

God's Dream for Justice

by Pastor Patricia Geiseman

Epiphany 3

January 26-27, 2019

Luke 4:14-21

On January 2nd, Ed and I took the train into the city to see "Fiddler on the Roof" at the Cadillac Palace Theater. The tickets were a gift from our older son and his fiancée. Alex knows how much we enjoy this musical. It was extremely well done, and we had really good seats. I have seen this musical several times and never tire of it.

"Fiddler on the Roof" became really popular with the help of the film in 1971. The story was written in Yiddish by Sholem Aleichem and originally titled "Tevye and his Daughters." It was set in 1905 in the small Jewish Russian village of Anatevka.

Throughout the story, Tevye tries to maintain his Jewish religious and cultural tradition as outside influences encroach on the family's lives. His three oldest daughters wish to choose their own husbands, to marry for love—a break from tradition. In one of the best scenes Tevye conjures up a dream of long-dead grandmother Tzietl, which Golde interprets as a blessing for the daughter to marry the young tailor she loves instead of the old butcher she does not.

At the end of the dramatic scene, Golde asks Tevye, "How did Grandmother Tzietl look?"

"Pretty good for someone who has been dead for thirty years!"

Tevye's dream plan worked! Blessing was given! The daughter could marry the man she loved. Tevye tells his wife, "Love, it's the new style."

As the story moves forward, it becomes harder for Tevye to hang on to the tradition that gives his life meaning and order. "Without our tradition," Tevye declares, "our lives are as shaky as a fiddler on the roof!"

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus is in the synagogue. This is his first official teaching. Jesus has been blessed by Simeon and Anna, baptized by John, endorsed as God's Chosen One. He has been sent into the wilderness for prayer and discernment. And, now this is it. The beginning of his ministry.

And Luke makes it clear that Jesus was rooted in TRADITION: the tradition of the Sabbath, the Scripture, and the Synagogue.

Jesus was at home here. The synagogue services were informal, as the men gathered for prayers, readings, comments, and alms giving. It was likely Jesus was surrounded by men he had known his whole life ... relatives, brothers, neighbors, and friends.

Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah of the Servant of God. The men in the room knew the words by heart.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has appointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Luke 4:18-19, NRSV)

"Ah yes!" The old Jewish men nodded. "That is right, and we are waiting."

Then Jesus sat down and shocked the assembly: "*Today* this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Luke's message to his community—and to ours—is this: The Dream of God shared long ago by the prophet Isaiah will be lived out in the ministry and mission, words and wisdom of this One, Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus—who is rooted in tradition and filled with the Spirit—will bring good news, release, recovery, new vision, and a year of the Lord's favor. His year of ministry will be the Jubilee of God. Freedom from injustice.

And, this life-changing mission will continue through the work of the church.

The Dream of God's justice lived out in Jesus lives on through us.

Oftentimes we understand justice as deserved punishment for our sins, the opposite of mercy, as loving forgiveness despite our guilt. Most often in the Bible, the opposite of God's justice is not God's mercy but our injustice.

As modern Americans, we are the most individualistic culture in human history. There is much good in this: We have values, rights, choices, and opportunities.

But none of us here is self made- we have inherited much of what determines our health and intelligence, we were brought up in families, and received education. We have had good and bad breaks. There is a whole web of circumstances that have brought us to who we are today. [1]

Like Jesus, Luke, and Tevye, we have roots in tradition, religious and cultural. And like those before us, it can be difficult to discern when to let go and open up and when to hold on for dear life.

How does the tradition we hold on to match with God's dream of justice for everyone? Does our tradition welcome or withhold?

This past Monday was Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. Many people had the day off from work to remember the work and life of Dr. King, who shared in the Dream of God's

justice. King wrote in 1958 “We never get anywhere in this world without the forces of history and individual persons in the background helping us to get there.” [2]

Last fall my younger son, Gregg, began a new position as a firefighter/paramedic with the Memphis Fire Department. For him it is a *dream job* to be part of such a large and lively city. In November of last year, Ed and I went to visit him. While we were there, we also visited the National Civil Rights Museum, which is in the old Lorraine Motel where Dr. King was assassinated. It was a surreal feeling to stand in front of that space. Like going back in time. The museum is informational and impactful as it tells the story.

It was eye-opening. There are powerful, poignant places that ask for the utmost respect, complete silence, and no photography. Even though Dr. King is highly featured in the museum, I noticed how many thousands of people stood with him and around him, with courage and commitment.

This past Monday the news shared a hopeful quote from King that I have heard many times, and you no doubt have, too: “*Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.*”

As I read more about these famous words, I learned that King himself marked these words with quotes. They were originally written in 1853 by Theodore Parker, a Unitarian minister, who called for the abolition of slavery.

So, one hundred years later, Dr. King shared this vision and this hope.

Countless courthouses all over the world include a statue of Lady Justice near the entrance. She goes way back to the Roman goddess Justitia. Since the sixteenth century, Lady Justice most often wears a blindfold. The idea behind the blindfold is that justice should be applied without regard to wealth, power, or other visible signs of status. The blindfold makes Lady Justice impartial.

But there is another way of looking at justice.

Justice is not blind but sees with a new vision.

Interestingly to me, the Lady Justice in front of the Memphis Courthouse *does not* have a blindfold. She holds two scales, one in each hand, as she discerns what is fair.

I like this better. God’s dream of Justice, Shalom, well-being for everyone and the earth invites us to open our eyes. To look again at injustices and consider our place in them. To see the oppressed, the captive, those in the dark, those in need of a new way.

Like Isaiah, Jesus, Paul, Tevye, and Martin Luther King. we are rooted in tradition. Our faith tradition is one that expands to include others. Just as Tevye told Golde, “Love, it’s the new thing!”, love is ALWAYS the new thing!

We can see how complicated justice can be. And how badly we can treat each other! The multilayered confrontation in front of the Lincoln Memorial this past week was confounding. You probably saw the clips of the rally that could make us wonder about the arc of the moral universe. Catholic High School students vs. Hebrew Israelites vs. a Native American Elder. There was an abundance of disparaging, damaging, disrespect.

Sometimes, it seems freedoms that were intended to include and welcome, exclude and reject.

I would ask each of the three groups: What tradition are you holding on to?

Justice calls for vision, not blindness.

This past week on NPR Terry Gross interviewed the co-hosts and co producers of a podcast titled “Ear Hustle,” which is prison slang for eavesdropping or being nosy. The podcast features interviews with inmates from San Quentin talking about their daily life—things like living with a cell mate in a tiny cell, what it’s like to be in solitary confinement, the heartbreak of being a parent separated from your child, how everything inside is separated by race, and so on. [3]

“Ear Hustle” was co-hosted and co-produced by Nigel Poor, a professor of photography at California State University who volunteered at the prison, and Earlonne Woods, who was serving a life sentence because of the three-strikes law. In November of last year, Governor Jerry Brown commuted Wood’s sentence, and Woods regained his freedom after serving twenty-one years.

The whole long podcast was fascinating.

The compelling part of the story is how people can change. And what enables the change. Earlonne grew up in the tradition of not caring; he went to prison the first time at age seventeen. At that time, prison life reinforced the tradition of not caring.

When he was released, he continued the violent lifestyle and ended back in prison. Then something remarkable happened. After fourteen years into his sentence, Earlonne joined a restorative justice group. The group activity included healing circles. Here’s how Earlonne described it:

It really wasn’t until I got into a healing circle that I understood what it was like to be a survivor of crime because in these circles you’re sitting across from crime victims, you’re sitting across from law enforcement, you’re sitting across from politicians ... having these intimate conversations why you went down this path or what it was like to be a survivor. And you really get a better understanding of your impact that you’ve personally had on people in society. People telling their stories about being robbed or losing a child, losing a loved one. It puts you in a whole different space.

This changed his life.

Professor Poor chose to work with Earlonne because she said he was a good observer. And she saw something possible in him.

Earlonne, the freed prisoner, and Nigel, the photography professor, continue to work together. They plan to interview people who are transitioning back into society from prison.

Professor Nigel said, now that Earlonne is free, they can work together as real equals. They will continue as co-creators, co-producers and co-hosts.

So, we meet for worship, like Jesus long ago. Scripture is read, comments are made, prayers are prayed, and alms are received. We come together as a healing circle.

And we ponder ... our traditions here and at home and as citizens. What do we hold on to?

In the healing circle of Abundant Love, we are not blindfolded but freed with Divine Vision to see each other and ourselves in new ways.

And when we do, the long arc of the moral universe bends a bit more toward justice.

Amen.

Resources:

[1] Borg, Marcus. *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith*, HarperOne, 2003, p. 128.

[2] King, Martin Luther, Jr. "Out of the Long Night," *The Gospel Messenger*, 1958.

[3] "Ear Hustle," earhustlesq.com

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Reflection questions

- *Jesus was shaped by God's Word; he was rooted in his faith tradition. What tradition has shaped you?*
- *What roots keep you connected to the Source of Life?*
- *Do you ever feel "uprooted"... wondering if the teaching and traditions of the past really hold?*
- *Jesus made God's Dream for Justice visible. Where do you see this Dream lived out today?*