

“He Chose This Route for a Reason”
John 4:3-29
15th Sunday after Pentecost

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Westminster, Greenville
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As I mentioned a moment ago, the pillar of Westminster that we are considering this morning is JUSTICE.

Why justice?

Because working for justice, striving to achieve a more just society has always been a core value and part of the history of this church.

Whether it was our Session passing a resolution, in the 1960s during the Civil Rights movement, to seat anyone of any race who comes to worship here...

Whether it was our church's commitment to alleviating hunger by starting Meals on Wheels here in Greenville, or our church's commitment to people who live with mental illness through our support for Gateway House, or our church's commitment to reaching out to impoverished communities in Africa and the Dominican Republic, our congregation has always had a long-standing commitment to working for justice here, and justice out there.

And it's not just in our history.
It's in our present.

Working with Soteria to help formerly incarcerated men and women get their feet under them as they reintegrate into Greenville...

Working with Habitat for Humanity, and working with Thornwell, and Camp Thornwell, so that vulnerable children in our society will have a safe place to live and learn and grow...

The pillar that we're discussing today is justice...not only because it's part of our past, not only because it's part of our present, but because I see it, and I hope you see it, as part of our future.

What are new ways that we can work for justice both within these church walls and outside our church walls?

Being a church of Open Minds Open Hearts compels us to consider where injustice might be breeding and to do something about it as followers of Christ. What Martin Luther King, Jr. said all those years ago is still true today:

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

Now...having said all that, there was a part of me that was hesitant to preach today.

Why?

Because the topic this morning is justice.

Because we who worship together will not always agree on what justice looks like for any number of important issues in our society.

For example, take the subject of capital punishment: there are people in these pews today who believe that, with due process of law, capital punishment is moral, right, and an appropriate act of justice.

And there are people in these pews here today who would argue that capital punishment is never right, never moral, and by definition an act of injustice.

Faithful Christians in these pews with differing views of justice.

It could be any number of issues, right?

How we approach racism in our society.

How we approach poverty, economic injustice in our society.

How we respond to all the violence in our society.

Each of these topics has something to do with justice...and each topic has the possibility to invite very strong FEELINGS. Emotionally charged subjects. And here we are, coming out of a pandemic that strained the connections within every church, and one of our goals this year is to get RECONNECTED, to build connections, and how do we do that if we do not all agree when it comes to issues around justice?

One solution is to ignore the topic of justice, but that's not really a solution. Because if there's any issue the Bible cares about, it's justice.

It's all over scripture.

First chapter of Isaiah:

“...seek justice, rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan, plead for the widow.”

Or the passage you heard today from Micah...

“...what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

Or how about the Sermon on the Mount?

Jesus opens with the Beatitudes. There's a word that he repeats in the Beatitudes that often gets translated as righteousness:

“Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness...”

Did you know that the Greek word for righteousness also means “justice”?

“Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be filled.”

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of justice, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

So the question is not whether Jesus says it’s important.
And the question is not whether the Bible says it’s important.
And the question is not whether Westminster says it’s important.

The question is how do we say it?
How do we practice it?

When it comes to the pillar of justice...who is God calling us to be?

My colleague Karl Travis, the former pastor at First Presbyterian Church in Ft. Worth, Texas, once said in a sermon:

“It is tempting, these days, to think that being Christian is about taking the right stands on the right issues. I do not believe that Christian faith is first about taking stands...It is first about standing with people. It is about loving people.

“Which is to say that the kind of love to which we are called is no Hallmark love, no sentimental love only. It is a kind of rough and tumble love.”

I LIKE that...

especially the part about taking stands and standing with.

That's a helpful way not only to think about Christian love.
It's a helpful way to think about justice.

Is justice about taking the right stands?
Yes, absolutely, sometimes it is.

I'm reminded of Norman Mineta.
Do you remember Norman Mineta?
Norman Mineta died earlier this year.

He served as President George W. Bush's Transportation Secretary, and was the person who—during the 9/11 attacks—ordered all the planes in the air over the United States to land right away.

He was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2006.
And he served many years in Congress.

In fact, back when I was in high school, President Ronald Reagan signed into law the Civil Liberties Act of 1988. Do you remember what this Act did?

It was an Act passed by our government to help redress the wrong our country committed when it sent Japanese Americans to internment camps after the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

In his remarks prior to the signing, President Reagan said the following:

Congressman Norman Mineta, with us today, was 10 years old when his family was interned.

[Said Mineta]: "My own family was sent first to Santa Anita Racetrack. We showered in the horse paddocks. Some families lived in converted stables... We were then moved to Heart Mountain, Wyoming, where our entire family lived in one small room of a rude tar paper barrack."

President Reagan went on:

Like so many tens of thousands of others, the members of the Mineta family lived in those conditions not for a matter of weeks or months but for 3 long years.

The legislation that I am about to sign provides for a restitution... Yet no payment can make up for those lost years. So, what is most important in this bill has less to do with property than with honor. For here we admit a wrong; here we reaffirm our commitment as a nation to equal justice under the law.¹

It's true.

Sometimes, the pursuit of justice means we take stands.

But the pursuit of justice ALSO is about standing with.

It's about treating every person we encounter as God's beloved child. Which is precisely what happens in our Gospel text today.

In chapter four of John's Gospel, Jesus talks with a Samaritan woman at a well...what's the big deal?

In Jesus' day, there were at least two barriers to that conversation.

¹ [Remarks on Signing the Bill Providing Restitution for the Wartime Internment of Japanese-American Civilians | Ronald Reagan \(reaganlibrary.gov\)](https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/Remarks-on-Signing-the-Bill-Providing-Restitution-for-the-Wartime-Internment-of-Japanese-American-Civilians)

- a) A man, a rabbi, initiating conversation with a woman he did not know;
- b) A Jew, being friendly with a Samaritan...

Now many commentators through the years have mishandled this text, assuming that “because she has had five husbands,” this Samaritan woman was, at best, something like the biblical version of Elizabeth Taylor.

That’s not what’s going on here.

When it came to marriage, the woman at the well would have had no power.

And power is always the crucial dynamic if we’re talking about justice.

Who knows what happened to each of her husbands along the way.
Did they die?
Did they divorce her?
We don’t know.

What we do know is this Samaritan woman would have been extremely VULNERABLE, being passed from one husband to another like she was a piece of property, with no voice or vote in the matter.

And when Jesus treats this woman with the dignity and respect she deserves, he is saying to his disciples:

**It matters who we stand with,
who we talk with,
who we listen to...**

That’s an important part of justice.

Not just taking stands.

But standing with people.

The mother of one of my mentors in ministry died last month. I read her obituary with fascination, because it became immediately clear to me how my friend and colleague and mentor in ministry—received some of the early seeds of his Christian faith.

Dorothy was the name of my colleague's mother.
And part of her obituary read like this:

In the early 1960's, when Tulsa was still racially segregated, Dorothy served on the board of Dunbar Day Nursery in north Tulsa, the first preschool in a predominantly Black neighborhood.

One day her children came home from school to find their dad home and their mom gone. When they asked where she was, he replied grimly, "She's probably in jail right now."

Dorothy had joined Black friends from the board in a sit-in at a lunch counter in Tulsa to demand that it be integrated. The sit-in was successful in achieving its goal, and she was not arrested. She later told her children that she was scared to death to disobey the law, but her faith and conscience told her, "Sometimes there's a higher law."²

It matters who we stand with, right?

So justice has something to do, at times, with taking stands.
And it also has something to do with standing with.
And it also has something to do with UNDERSTANDING.

² [Dorothy Greenwood Gibbons Obituary \(1922 - 2022\) - Tulsa, OK - Tulsa World \(legacy.com\)](#)

With making the effort to get to know someone's situation, their particular place in this world and how they came to that place.

With refusing to lump everyone into a broad category.
I can just hear the disciples saying, "Oh, those Samaritans...we know what they're like."

And I can see Jesus responding, "Do you? Have you really made an effort to get to know the Samaritans next door?"

Again, it was King who said that one of the great tragedies of life is that "more often [people] seek to live in monologue rather than dialogue."

I wonder if dialogue was the reason Jesus went through Samaria.

Because the most fascinating part of our story from John just may be verse 4, when John writes that Jesus, on his way from Judea to Galilee, "had to go through Samaria."

Had to go?
Jesus didn't have to go through Samaria.
Jesus could have gotten to Galilee using another route.

When John writes that Jesus "had to go through Samaria," he's not making a geographical statement. He's making a THEOLOGICAL statement.

Why did he have to go that way?

John doesn't tell us, but my guess is this:
Jesus was hoping for a dialogue.

He was hoping he would find himself in a position to talk with a Samaritan.

He was hoping to show his disciples that proximity matters,
 that who you stand with and next to matters,
 that understanding all children of God—who they are,
 where they come from, what their life is like...it matters, especially
 when it comes to working for justice.

So let me ask you something:
 Have you ever been to Samaria?
 I don't mean the land that used to be called Samaria.

I mean Samaria...
 Samaria could be any number of places.
 Samaria could be a place where people won't always think like
 you.

Samaria could be a neighborhood or a part of this country or
 another country where people don't have the same background as you.

A place where, gosh, it would be a whole lot easier if you could
 avoid that place...but you have this feeling that God may want you
 there.

Have you ever been to Samaria?

Sometimes Samaria can be found within your own church.

When I picture the future of our church, a vision for our church,
 one of the images I have in mind is of our congregation engaged in
 discussions together about the important issues of our day.

Whether it's issues of race, or poverty, or violence, or other topics
 that have to do with justice—I have a picture in mind of our purple

congregation being able to discuss those topics with one another, knowing when we enter the conversation that we will not all agree, but treating one another with dignity and respect, approaching such discussions with Open Minds Open Hearts, because we believe the Holy Spirit works not in monologue, but in dialogue...

Have you ever been to Samaria?

Maybe you read in today's Harbinger about the Interfaith Justice Ministry that's going on here in Greenville, over 18 local congregations involved.

Have you ever been to Samaria?
Most people, they avoid Samaria.
But what about you?

When it comes to justice, do you think God might want to take you on a journey that goes through Samaria?

I hope so.

Because according to today's text,
even though it may be a tiring journey,
and even though it could be an uncomfortable journey,
Samaria...is where we'll find Jesus on his journey.

Amen.