

Seeking Justice in a Brutal World

From the series: The Human Face of God

Text: Matthew 3:2

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

The subject of the sermon, this week, "Seeking Justice in a Brutal World," is always announced a week ahead of time and it's usually put together many weeks ahead of time, but I like to discipline myself to announce it at least the week ahead of time because it sensitizes me to the things that I encounter in the course of the week. This week it was a couple of pieces on the evening news, on a couple of different evenings: one about a therapist who is working with children through art therapy, trying to get them to bring to expression the fear and the rage and the anger that they feel, children who have witnessed the murder and dismembering of a father or a mother, little tykes, and the therapist saying that, with what they have been through, they have been scarred psychically for the rest of their lives. One bright-looking little fella who is asked, "Can you ever forgive the Russian soldier who killed your mother?" simply says, "No." Think of such a world in which we live where that is a part of the puzzle.

Then, on another evening, there was a piece about a Russian town. The scene opened with some old Russian gentlemen sitting on their stools on the ice, ice-fishing, and I think the cameraman very purposely focused on a fish that had just been caught, still flopping. One sees the fish in the death throes of the dance of death, flexing its body, striving for another breath or swallow, but obviously dying. And then the camera switched to Katja, an attractive young woman who has been driven into prostitution, something she said she would never have thought of, except that she has a two-year-old daughter for whom she must provide and there is no other way for her. You see the night scenes with her along the road with the truckers stopping, negotiating for her services. Then it switches back to the old men on the ice who talk about the young men in the town, none of whom have employment, all of whom have been driven to thievery, to drugs, to alcoholism, and the old men say, "We didn't have it very good, but we had a subsistence. These young men - they don't have any place to go." The camera pans three obsolete, old monster factories, factories that once were productive and gave the people of the town work and at least a subsistence wage, but factories now obsolete, inefficient, outmoded and outdated which have not been able to make it in the most recent revolution in Russia, the revolution to the free

market. And so, you have human tragedy of that sort, human beings with no way to support themselves in a situation where, generations before them, people lived and at least were able to negotiate life. But now it seems so dark and so hopeless. I watched that piece and I thought, "Dear God, it's a brutal world." There are so many people that hurt so much and so many that fall through the cracks.

In literature, I dislike stream of consciousness pieces; I can never understand them, but you're getting a stream of consciousness sermon this morning, because I went from Chechnya to that Russian town to a night in Boston in the 60s when I saw "Dr. Zhivago," which remains one of my favorite films, and I saw the Czarist Russia with its obscene opulence, its wealth, and its insensitivity to the suffering peasants, the masses, and then the Revolution and the liberators who overthrew the Czarist regime and established their Socialist government. I can remember my disillusionment when I came to realize that the liberators, liberated through violence, became violent oppressors fully as deadly as the regime that they had replaced. It was kind of a coming of age for me when I realized that violence and oppression are not the prerogative of the haves nor the have-nots, but of both. Whoever happens to have power, it seems it eventuates in oppressiveness, domination and violence and human tragedy. I thought how interesting that the Socialist revolution that overthrew the Czarist regime and brought in the Socialist pattern under which those old fishing men had at least subsisted has been replaced by another revolution, one we have applauded, the revolution of the free market, with its competition which has put out of commission the whole town, creating more human tragedy and despair.

Now before you budding entrepreneurs who have broken into the Russian market turn me off, and you Left bleeding-heart liberals start applauding, let me plead - I'm not making a political statement, nor an economic statement. I am talking about the injustice, about the brutality of the human situation. I'd like to have you join me in trying to feel it somewhat this morning, because this isn't about the free market or about Marxism; this is about the human situation which is so marked by so much pain. That may seem a modest goal, but at least it brings me to deal with the biblical lessons this morning in a way that I never would have done growing up and in my early years. I was brought up, as I'm sure you were, with the wise adage that you never, in polite company, talk about religion or politics. And I was trained and nurtured in the understanding that religion and politics don't mix.

Can you imagine my dismay and my amazement when I come to realize that the Hebrew prophets that formed the background of the Christian Gospel and the Christian Gospel whose forerunner was John the Baptist and whose incarnation was Jesus Christ and whose apostle was Paul, that that whole story arose out of political and economic situations marked by brutality and injustice? I guess if you would ask me to mark some of the most significant ways in which my understanding of the Gospel of the Christian tradition has changed, I would have to say probably as much as anything it is that understanding that what John the

Baptist was about and what Jesus was about was social, political, economic reality that was marked by injustice and brutality, and that growing up, for me the Gospel was something that had to do with the soul, that had to do with the spirituality of life, that had largely to do with my individual relationship with God. It had to do with the way of salvation, it had to do with a way of life here and a faith commitment which would lead to heaven over there. And then I wake up to discover that what John and Jesus were about was about the concrete, earthly reality of politics and economics, about empire and about slavery, about human suffering. That amazes me and that means that I can no longer not mix religion and politics, because my religion has political and economic implications so deeply entwined because it arose out of that matrix.

We live in the generation that knows more about the first century than any generation before us, since the first century itself. Through textual studies, through archeological discoveries, through cross-cultural understanding of peasant societies in the time when Rome ruled the world, we have an understanding of that social, political, economic context in which John brought his message as an apocalyptic prophet, in which Jesus pointed to the kingdom of God. And we understand today that what is going on in Russia today was going on in Galilee two thousand years ago.

For twelve hundred years in the Galilee, little villages dotted the hilltops and the valleys of the Galilee, and people lived in extended communities, little villages, able to subsist, able to live. Subsistence, not surplus. They made it. They just made it. But, they made it. Twelve hundred years in the Galilee, generation after generation, cultivating a little grass, raising some livestock, they made it. And then came the day of empire, the Roman legions, followed by the Roman tax collectors and the Roman entrepreneurs. Then subsistence was not enough; there had to be surplus, when conscripted labor was necessary for the building of the public works in the new cities that were being built and where taxation got real serious, such that many were put into debt, needing to borrow which would jeopardize their future, making them even more a debtor until finally their land was foreclosed on them and they became landless and homeless and hopeless. It was happening all over the Galilee, and Perea and the environs of Jerusalem. They were an occupied state by an imperial power that ruled rather well, but rule as all empires rule - for their own aggrandizement and, therefore, the people grinding under that system knew increasingly the pain and the brutality of the human situation.

They also became ripe for a messenger, a prophet. They also became ripe for a John the Baptist who, in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets of Amos and Micah and Isaiah and Jeremiah, cried out for justice, for mercy, for the righteousness of the covenant of the people of God. There was a ready audience for that kind of call and John the Baptist was a fiery prophet who was steeped in his old covenant, who was angry, full of vengeance.

Who can blame him? He was probably one of those vengeful children of a vengeful God, but who can blame him? Who can see the injustice, the tragedies, the hurt and the pain of the human situation? Who can contemplate it for very long without feeling something inside that rises up and says, "It is wrong and it must be righted." John, reflective of so much of the thinking of his day, felt that because he knew God, the God of Israel, the God of justice, the God of righteousness - because he knew this God, he knew this God could not countenance this thing; he could not let this thing go on. He knew that, somehow or other, the God of Israel would have to make some dramatic move, some direct intervention to right the wrongs and to establish the righteous and to put down the oppressor.

There were others who had different voices. There was the Qumran community, the Essenes who went out into the wilderness, fasted and prayed and waited for God to do something. They left society. There were the Zealots, the guerillas who were trying, through guerilla activity, to undercut the Roman authority. But John, a prophet in the mold of the old prophets, brought his protest publicly. He preached his message at the banks of the Jordan; he called people to be baptized for the cleansing of their sin in a ritual act and to go back into Judea and the environs of Jerusalem and to wait for God to act. John was in that Messianic mode and it has continued to crop up now and then through the centuries and we got a little taste of it even at the turn of the millennium, that mode that says God is going to act, God is going to do something. Obviously, the God of justice will intervene.

The problem with messianism, the problem with that apocalyptic anticipation of the intervention of God, is that it can always be proven wrong, and for two thousand years it's been proven wrong. Every date that was set, every growing expectation to the present has been disappointed. And so, one wonders about the world; one wonders what does one do? Does one simply reconcile oneself to its brutality? Does one simply accept the fact that that's the way the human situation is and ever will be?

I was thinking about Karl Marx and Lenin. They had an idea and that idea spread like wildfire around the globe, once they got it started. They had to start it with violence and they had to keep it going with violence. But, it was an idea of another kind of world. It was an idea of a classless society in which there would be no need, in which everyone according to his ability would offer and everyone would receive, according to his need. It was Utopian and Utopian comes from *utopos*, no place. This has never existed; it's no place. This idea has no rootage, no home. It's never landed; it has never become concrete. But the idea that Marx and Lenin had did catch fire. It did involve millions of people in that movement which was strong enough for us to get pretty worried about it. It was strong enough for us to engage in a Cold War over those decades. Thank God we had more muscle, more dollars, more technology, we were able to out-spend them and finally spend them into bankruptcy and we proved that that political,

economic system doesn't work and the free market economy triumphs. But, what fascinates me is that there was an idea, an idea that took hold. We say we can't do anything. I feel that way. And yet, there was an idea and a vision and, By Golly, it swept the earth. So then, I wonder. Of course it was flawed, of course it was violent, of course it became oppressive, of course it was as brutal as that which it replaced. I'm not arguing, making no apology for it. I'm only saying look what happened when an idea captivated the masses. I wonder if anybody has an idea.

You know, the Gospel that we proclaim was a Gospel that came out of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ and it was a word to those who were oppressed, to those who were out of sync, to those who were out of luck, to those who didn't have a prayer. That's where the Gospel was born. Now we wear the Roman toga; now we call the shots. What would happen if we had an idea? What would happen if someone had an idea as to how to change the landscape of the world and it could be implemented, because you need power to implement, but without violence? What if somebody here got an idea about how things could be other than they are so there wouldn't be so much brutality, so there wouldn't be so much hurt, so many people would not fall through the cracks, so our structures and our systems, political and economic and social, didn't exclude so many and didn't leave so many driven to all kinds of self-destructive behavior?

I don't know, but I wonder about it because I am convinced that what John was about and what Jesus was about was about the concrete reality of everyday life. The kingdom of heaven was to come on earth; it was to be the kingdom of God; it was to be the way human society was organized if God were calling the shots. John was waiting for God to come, but God doesn't come, God doesn't intervene, God isn't going to intervene. It's no use waiting for God; God is waiting for us.

I think we give up. I think we just think that's the way it is and we better keep our powder dry and we'd better stay strong, and if anybody comes around with a cockeyed idea that would too radically alter the whole situation, there's always the CIA.

I don't know, friends, but I think a lot about it. I know in the meantime there is Micah 6:8, "What does the Lord require but that you do justly, love mercy, walk humbly with your God." And I know here and there, we can do a good thing, and I think all of us here would and we do, but you know, it's the Big Picture, it's the way everything is organized and structured. It's systemic. We could all sell all and give all and we wouldn't alter, ultimately, anything. It's the Big Picture. It's the *idea*. We'll have to see next week if Jesus had an idea. We'll continue. In the meantime, let it disturb you a bit.