

Title: "The Blessing of Justice"
Text: Psalm 41:1-3; Micah 6:6-8

This summer on the Sundays on which I have been preaching,
-we have been exploring what it means to be "blessed by
God."

We have been unpacking the great "priestly blessing" which
God gave to Moses and Aaron to speak over His people.

Let's speak the words again over one another today,
-and receive from one another these words which God still
wants to make real in our lives.

"The LORD bless you and keep you;
The LORD make His face to shine on you and be gracious to
You;
The LORD turn His face toward you and give you peace."

So far this summer, we have explored the blessing of God's
forgiveness, and the blessing of God's peace.

Today I want to talk to you about the blessing of God's justice.

In Psalm 41:1-3, David writes:

"Blessed are those who have regard for the weak;
the LORD delivers them in times of trouble.
The LORD protects them and preserves them;
They are counted among the blessed in the land,
He does not give them over to the desire of their foes.
The LORD sustains them on their sickbed
And restores them from their bed of illness."

Let's pray.

I don't know if you noticed it particularly as I read David's
words from Psalm 41,
-but the name of God, YHWH, or "LORD" is repeated three
times just as it is in the priestly blessing we proclaimed
together a moment ago.

In the blessing we proclaimed,
“The LORD bless you and keep you.
The LORD make his face shine on you.
The LORD turn his face toward you...”

And here in the same way, as David speaks of the person who is blessed by God,
-he says, “The LORD delivers him in times of trouble,
The LORD will protect him and preserve his life.
The LORD will sustain him on his sickbed.”

Do you see the way David is patterning his blessing on the priestly blessing?

And David says, this is the threefold blessing that God gives to the person who has regard for the weak.

And who is meant here when David speaks of the “weak?”
-Well, all throughout the Bible there is what some commentators have called the “quartet of the vulnerable.”

The quartet is made up of the widows, the orphans, the aliens, and the poor.”

And by aliens, we are not talking about creatures from outer space, but immigrants who are foreigners from another place, and not native Israelites.

But these four groups of people consistently come under the category of “the weak” in the Bible.
-They are the most vulnerable ones in the community.
-They are the ones who most easily fall through the cracks.
-They are the ones who have no one to speak up for them.

When a woman lost her husband in the ancient world,
-unless she had a son who could inherit the property and carry on the name, she was in deep trouble.
-Because she could not inherit the property herself.
-It went back to the husband’s family or closest relative.
-So she was at the mercy of the family, or of the community of the town in which she lived.

And most families and towns looked after their own.

-They took care of the widows.

-We see a beautiful example of this in the Book of Ruth.

And that's the way it should be.

-That's exactly what David is proclaiming here.

-That God cares about the weak, and God cares about the widow and the orphan and the immigrant, and the poor, and so those who do the same will receive God's blessings.

-The LORD will look after them when they are in trouble, when they are on their sickbed, when they are facing opposition.

"Blessed is the one," David says here, "who shares the heart of God and takes care of the vulnerable.

-For they will be blessed themselves as God takes care of them."

And my friends, this is in a nutshell what the Bible means when it speaks of justice.

And there are two Hebrew words which are often translated in English as "justice."

-One is the Hebrew word "Mishpat."

-And it is the word for "rectifying justice,"

-that is, giving people their rights, punishing those who do wrong, caring for victims and providing restitution.

-Mishpat is about rectifying the injustices we perpetrate on one another.

-But the other word in Hebrew for justice is: "Tzedakah."

-And it is about "being just," or acting rightly towards others.

-It's about treating people fairly, and equitably, and with generosity of spirit in the first place.

That's why it is also sometimes translated as "righteousness."

-It's about living rightly toward God and one another so that "mishpat" is not necessary.

Living in such a “just way” towards others that there is nothing to rectify by the law.

- Widows and orphans are being taken care of generously.
- Foreigners in our midst are being welcomed kindly, and treated fairly, and honored as people.
- The poor and infirm and elderly and injured are being guarded and guided and sheltered and fed.

Living like that is “tzedeqah,” and David says that the people who live like that will be blessed by God.

- They will experience the blessing of God’s “tzedeqah.”
- He will guard and guide and shelter and feed them when they are down and out, when they are sick or infirm, when they are older and weaker.

The trouble is, in every generation, we don’t live like that.

- All the way back to Adam and Eve, and Cain and Abel.
- All the way down to the United States of America in 2018.
- We don’t live “tzedeqah justice” and so we need more and more “mishpat justice.”

Isaiah lamented for every generation including his own, saying:

Isaiah 59:8-9

“The way of peace they do not know;
there is no justice in their paths.
They have turned them into crooked roads;
No one who walks in them will know peace.
So justice (mishpat) is far from us,
And righteousness (tzedeqah) does not reach us.”

Two weeks ago we preached on the blessing of God’s peace,

- God’s “shalom.”
- Do you see here in Isaiah how God’s peace and God’s justice are intimately connected with one another.

He says we don’t know God’s peace, because we don’t walk in paths of justice.

- And there was a bumper sticker out a number of years ago that said, “If you want peace, pursue justice.”
- And there is real truth in that. Isaiah would agree!
-If you want God’s peace, walk in the way of God’s justice.

John Perkins, who spent his life and ministry working for peace and reconciliation between blacks and whites in Mississippi, once wrote,
“Justice is any act of reconciliation that restores any part of God’s creation back to its original intent, purpose, or image.”

I have always liked that as a definition of justice.

-It is ultimately restoring God’s original intent for his creation.

-It is about overcoming sin and brokenness and injustice, and restoring God’s shalom, God’s “tzedakah,”

-God’s design for our relationship with Him,

-our relationship with each other,

-our relationship with the creation around us.

When we pursue acts of just living: fairness, equity, generosity,

-when we care for the widow, the orphan, the foreigner, and the poor,

-we are joining with God in restoring the world.

We read earlier from that simple, but powerful passage in the prophet Micah:

“He has shown you, O Man, what is good.

And what does the LORD require of you?

To act justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”

So how do we be that person who is blessed by God because we care for the weak?

1. First, we begin with prayers of repentance, asking for forgiveness for not being people who live “tzedakah.”

And we will do that in a few minutes as we come to the communion table.

-We will simply admit that we, too, each of us individually, and all of us corporately,

-we all fall short of the goodness and glory of God.

-We all are among those who in every generation do not live generously toward the widow, the orphan, the foreigner, and the poor.

We don't see the weak and the vulnerable the way God sees them.

-In fact, we try not to see them.

-We'd rather avoid the bother.

We begin in repentance for our own hardness of heart towards others.

-And we ask together for the blessing of God's forgiveness.

2. Then secondly, we also ask for and receive the blessing of God's peace, His shalom

We cannot bring God's shalom into the world, if we don't have it first ourselves.

-So we ask, and keep on asking, for more and more of God's shalom to be working in and through us.

And it is then that we actually begin right in our own lives to live justly, and love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

3. And as we do so, we simply follow God's leading each day.

Living the lives of justice and mercy doesn't mean you are going to go out and save the world.

-That's actually Jesus' job, not your job.

But if you are a follower of Jesus, it does mean that He is going to invite you to join him everyday in some aspect of living redemptively in your home, your neighborhood, your school, your workplace, your grocery store.

Seth and Krystal Williams have felt called to take in foster Children.

-So they went through the training and all the interviews involved in the application process,

-and little Amelia is with them at the moment.

-That is one way in which they are opening their lives and their home to the weak and vulnerable.

-King David would say the blessing of God will be upon them.

David and Krista Erikson have opened their home again and

again over these last years to house international students.

This is a way they have opened their lives and their home to the alien and foreigner in our midst,
-sheltering and feeding them and caring for them while they are a long way from home.

Emily Govoni has gotten a heart for the homeless families in our wider Boston community,
-and has called and motivated all of us to care about them too.
-She has organized multiple clothing and backpack drives and we have learned to partner with Family Aid Boston.

After the summer clothing drive Emily organized, Family Aid wrote us a thank you letter saying,
“Thank you for all the items you collected for the families we work with. Thank you for sharing our belief that every family deserves the dignity of clean, quality clothing, housewares, children’s items, and more. Thanks to your generosity, families utilizing our Family Necessities store will be able to get, for free, the much needed items they would not otherwise be able to support.”

Sounds like “tzedaqah” doesn’t it?

And Nancy McLaughlin works 4 days a week at the Immigrant Learning Center in Malden.
-She is helping to facilitate the welcoming of vast numbers of immigrants and refugees to our country,
-helping them to learn English, and to learn so much more.

And many of you have been part of our team in serving meals at the Bread of Life every other month.
-Or part of the Don’t Be Alone on Thanksgiving Turkey dinner.

And Lorraine has motivated us all to fill shoeboxes with fun things for kids in 3rd world countries through Operation Christmas Child.

You see, there are all kinds of ways to life “tzedaqah,”

and no one person has to do everything.

But if the blessings of God are upon us, then something in us will begin to want to allow those blessings to flow through us to others.

-And if we simply set about to follow Jesus, he will show us what living justly, and loving mercy, and walking humbly with God might look like in our lives.

And blessed are those who have regard for the weak,
-for the quartet of the vulnerable
-for the widow, the orphan, the alien, and the poor.

Blessed are they, for the Lord will deliver them in their time of need as well.

Let's pray. (Take a little time, then prayer of confession)