

serving two masters. But put them in the context of a journey toward a goal. What would happen if we started out on a journey and could not see our way? What would happen if we began a journey and did not decide which of two destinations we were aiming for? At every crossroads we would have to choose which of the destinations governed this decision. We might assume both goals are in relatively the same direction, but the longer we postpone really committing ourselves to one or the other, the greater the risk of getting off track. In fact, we may see the destinations as much more in the same direction than they really are, precisely because we don't want to have to decide. That is like serving two masters at the same time, having two ultimate loyalties governing our lives. It will not work.

In terms of the Christian life, this passage seems to be saying that many of us confess that God is our ultimate loyalty, and God's reign is our intended destination, but that we try hard to combine this ultimate goal with daily decisions that seek to improve our security here and now. We act as though these are quite compatible with our service to God. This passage is clearly pointing out that such behavior is mistaken. We either serve our need for security here, or we serve God. The two goals are not in the same direction.

When we try to combine goals, we are really deciding and probably deciding for the one that is not our public confession. In a sense, we are fooling ourselves, thinking that our goal is still God's future, but making our day-by-day decisions on a very different basis. When we come to

the end of the road, we may discover that the decisions at the various crossroads have indeed decided the final goal even when we did not admit it.

Perhaps in a perfect world, with perfect people, other goals would be neat waystations on the road to God's future. But we are not in that kind of world. It is God's world, indeed, but it is also a world that has fallen under the power of sin. To live by God's values and by the values of this world are two very different choices. God and this world are two very different masters, and we cannot serve both. It is a sign of our sinfulness that we try, that we pretend to ourselves and to others that we can choose for security here while serving God. The cross stands as a clear witness against such thinking.

The character of the sinful world is made very obvious in the text from Ezekiel. Some of God's sheep have strayed. Others have been injured by the greedy and uncaring stronger members of the flock. The water has been contaminated; food has been wasted and destroyed so some go hungry and thirsty. Nations plunder one another, and few can live unafraid. Unfortunately, this sounds very much like the world in which we live. It is God's world, but it is also a fallen world and should not be directly equated with the good creation that God has intended.

Justo: This is precisely the problem. We live in a fallen world, whose order does not correspond to the ultimate purposes of God. How, then, in this fallen world, are we to seek first the reign of God?

The text from Matthew gives us a hint: "Strive first for the reign of God *and its righteousness.*"

One of the essential marks of the reign of God is what the NRSV calls "righteousness." So, by seeking and practicing this "righteousness," we are seeking the rule of God and practicing for its eventual coming.

What is this "righteousness" that we are to seek? For most of us, the word "righteousness" does not have a very specific content. Actually, in its most common usage it tends to imply rigid moralism, as in "self-righteous."

For that reason, it is important to point out that the word that the NRSV translates here as "righteousness" is the same word that is also translated as "justice." Actually, just about anywhere in the Bible where you find the word "righteousness," you can substitute "justice," for that is what the original also means.

The choice of one word or the other, of "righteousness" or "justice," in order to translate the Greek *dikaioyne*, is important. Several modern European languages do have two distinct words, corresponding to the English "justice" and "righteousness." A few years ago, I did a quick survey of a number of translations into those languages. The result was interesting. In the majority of cases, those translations produced by churches or individuals experiencing persecution or another form of oppression tend to translate the word as "justice." In contrast,

those translations produced by order of a king and those produced by affluent churches tend to translate it as "righteousness." I suspect that this is more than a mere coincidence.

In any case, back to the text in Matthew, what we are to seek first of all is the reign of God, and that reign is characterized by justice: "Seek ye first the reign of God and its justice." It is not purely a matter of personal, moral righteousness; it is also a matter of justice.

Catherine: There is something about the nature of justice in Scripture that has to do with the relationship of strong and weak. In terms of human relationships, injustice occurs when the weak are made weaker by those who are stronger. Justice is served when the strong use their strength to protect the weak. Think of the parable of the sheep and the goats later in the Gospel of Matthew. There the judgment is based on how the hungry, the sick, the imprisoned, the naked are treated. Justice is a matter of how we treat the weak.

The great model for us is the way in which God treats us. All creatures are weakness itself, in the face of the Creator. Yet God seeks to strengthen the creation, to assist and nurture it, to mend it. Since the human creatures were distorted and destroyed by sin, God went to great lengths—the incarnation and the cross—to redeem humanity and give it a new beginning. That is God's justice, God's righteousness. That is our model of justice.

There would be weak and strong in this world even if there were no sin. The fact that we are born as helpless infants means that we begin life in extreme weakness, dependent upon stronger human beings, usually parents, but ultimately all of society, to protect and nurture us. In terms of the wider creation, we as human beings are stronger than many other creatures. Justice means that we live as those who use their strength to help the weak. Justice is the opposite of the dictum that "might makes right." The strong are not to use their strength to harm the weak but rather to care for them.

But this is hardly the way of the world in which we live. All we have to do is read the newspaper to see the increase in reported cases of child abuse, of the abuse of the elderly, of strong nations plundering weaker ones. The law of this world seems to be that of "take what you can, build your own security whatever the cost to others."

The Ezekiel passage gives us examples of how the strong misuse their strength, It also points to the judgment that God will carry out. Look at verse 16: God says, "I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice."

What does this mean? Who is to be "fed with justice"? The weak and strong both? Or only the strong? Perhaps it is justice that strengthens the weak, and justice that destroys the strong.

There will be judgment. What we actually live for will become clear—to us as well as to God. In that judgment, the last will be first; the weak will be strong, and the first will be last. In the words of Mary's song ("The Magnificat"), the mighty will be put down from their thrones and the rich will be sent empty away. The lowly will be lifted up, and the hungry will be filled with good things.

We lose track of justice when our search for security in this world blinds us to the life that is based on God's reign.

Justo: Security is important. Yet in a world in which some are relatively secure, and others are not, those who are more secure, the strong, often use their greater strength to increase their security, even at the expense of the weak. The problem with this search for security is that there is never enough.

The logo for AETH features a stylized sunburst or fan shape in shades of yellow and pink, positioned above the word "AETH" in a large, light purple, serif font.

You remember that Jesus, at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, from which our text is taken, spoke of two houses, one built on sand and the other on a solid foundation. Those who do not follow these teachings, he says, are like those who build on sand. If your house is built on sand, you will never be secure. You may build a bigger house, with thicker walls and heavier beams; you may amass building materials for your own house, even at the expense of leaving many others homeless, but you will still have to fear the wind, and the rain, and the floods.

In Ezekiel, there are sheep who not only feed on the good pasture but also trample the rest of the pasture. When they drink, they foul the water with their feet. They push the others with flank and shoulder, and with their horns they butt at the weak animals until they are scattered far and wide.

It is amazing how imagery taken from an ancient, pastoral society is applicable to our modern, highly industrialized, global society. In our modern world there are also strong sheep who foul the pastures and the waters and who push other sheep aside. We live in a world in which a few have millions, while millions have nothing. We have the resources to build superhighways and modern airports for those who travel away from home, while there are thousands who have no home, and we say we lack the resources to meet their needs. We consume more Mexican beef than does Mexico, with the result that we suffer from too much cholesterol, while the poor in Mexico suffer from lack of protein. Our lifestyle produces enormous amounts of waste, some of it highly toxic, and we find ways to send it as far away as possible, to a poor county in Mississippi or a Third World nation whose rulers we bribe so they will accept our waste. Or we pollute the world with arms that we produce and sell because it is good business and which dictatorial regimes all over the world buy in order to stay in power.

We do not intend to do these things. We just want comfort and security. But in our striving for security in a world of limited resources, we end up destroying what little security the weak have. So, now as in centuries past, the words are sharply relevant:

"Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of the pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet? And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have fouled with your feet? Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide."

Catherine: Security is a basic human need. God knows that. In fact, what the passage in Matthew stresses is that God provides our ultimate security. When we seek security in all the wrong places, it will never be enough, and it will fail us in the end. What the text says clearly is that when our security is with God, it will not fail. God is the source of all that we need. When humanity turns away from that source, then some have too much, and others have not enough.

Worry—*anxiety*—about what we will eat or drink or wear, as the primary motivation for our actions, is the result of sin. It leads to greed and lack of concern about others. We are to seek first God's justice. Our actions are to be based on that. Then what we need will be given to us as well.

Yesterday, Justo mentioned the fact that this entire passage is addressed to a plural "you," not singular. That makes a great deal of difference at this point. The text is not saying that if I, individually, seek justice, then I can rest assured that all of my physical needs will be met. Unfortunately, that is not the case, as we well know. Many who have sought justice have ended up in prison, tortured, or killed. The promise is that if we as a human community will seek justice, then there will be enough for all, for God has provided enough. The Ezekiel passage

stresses the same thing. When judgment has fallen upon the flock and justice is carried out in the society by means of a righteous government, then God will provide enough food. There will be security for all.

In a sinful society, however, we each act for our own interests, augmented, perhaps, by the interest of our immediate loved ones. If something does not guarantee me—us—security, then it is impractical. But God's justice or righteousness is more widely, less selfishly concerned. It is that to which we are called.

When we look at yesterday's and today's study together, it is also clear that we cannot separate issues of justice from issues of ecology. Preserving the planet, caring for creation, is not simply an aesthetic concern. Nor is it only a matter of self-preservation. Fouling the water others must drink is a way of making the weak weaker, of keeping the strong stronger. It is a matter of justice.

There is a very interesting passage in the Book of Exodus, when the children of Israel are wandering in the Wilderness, totally dependent upon God for their sustenance. You remember the sending of the manna. The directions were that the head of each household was to go out and gather the manna, about a quart of it for each person in their tent. What we often forget is what happened next. As the heads of the families went out, some were quicker in gathering and managed to get much more than they were supposed to. Others were slower in gathering

and did not get enough. God had sent enough, but evidently the concern for security led the stronger ones to take all they could, leaving too little for the slower ones.

The story does not end there. The account then goes on; when they measured the amounts that they had collected, a miracle had occurred: Those who had gathered too much had just the right amount, and the same was true for those who had collected too little. God had overruled their unjust behavior and made sure that the distribution was righteous. Paul uses this example when he writes to the Corinthians about the collection for the church in Jerusalem. The church is the community of the Holy Spirit. It ought to be able to live out the miracle of distribution, to live justly, making sure that those who have more than they need voluntarily give to those who do not have enough. They ought to be so secure in the promises of God, so committed to the future that God has for them, that they can live by this strange justice.

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Justo: It is interesting to note that when we think of the miracle of the manna, we usually think of God providing it and forget about this other miracle: God redistributing it. Why is that? Could it be because as a society and as a church we can boast of being imitators of God in the miracle of production but not in the miracle of distribution? And if so, is it not because our faith is so little that we are not ready to trust God for our security, and insist on building our security on the shifting sands of accumulation?

There is a story that illustrates this. It happened in Brazil in early colonial times, when ships came from Europe to gather the much-coveted brazilwood. It is reported by a French Calvinist missionary, Jean de Léry.

An old man once asked me, "Why do you people, French and Portuguese, come from so far away to seek wood to warm you? Don't you have wood in your country?" I answered that we had plenty, but not of that quality, and that we did not burn it as he supposed but extracted a dye from it for dyeing, just as they did to their cotton cords and their feathers. The old man immediately replied: "And I suppose that you need much of it?" "Yes," I answered, "for in our country there are traders who own more cloth, knives, scissors, mirrors and other goods than you can imagine. One single trader buys all the brazilwood carried back by many loaded ships." "Ah," said the old man, "you are telling me marvels. But this very rich man you are telling me about, does he not die?" "Yes," I said, "he dies like all the rest." But savages are great debaters and generally pursue any matter to its conclusion. He therefore asked me: "When he dies what becomes of what he leaves?" "It is for his children if he has them or for his closest brothers and relatives." "Indeed," continued the old man, who as you can see was no fool, "I now see that you French are great madmen. You cross the sea and suffer great inconvenience, as you say when you arrive here, and work so hard to accumulate riches for your children or for those who survive you. Is the land that nourished you not sufficient to feed them too? We have fathers, mothers and children whom we love. But we are certain that after our death the land that nourished us will also feed them. We therefore rest without further cares."

Léry added:

Although this tribe may be blind in attributing to nature . . . more than we do to the power of God's providence, yet it will rise up in judgement against the plunderers who bear the name of Christians.

Catherine: Justice has to do with the righteous distribution of the good things that God has given us. It cannot be separated from a care and concern for the whole creation. When we order our lives by God's values, we seek to live even now in the way in which we firmly believe

we shall live in the final future. We will behave as God's faithful flock, as those who have only one master, as those who truly pray daily, "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Then our witness to a fallen world will be credible, and we shall indeed be a light shining so that others will also glorify God.

