

Justice isn't just 'somewhere over the rainbow'

About five minutes into the film 'Wizard of Oz', after Dorothy's rather unpleasant incident involving her dog, Toto, and the town spinster, Miss Gulch. Dorothy's Aunt Em tells her to **"find yourself a place where you won't get into any trouble"**. This prompts Dorothy to wander off by herself, musing to her dog Toto, 'Some place where there isn't any trouble.' Do you suppose there is such a place, Toto? There must be. It's not a place you can get to by a boat, or a train. It's far, far away. Behind the moon, beyond the rain...", at which point she begins singing the now well known standard 'somewhere over the rainbow'.

We all yearn for a just world, a place where trouble no longer exists. But **is justice always somewhere over the rainbow?**

God's vision of Shalom and Sodzo is glorious in its scope & inspires us. The danger for us is that it can seem too big, too far away, somewhere over the rainbow.

What I've been loving about the Restore series. Each week we have been looking at God's saving work from a different angle. We have found that it is not about sitting around dreaming of a better place, but that God is calling us to participate with him in making shalom/sodzo a reality in our lives... God's Justice isn't just 'somewhere over the rainbow' - it's active in real ways and he wants us in on it.

Story of the boy who broke the neighbour's window

- 2 extremes
 - parent lets the boy off - how can you not care
 - parent lashes out with great fury - abusive situation
- 3rd option
 - Parent exercises some restorative justice
 - Find a punishment that will work in a restoring way
 - mow lawns of neighbour for summer
 - hope that each week boy's interactions with neighbour - become sorry
 - the punishment was not for its own sake, It was a means towards reconciliation and growth

Our first reading Hosea 11:

The prophets were people who proclaimed God's words to the leadership of Israel and Judah before during and after Israel's destruction and Judah's later exile to Babylon. They were recorded and can be found in the second half of the OT.

Often we prefer to skip the prophets - too much judgment, too much fire and brimstone we say. But the Old Testament prophets actually present an ancient and yet always vital perspective of who God is.

They provide a key to understanding God's justice:

Abraham Heschel wrote "Indeed, the sort of crimes and even the amount of delinquency that fill the prophets of Israel with dismay do not go beyond that which we regard as normal, as typical ingredients of social dynamics. To us a single act of injustice--cheating in business, exploitation of the poor--is slight; to the prophets, a disaster. To us injustice is injurious to the welfare of the people; to the prophets it is a deathblow to existence: to us, an episode; to them, a catastrophe, a threat to the world."

We see through the prophets a picture of God forming: The more you love, the more anguish you feel. The more you love the more upsetting this world will be. The more outraged you'll be with

injustice, senseless violence, exploitation, meanness and cruelty. **The more love, the more wrath.**

We also see a picture of sin forming in the prophets:

Ultimately the root cause of sin is losing sight of who God is.

God doesn't care/isn't there/can't act

Richard Rohr: It is quite helpful to see sin, like addiction, as a very destructive disease, instead of merely something that is culpable, punishable, and "makes God unhappy." If sin indeed makes God unhappy, it is because God loves us, desires nothing more than our happiness, and wills the healing of our disease.

Hosea 11 - Israel the wayward child

God is the wounded father at the end of his tether at Israel 'his son's' complete disregard.

You get a sense of the great anguish of God as parent. You also recognise the lostness and blindness of Israel, who give God lip service but otherwise ignore him. And God is torn between devastating punishment and compassion for his child.

Like in our story of the boy who broke the window, we create this false tension between God's justice and God's mercy and forgiveness. That is, God will either punish you or forgive you. Its one or the other, either mercy or justice, heaven or hell.

But when we understand 'restorative justice', we can see that Justice is mercy. The punishment is a means to sin being put an end to.

And really, could we describe love in any other way? Love isn't solely comprised of mercy. Nor is love solely comprised of punishment. Love involves both seasons. Just ask any parent raising a child. There is a time, when punishment has done its redemptive work, that the parent "moves" toward grace and mercy. As God does in Hosea 11. But the parent isn't "changing her mind" about the child. Reneging, caving or reversing course. No, the season of punishment and the season of mercy are a part of a single unified stance toward the child. Love.

After speaking words of strong judgment, God sings out a lovesong to Israel. "How can I give you up?"

It is the logical outworking of the claim that "God is love" (1 John 4.8). After judgment, God cries out "How can I give you up?" The compassion of God is the great counterbalance to the wrath of God.

That, it seems to me, is the crux of the matter. You either think God feels this way about humanity or you don't. You either think God will give up on us eternally or that deep within the heart of God there is an eternal commitment to never give up.

I think that God doesn't give up. At the end of the day it's pretty simple: I trust in the God who sings after judgment 'How can I give you up?'

Matthew 12: The God of love who cannot give us up - has come to us and shown us his extraordinary way of setting the world to right:

“Look at my Servant, whom I have chosen.
He is my Beloved, who pleases me.
I will put my Spirit upon him,
and he will proclaim justice to the nations.

He will not fight or shout
or raise his voice in public.
He will not crush the weakest reed
or put out a flickering candle.
Finally he will cause justice to be victorious.

And his name will be the hope
of all the world.”

In Jesus, God shows us a clear and walkable path towards justice, towards shalom.

He will bring justice. Is it an easy path? No. In God’s strength, is it walkable? Yes.

The story of the Car Thief

A young man steals your car, takes it for a joyride and causes irreparable damage to car.

The man is picked up by the police, charged with car theft, reckless driving and is given a just prison term.

Should I be satisfied with the result? It feels right to me as the victim to see the wrong-doer be punished. It’s emotionally satisfying.

Most often the justice we know ends there. Its called retributive justice. Pay back. Tit for tat. An eye for an eye.

But has God’s justice been done me? Has the thief had God’s justice done him? Even if my car is restored to me through insurance, is the account settled between me and the thief? I may forgive him, but is the wrong removed? Are we reconciled? No.

A just result can’t be found through punishment alone. No doubt punishment is part of the picture. But, as any victim knows, justice isn’t reducible to punishing the perpetrators.

Crimes (and any wrong doing for that matter) create relational and psychological wounds that punishment cannot heal. Punishment is only effective when it leads the perpetrator towards repentance.

How hard it is for us to move beyond ‘tit for tat’ pay back.

As someone who hopes in God’s shalom...**whether I like it or not, I have a commitment and responsibility to my neighbour to see restoration happen.**

Matthew 5:43-45 Love your enemies

“You have heard the law that says, ‘Love your neighbour’ and hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike.

I remain a man wronged. Who can set right the wrong? The thief and only the thief, nobody but the man that did me the wrong. God can move the person to right the wrong, but God himself cannot right it without the person.

God cannot bring about justice without our participation.

Suppose the thief is guilt stricken and has it in his mind to repent. He comes to me and says he is sorry he stole it, and begs me to accept his apology as a beginning of

reconciling: Now this is starting to look like justice. Should I not feel that he has gone far to make right his wrongs - he has done more to make up for the injury he had inflicted upon me, than just bringing my car back to me.

We have seen from the prophets that: God's anguish and wrath over injustice is an indicator of His great love for us - our God who cannot give us up.

The root of our waywardness is losing sight of who God is and how much he loves us.

We have made some hypothetical headway along the path to justice that Jesus leads us on through our Car Thief exercise:

Justice can't be found through punishment alone. Punishment should only be a means to reconciliation.

Whether I like it or not, I have a commitment to my neighbour to see restoration happen.

Justice requires our willing participation. God cannot bring about justice without our participation.

Communion:

"Look at my Servant, whom I have chosen.
He is my Beloved, who pleases me.
I will put my Spirit upon him,
and he will proclaim justice to the nations.

He will not fight or shout
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In communion we are accepted and welcomed into God's presence. Our host Jesus invites us to his table. In the freedom of this sacred space I invite you into a time of personal confession:

George MacDonald: In Jesus' coming to be with us, in his life and teaching, in his death and resurrection Jesus shows us a new way, that looks like death but leads to new life. It restores us. He could not do it without us, but when we accept him, he leads us up to the Father's knee: he makes us make atonement. Learning Christ, we are not only sorry for what we have done wrong, we not only turn from it and hate it, but we become able to offer our whole being to God to whom by deepest right it belongs.

Take nourishment from the bread, Christ's body broken for you.

As we serve the grape juice, representing the blood of Christ, I invite you to consider what issues of injustice are pressing on your heart and mind:

Have I injured anyone? With Jesus to aid my justice, new risen with him from the dead, shall I not make good amends? Have I failed in love to my neighbour? Shall I not now love them with an infinitely better love than was possible to me before?

Desmond Tutu: We have this extraordinary revelation in Jesus, exhilarating really, that human beings have this extraordinary capacity for good. And that is what we must ultimately hold before the world.