

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas - December 8, 2019
While the Sun Endures
Isaiah 11:1-10 and Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

I have a great deal of respect for those who work to keep us safe. For law enforcement officers, and prosecutors, and judges. Daily, they put themselves in dangerous situations for the benefit of our communities. Daily, they strive to bring justice to the victims of crime. Daily, they work to restore our faith in the system. Theirs is both a difficult and a necessary calling, and I am grateful for their service.

I also recognize that today's perpetrators have, often times, been victims themselves. Recently, I heard a story about a lone male who had a violent outburst in a room full of 30 people. Screaming loudly, he flipped over chairs and crashed into tables as papers went flying in every direction. Those present were understandably rattled. Fearful of what might happen next, they quickly cleared the room.

What is justice in this situation? Well that depends, doesn't it? Because we still have a lot of questions. Like what caused the outburst? Was anyone injured? Was a weapon involved? How old was the perpetrator? Was he a first time offender? What if I told you that this situation unfolded in a classroom right here in Akron,

and noted that the male in question is not yet 18? In fact, he's only five years old. The mayhem that he caused was in a room of kindergarteners.

I do not know the boy's name, but I learned that his family lives in poverty and that, even at this tender age, his life has already been scarred by trauma. In this regard, he is not alone. Sadly, there are many children currently served by Akron Public Schools who present their teachers, administrators, and fellow students with some truly daunting challenges. One young student, for example, watched a parent die of a drug overdose right in front of his eyes. Scores of others are exposed to violence on a regular basis. Children in our community are often neglected and abused.

We know that children deserve better, and that beyond the basic necessities of life, such as adequate housing, food, water, and healthcare, what children need most are peace and stability. This is what will serve them best in the years to come. Yes. And this is what will make our community safer, and stronger, and more productive. Our hearts break to know that these ideals remain elusive in so many homes.

Friends, I do not say any of this with the intention of vilifying or demonizing those on the margins. Far from it. I understand that many fine parents struggle to pay their bills. And I'm not suggesting that a child's outbursts, even violent ones, are the

result of poor parenting. Instead, I merely wish offer a reminder of what the Bible has to say about the poor.

Peter Bynum, writing about the Sermon on the Plain, notes that “the Lukan Jesus is not talking about spiritual poverty; he is talking about people who have no money. The Lukan Jesus is not talking about spiritual hunger or emotional malaise; he is talking about people who haven’t eaten a good meal in a week, people who are physically hungry.”¹ Yes. While “Matthew’s Jesus seems to be talking about the poor or hungry in spirit as if they were not there” using words like “*theirs* is the kingdom of heaven,” and “*they* will be satisfied,” in Luke Jesus is talking directly to the people who are suffering. ‘Blessed are *you*... *yours* is the kingdom of heaven... *you* will be satisfied.’” The message here is that God hears the cry of the poor and that God is attuned to their needs.²

When adults engage in violent, public outbursts, charges may follow. Understandably, we long to keep the peace. But what does justice look like for a small child whose life is filled with poverty and trauma and who is already struggling to keep his cool? What happens when that child is no longer in kindergarten, but is now a student in middle school or high school? And how can we, as a community,

¹ Peter Bynum, “Good News to the Poor,” *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 2019, 32.

² Bynum, 32

show our love and concern for all people? For the one who is troubled and for those who have been victimized?

Perhaps, we find a useful model in the example of the Peace Corps where volunteers go about the business of loving others not by possessing all of the right answers and dictating those to the people, but by walking alongside them in partnership. Much like the missionaries and ambassadors of our church, Peace Corps volunteers are in search of meaningful relationships. And much like the missionaries and ambassadors of our church, Peace Corps volunteers are hopeful that meaningful relationships, once formed, may have the power to bridge divides and bring needed transformation to communities.

As we all know, this work is so much easier said than done. Building meaningful relationships, especially among people with very different perspectives, is often challenging. It takes time, persistence, and care. And at many points along the way, we may not like what we hear. Here, I recall how the Bible is filled with the cries of the prophets. With folks like Isaiah, and Jeremiah, and John the Baptist. People who call us to see the world from a different perspective, and who challenge our own presumptions and ways of being in the world.

As David Davis reminds us, “prophets do not look for spectators. They do not seek to attract a crowd of bystanders motivated by a spirituality of self-interest. They are about creating, shaping, pruning, sending a kingdom people. They are calling God’s people to do the work of justice and righteousness and sculpting God’s people to be servants. Prophets send people to further the mission of God, working to bring about the promise of a peaceable, glorious kingdom.”³ This is the difficult work of the prophets.

In our first lesson this morning, Isaiah says that the Lord “shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.” It reminds me of a speech from 1963, in which Martin Luther King, Jr. offered his own, prophetic vision. Speaking of his dream, King noted his longing for a world in which individuals would be judged not on account of the color of their skin, but in relation to the content of their character.

³ David A. Davis, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year A, Volume 1*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 20.

Friends, we recognize that character is shaped in community. In conversation with those with whom we do not agree. And at the table of Jesus Christ where, together, we shall work for justice as long as the sun endures.

May it be so and all thanks be to God. Amen.