

Justice. Compassion. Mercy.

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Scriptures: Matthew 23:23; 5:1-2,6-7; Psalms 119:156, 160

Matthew 23:23

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others."

Matthew 5:1-2,6-7

And seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain and when he was set, his disciples came to unto him. And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy."

Psalms 119:156, 160

Great is your mercy, O Lord; give me life according to your justice.

Thy word is true from the beginning; and every one of thy righteous judgments endureth for ever.

Sermon

Several weeks ago, I mentioned to Pastor Steve that I had several responses to recent sermons but since my comments were "sermon length", I stayed in my seat. Steve's response was, "Why don't you give them as a sermon some Sunday morning;" so here I am.

Now, I'm 80 years old but I have never before given a sermon! Oh yes, you've seen me up here before but those were "lectures", not "sermons"; Ancestry/Anabaptist History lectures. So, the first thing I had to do was learn what a sermon is. From the American Heritage dictionary:

A sermon is: Any discourse or speech; especially, a lengthy and tedious reproof or exhortation."

Now before you all get up to leave, I assure you this will not be lengthy. It may be a reproof, but if so, very mild, not tedious, and more an expression of "soul searching" and uncertainty. And I don't know if it is an exhortation because I don't know what that word means!

Several weeks, a month or so ago, Thunder John gave a sermon on Justice and Mercy which was followed a few weeks later with a sermon from Pastor Steve on Compassion. And I was troubled by those two sermons.

- Justice is a good thing, isn't it?
- So is Mercy
- And, so is Compassion

But the three words don't fit together in my mind.

Justice, in my definition, a crude definition, means "getting even." Perhaps more nicely stated, "evening things up". I think that is many persons' definition. If a white policeman kills a black man during a traffic stop and gets one year probation and a desk job, that is not justice. If that white policeman gets life in prison without parole, THAT is justice!

I heard John talk about Justice and Mercy in the same sermon. But doesn't Mercy interfere with Justice? Or does Justice interfere with Mercy. Is it possible to have Justice with Mercy?

Example: In 2021, (again from John's sermon) Ethan Crumbley killed four classmates in a Michigan school shooting. He was given life in prison without parole. John pointed out that people jailed for crimes of this type get two kinds of mail: Fan Mail and Hate Mail. John, I believe, is trying the middle path – Compassion Mail. For this I commend John.

But, John, I think you also suggested that such a severe punishment (without parole) could remove all hope and purpose from life (true) and that suggestions and support of the perpetrator in eliminating the “without parole” would be merciful. And here is where I find Justice (a good thing) and Mercy (a good thing) in conflict. In these situations, my first thought, my first sympathy, goes to the victim, not the perpetrator. Four victims were sentenced to death without parole by the perpetrator. None of those four, now in their graves, are eligible for parole. Justice demands for the perpetrator at least life without parole.

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The Crumbley story may be an extreme example but, in all cases of perpetrators and victims, there is Justice, Compassion, & Mercy to be considered.

Again, from American Heritage dictionary:

- Justice: Fair treatment (and I add, think “fair treatment” from the victim's perspective); “making things even” as the Scales of Justice at the top of our bulletin today indicates
- Compassion: deep feeling of sharing the suffering of another
- Mercy: Kind treatment of an offender: clemency

In our scripture this morning, Jesus spoke of Justice and Mercy in the same sentences. As one who thinks first about the victim and second about the perpetrator, I see clearly how Compassion can fit with Justice; I still struggle to see how Mercy fits with Justice.

And now for the SECOND SERMON.

You didn't know you were going to get two for the price of one today. Think of it as a Sunday double-header at the ball park!

Today we are living in “unprecedented” times!

- The former president,
- A dysfunctional congress
- A divided country

I don't think I have heard a single newscast in the last 6 years, PBS, NBC, CNN, that didn't use the word: “unprecedented” at least once.

These past years with the dead-locked congress, the actions of the former president, and the debated election have been unprecedented in American political history, right? WRONG!!

From the beginning there were two sentiments - strong central government and limited central government. Although Washington was not elected as a member of a party, during his terms in office two parties emerged, the Federalists who favored strong central government and Republicans who favored limited power of the presidency and government preferring the power to remain with the states, hence the people.

- During George Washington's terms in office, 1788-1796, rumors started by his political opponents insisted that he was setting himself up to be "President for Life", maybe even King. (Sound familiar? Is that what some of us fear in the next election? That we might elect a dictator for life?)
- John Adams, the second president, was elected as a Federalist. The Federalist congress passed the "Alien Act" allowing the president to expel any alien of any nation he thought was a danger to the US. (Sound familiar? Were our Founding Fathers worried about a Muslim influx? No!) The alien act was aimed particularly at the French who after their own revolution favored the Republican philosophy. Only one person was expelled; most other French chartered ships and left on their own.
- The "Alien Act" was followed by the "Sedition Act" passed by the 6th Congress criminalizing "false, scandalous, and malicious statements" against the government, the president, or congress which Adams signed into law in 1798. Seven years earlier, Congress had passed an Amendment to the Constitution declaring "Congress shall make no law ... abridging the freedom of speech" (And today we still argue over the limits, if any, of the First Amendment)
- Meanwhile, newspapers flourished in the land of the free press. Federalist newspapers and Republican newspapers. You could choose from which paper you wanted to get your news. (Sound familiar? Fox News and CNN).
- In the 1800 election the candidates did not run as a party. Each elector cast 2 votes, not specifying president or vice president, and the candidate to get the most votes was president, the one with the 2nd most votes was vice-president. Republican Thomas Jefferson got 73 votes; Republican Aaron Burr got 73 votes. That meant that that congress would choose the president with each state (not each representative, but each state) getting 1 vote determined by their delegation. 16 states – 9 to win. The first ballot was 8 Jefferson, 6 Burr, two split, i.e., no vote. 35 ballots later, it was still no decision. (sound like the recent house speakership election?) If the inauguration day came with no president or vice president having been chosen, the president pro tempore of the Senate would become president. The Federalist controlled Senate would choose the president pro-tempore of the senate and could thereby steal the election from the Republicans. But the president pro temp would not be chosen unless the president of the senate was absent. Jefferson, vice president in the outgoing Adam's presidency was the president of the senate and made sure he was never absent. Finally, the Federalists broke and a group abstained on the 36th ballot allowing some Republicans to switch their vote to Jefferson making Burr the vice president. (This is good stuff compared to our rather dull 2020 election)
- And then the Federalist leaning Washington and the Federalist elected Adams were out and the Republicans led by Jefferson rolled into Washington City, the new capital. But the more Jefferson tried to limit the power of the presidency, the more he assumed. (Does that sound familiar?) And then came the big decision. Napoleon offered the US the right to buy a landmass on the North American continent larger than Great Britain, France, Germany, Spain, Portugal, and Italy combined for \$15 million. But the Constitution clearly said the President only had the powers "explicitly" stated in the Constitution and the Constitution did not say the president had the power to acquire

land on behalf of the country. Trouble was, congress was not in session and wouldn't be for several months. And, Napoleon was beginning to re-think his decision. Jefferson quickly signed the acquisition treaty and the Louisiana purchase was completed unconstitutionally.

And then the Federalists came back to Washington for the next congressional term and the howls began - not because Jefferson had used excessive unconstitutional power, but because of the waste of \$15 million for land that was unknown and only wilderness and full of savages.

- Republican Aaron Burr was just completing his 4 year term as Jefferson's vice president and was campaigning for the governorship of New York. There was much talk about his sexual improprieties (sound familiar?) and he believed the Federalist Alexander Hamilton was behind it. Burr challenged Hamilton to a duel and after the shots rang out, Hamilton, Secretary of the Treasury to Adams, fell dead. It's like as if Mike Pence challenged Janet Yellen to a duel. And what happened to Burr? Nothing. They had the good sense to cross the Hudson River to New Jersey where dueling was legal.

The last eight years have been unprecedented? Naw, politics as usual in America. Oh, and by the way, if I was Mike Pence, I wouldn't challenge Yellen to a duel. I hear she's pretty quick with a dueling pistol.

You've heard the saying:

- Soccer is the beautiful game of gentlemen played by ruffians. And
- Rugby is the game of ruffians played by gentlemen

Democracy is like soccer; democracy is the beautiful game of gentlemen (& women) played by ruffians with referees prone to making wrong calls in front of a population ready for a scrap with the opposition.

It is up to us to save the beautiful game as our ancestors, yours and mine, have done for a couple hundred years. I urge you, get involved at the national and/or local level and help save the beautiful game in these rather normal political times.