

Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time/September 29, 2013

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15; Luke 16:19-31;

Rev. Joel M. Krueger

"Bending Toward Justice"

"The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice."

These words were written by Rev. Theodore Parker, a Unitarian minister and prominent American Transcendentalist, in 1857, in a sermon entitled, "Of Justice and the Conscience." It was part of a collection, "Ten Sermons of Religion" that he published. In this sermon in which he called for the abolition of slavery, he states:

"Look at the facts of the world. You see a continual and progressive triumph of the right. I do not pretend to understand the moral universe, the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. But from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice."

The truth of these words would be reiterated by others in later years. The Freemasons in 1871 would include them in one of their rites of membership; they were quoted as Parker's words in a book published in 1918 entitled "Readings of Great Authors"; a Los Angeles Rabbi, Jacob Kohn, would include them in his New Year's message in 1940, as the Nazi's ravaged Europe and American Jews were wondering about the reports coming out from their European kindred, where he said:

"Our faith is kept alive by the knowledge, founded on long experience, that the arc of history is long and bends toward justice. . . We have seen so many ancient tyrannies pass from earth since Egypt and Rome held dominion that our eyes are directed not to the tragic present, but to the beyond, wherein the arc of history will be found bending toward justice, victory and freedom."

And then in 1958, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. referenced these same words in an article printed in the "Gospel Messenger" and he would refer to them frequently in speeches, such as the one given on the steps of the State Capitol in Montgomery, Alabama, on March 25, 1965, where he said:

"I know you are asking today, "How long will it take?" (Speak, sir) Somebody's asking, "How long will prejudice blind the visions of men, darken their understanding, and drive bright-eyed wisdom from her sacred throne?" How long will justice be crucified, (Speak) and truth bear it?" (Yes, sir) I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, (Yes, sir) however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, (No sir) because "truth crushed to earth will rise again." (Yes, sir) How long? Not long, (Yes, sir) because "no lie can live forever." (Yes, sir) How long? Not long, (All right. How long) because "you shall reap what you sow." (Yes, sir)" "How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

And most recently, Barak Obama, in 2009, again referenced these words as those of Dr. King.

I tell you all of this because I believe it speaks of this innate belief that we, as human beings seem to have, that justice, while it isn't always present, will one day win out. There is a deep inner

yearning for justice and fairness and equality that lives within all of us. There is a part of our human nature, part of our psyche, some little part that exists somewhere up there in our brains that tells us to keep hanging in there, because though it may not look good now, eventually, justice will come, things will be set right and those who have been oppressed, wronged and ill treated will be given their rightful place in the world.

I think justice is what Jesus was really talking about when he told this parable to the Pharisees. You see, he had just been warning them about the dangers of their love of wealth and of their way of justifying themselves before others but having hearts that were an abomination before God. Jesus, especially in the gospel of Luke, was constantly talking about the poor, reaching out to them, reminding them that they too are beloved of God. That God has a special affinity for the poor and oppressed and all those whose hearts are longing for justice. Jesus' God was a God of justice, and all those who sought to be on God's side had better be fighting for justice and equality and freedom for all people.

And so we get this great parable. And it's not so much that the rich man does anything bad to Lazarus. It seems more that he simply does not take notice of him. He ignores him, doesn't even acknowledge his existence. At our Wednesday House Church gathering, it was noted how in Charles Dickens "A Christmas Carol", Scrooge is guilty of a similar sin. He is all caught up in his own dealings and his own business. And when the ghost of his old partner, Jacob Marley comes to him, he says to him how good he was at his business. To that Marley tears off in a rant with those great words, *"Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were, all, my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!"*

Jesus makes it clear. Justice will not be denied. If even it has to wait until the afterlife. But then it will be too late. So you'd better seek it now, while you still can.

The passage in Jeremiah gives us another take on justice. Here we find the prophet in house arrest because he has publically declared that Israel's trouble is due to her injustice. That because her leaders and religious elite have forsaken the poor and gone off to worship other gods of their own creation, God, the God of Israel, has given them over to the hand of the king of Babylon, with whom they have been at war for 10 years, and who has already carried many of their people into exile and slavery. And that the whole nation of Israel is about to collapse. And eventually it does.

Yet, even in this situation, Jeremiah performs a prophetic, symbolic act. He purchases some land from a relative of his. He purchases some land in a place that is about to be annihilated, destroyed, completely obliterated! But he does so, to show that he has hope. That he believes in his God and that this God is a God of justice, who will eventually vindicate his people and bring them home once again. And so, before these men who think he has lost his mind, he goes through all the acts of securing the deed and making the purchase, and ensuring that it will be held safely. For as he says, *"For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land."* Jeremiah knew that the arc of the moral universe is long, but that it bends toward justice.

Do we truly believe in a universe that bends toward justice? In a world that is so wrought with violence and hatred and mass killings, with leaders so polarized and divided that they see one another as evil, when the gap between rich and poor grows wider and wider every day, it is hard to believe in justice. And even if we do, do we believe we have a part in that bending?

Certainly our Christian faith teaches that we do. The abolitionists like Theodore Parker certainly did. The leaders of the civil rights movement in America certainly did. I would suggest that those of us who have been engaged in the fight for equality for people of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered orientations certainly do. I would say that those who were just here in our building yesterday and last week with the Restorative Justice Project certainly believe it.

And I think that we, here, who continue to maintain an almost 200 year old building, which houses a people who practice a faith that is some 2000 years old, who many say is on its way out, certainly must believe that this universe bends toward justice and that the God we worship is pulling on that arc, bending it, and that we, ourselves in fact do, have a part in that bending! We have a part in that bending and we better make sure that we are thinking more like Jeremiah than like that rich man in Jesus' parable.

We need to have hope, we need to have vision and we need to be doing the work of bending that arc of justice. It is too easy to keep our eyes fixated on our own needs, our own business and forget to see the needs of our brothers and sisters all around us. We need to keep caring for the poor, standing up for the rights of all, and reminding the rest of the world that justice will indeed prevail and that we all need to be working on it together. Are you with me? Then let's do it! Amen.