

JUSTICE IN THE BURBS

Why Should I Care?

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Jeremiah 29:4-14

⁴Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. ⁷But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. ⁸For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, ⁹for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the LORD.

¹⁰For thus says the LORD: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfil to you my promise and bring you back to this place. ¹¹For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. ¹²Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, ¹⁴I will let you find me, says the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

This morning we are continuing our series – Justice in the Burbs. Beginning last week and for four weeks we are using Will and Lisa Samson's book by that title to address some big questions about what it means for us as people of faith to live lives of justice. Steve began the series last week by asking the question, what do we mean by justice? He talked some about how justice is often understood along the same lines as vengeance – when someone has wronged us, we want to return the favor, it's only fair, we say. The idea of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth often fosters this understanding that justice means to be punished for the crimes you've committed. However, Steve challenged us to rethink justice to be more about living rightly in our relationships. Justice, he challenged, is about concepts like mercy, compassion, fairness, and living by the golden rule.

Having begun to rethink what we mean by justice last week, we now turn to address the next question, “Why should I care?” Why should we be concerned about justice in the world? This question takes on many forms – why should I care about what’s happening with my neighbor down the street? I’m sure they have family and friends who can check on them. Why should I be worried about whether or not kids in Columbia Center have safe places to play and hang out? People in their community can deal with that. Why should I be concerned about who is making my clothes or growing and harvesting the food I eat? It’s none of my business how much they get paid or what their working conditions look like.

The reality is, we live in a world that is fragmented and disjointed. We are kept separate from others, both in our own communities and around the world. When we are disjointed and disconnected from one another, it is hard to ask these tough questions, it is hard to know how our actions as individuals can have any kind of a positive impact on things that are happening in other’s homes and in other places around the world. So, why should we care about issues of justice?

Before jumping to answer this question, I want to provide a little background for the discussion. I imagine that many of you are familiar with some words from the 29th Chapter of Jeremiah, “*For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.*” These words from Jeremiah 29:11 are often talked about in relationship to the hope that God has for us as God’s people. According to the prophet Jeremiah, God has plans for us that include our welfare, our best interests in mind, plans that will help us avoid harm in our lives, plans that should give us a future filled with hope.

When we pluck verse 11 out of the context of the rest of the story, it can cause us to misinterpret the hope that Jeremiah speaks of and the work that God is said to be doing in the midst of the world. If we read these words from our perspective, from the perspective of upper-middle class citizens of the suburban United States, they sound wonderfully promising. God has plans for us that will lead to good and protect us from harm, God has plans for us that will bring us a future with hope. This is wonderfully good news! However, it is not good news that is limited to us. It is not good news only for a select few in a select location. God's promises in this passage are promises to all of God's creation...

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In this passage we hear the prophet Jeremiah speaking to a people who are in exile, people who are cut off from their homeland and from the promises that have been made to them. And in the midst of their isolation and despair, God speaks words of hope and promise. The words of Jeremiah are words that remind us of God's promises to all of creation, not just to an elite few who happen to live in a particular social location. God

has promised to be at work in the world for the good of all things. And so we come back then to our original question when it comes to justice in the world, “why should I care?”

The easiest answer is this – because we’re supposed to. We talked a few weeks ago now about how God has created us as human beings to be caregivers for the rest of creation. As a natural out flowing of this call, to be stewards and to care for others, we should all desire to live lives of justice. However, we know that in reality this doesn’t always happen. We want to, we think about it, we understand that maybe we should, but when it comes down to it, we all make choices day in and day out that are shaped more by global markets, the influence of media, our desire to be comfortable, and our desire for convenience, than they are by our desire to live God’s justice in the world.

Now, please hear me clearly this morning, I do not stand up here to be condemning of you or to speak from a place of superiority. I will be the first to admit that my life is nowhere near what I think God would have it be. Everyday I make choices that are easy and comfortable for me, regardless of what effect they might have on other people and the world around me. Still, I know that God calls me, and calls each and every one of us, to live lives of Justice.

I’ll also be real honest with you this morning; I have found that this first reason that I offer, that we’re supposed to care about justice because it is what God calls us to do, isn’t always the most effective or the most motivating. Often times when “because we’re supposed to” is offered as a reason, we simply feel obligated and/or guilty. We might do something, but it’s not because we want to, it’s because we feel like we have to. When we’re kids and we’re told to eat vegetables “because we’re supposed to” we rebel and want nothing to do with vegetables. As we grow older we begin to truly learn and

understand and experience the benefits of eating vegetables and so we eat vegetables more willingly because we understand the benefits that doing so provide.

This morning then, I want to offer four other reasons why we should care about justice, reasons that, when coupled with God's call on our lives to live justly, I believe can help us take steps to live more like God would have us live.

The first reason that we are to live lives of justice is that when we do so, our lives can be transformed. When we begin to see and experience and engage with the needs of others and of the world around us, it can help us gain a much healthier perspective on life and can help us develop an attitude that is much more positive.

I heard recently about a woman who had been in a terrible accident and was in the hospital with her jaw wired shut. She decided that while there wasn't much she could do, she could do something. And so every time she heard a life flight helicopter taking off or landing she took time to pray for the person who was in need of medical help. She prayed for the doctors and nurses and everyone who was going to be involved in helping provide medical attention for that patient. She prayed for the friends and family of the injured person, that they might find peace and comfort during their difficult time.

In a situation where she could have felt bad for herself, could have shut down and simply looked inward asking, "why me?" this woman made an intentional decision to be engaged in a simple act of justice by looking outward and remembering in prayer, people she didn't even know. By thinking of others in need, by looking outside of herself, this woman lived a life that reflected a transformation by God's love.

Secondly, we are called to live lives of justice because by doing so our communities of faith can be transformed. I think of First United Methodist Church in

Slidell, LA, a church that our congregation has been partnered with these last several years. When Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005, First Methodist in Slidell found their entire campus covered in about 5 feet of water. The devastation from the storm was widespread leaving many of their buildings in need of serious repair.

Their first instinct though, was to look outward. Rather than focusing inwardly and worrying about how to get the church fixed up, they looked outward and began helping their community. They hosted relief workers from around the country and had them doing projects in the neighborhoods around the church. People from the church helped one another and others in their community get back on their feet. Only after the community had begun to recover did the church then look to get their own property fixed up. This church is happier and healthier today than they were before the storm and it is thanks in large part to the way that they reacted by reaching out and sharing God's love with others around them when a horrible tragedy struck their community.

In addition to our individual lives and our congregations being transformed, when we live lives of justice, our greater communities can be transformed as well. In and around Traverse City, MI a network of churches has formed to provide shelter for the homeless. The program is called Safe Harbor and the basic idea is this. A group of churches (approximately 12 at this time) take responsibility on a rotating basis for providing shelter and meals for the area's homeless. Each church is only responsible for one night every couple of weeks, but because of the forward thinking nature of the group's organizers and thanks to the willingness of each individual church to participate, approximately 40 of the region's homeless have a safe, dry, and warm place to sleep each night during the coldest months of the winter.

Growing up, I remember conversations about something like this in my home church, and it was fought and ultimately shot down by some of the people in the church. Questions and concerns were raised about what kind of a mess would be made, would things get stolen, who was going to clean up, how would we protect our kids who were there for activities, and on and on. None of them were bad questions or concerns, but all of them were definitely inward focused. As individuals and as churches we have the choice to make, will we continue to look inward or will we begin to look outward so that our lives, our churches, and our communities might ultimately be transformed.

And now, one final response to the question, “why should we care about justice?” We are called to be concerned about the lives of others and about the world around us and we are called to be involved in work for justice because by doing so, the future can be transformed. There are serious questions and issues facing the current generation and what the future looks like doesn’t depend on *if* these questions and issues are addressed, The future depends on *how* these questions are addressed. How will the AIDS epidemic in Africa be addressed? How will poverty around the globe be addressed? What will be done to help the countless women and children around the world who are sold into the sex industry each year? What will be done about mounting political tension and growing distrust amongst nations?

We can continue to live our lives day to day with little interest or concern about these questions. Doing nothing to address them will help shape the future; it will almost certainly lead to a future where an increasing number of people face poverty and disease and where there is increasing global conflict. However, beginning to educate ourselves about these issues and seeking to affect positive change will also help shape and impact

the future; it will lead to possibilities for peace, for health, and for restoration. The opportunities to help shape the world for our kids and grandkids are more numerous than they've ever been. What we do, is ultimately up to us.

We are called to be engaged in work for justice because it is who God has created us to be, because when we do so, our lives can be transformed, our churches can be transformed, our communities can be transformed, and ultimately the future can be shaped and formed in ways that reflect God's hopes for the world. Through the prophet Jeremiah we hear God speaking to us, telling us of plans for all of creation to prosper. God is calling us to hear and respond, to take the opportunities that we've been given to work for transformation of this world and the shaping of God's future. The task might seem huge, and it is an incredible responsibility, but ultimately, I believe it can also be our greatest joy.