

02.25.24

**“Finding the Beauty in Justice”**

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

**Proverbs 31:8-9 (NIV)**

<sup>8</sup> Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves,  
for the rights of all who are destitute.

<sup>9</sup> Speak up and judge fairly;  
defend the rights of the poor and needy.

**Isaiah 42:1-4 (NIV)**

<sup>1</sup> “Here is my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen one in whom I delight;  
I will put my Spirit on him,  
and he will bring justice to the nations.

<sup>2</sup> He will not shout or cry out,  
or raise his voice in the streets.

<sup>3</sup> A bruised reed he will not break,  
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.

In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;

<sup>4</sup> he will not falter or be discouraged  
till he establishes justice on earth.

In his teaching the islands will put their hope.”

**Leader: These are Words of Wisdom for the People of God!**

All: Thanks be to God!

**Matthew 25:31-46 (NLT)**

*The Final Judgment*

<sup>31</sup> “But when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit upon his glorious throne. <sup>32</sup> All the nations will be gathered in his presence, and he will separate the people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. <sup>33</sup> He will place the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left.

<sup>34</sup> “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world. <sup>35</sup> For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home. <sup>36</sup> I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me.’

<sup>37</sup> “Then these righteous ones will reply, ‘Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink? <sup>38</sup> Or a stranger and show you hospitality? Or naked and give you clothing? <sup>39</sup> When did we ever see you sick or in prison and visit you?’

<sup>40</sup> “And the King will say, ‘I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!’

<sup>41</sup> “Then the King will turn to those on the left and say, ‘Away with you, you cursed ones, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his demons. <sup>42</sup> For I was hungry,

and you didn't feed me. I was thirsty, and you didn't give me a drink. <sup>43</sup> I was a stranger, and you didn't invite me into your home. I was naked, and you didn't give me clothing. I was sick and in prison, and you didn't visit me.'

<sup>44</sup> "Then they will reply, 'Lord, when did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and not help you?'

<sup>45</sup> "And he will answer, 'I tell you the truth, when you refused to help the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were refusing to help me.'

<sup>46</sup> "And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous will go into eternal life."

**Leader: These Words of Warning Are of God.** All: Thanks be to God!

**Please pray with me:**

Creator God, we thank you again for this week of Bible Study, worship, and fellowship. We are trying to find beauty in ordinary daily things, concepts, and people. May we find beauty in these Scriptures and resources as we draw closer to you and to each other. Help us to understand your special Word today, applying it to our actions and motivating our intentions. May the quest for justice open our hearts and deepen our insights of beauty. Speak through this messenger this morning. Amen.

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Happy Leap Year! And almost Leap Day! Do you know anyone who was born on leap day? I only know one person, a former co-worker who celebrated on Feb. 28 to stay within her birthday month, but others celebrate on March 1. All legal documents show February 29<sup>th</sup> as their date of birth and Facebook alerts friends to a leap birthday on both days. Leap years occur so that our calendar year matches the solar year, the amount of time for our planet to rotate around the sun. Julius Caesar, in 45 A.D. changed the basis of the Roman calendar from using the moon to the sun, with a decree that every fourth year an extra day would be added to keep everything in sync.

Today's sermon topic and title were fun to prepare and research. The challenging topic, however, is too broad for one Sunday, so it will be more of an introduction to a concept for you to ponder during Lent. Defining justice as filling a community need is a timely discussion since

it's the last official Souper Bowl Sunday and we voted unanimously last week in favor of supporting the New United Gospel Food Mission. Watch for an article in the March newsletter or call with your questions.

Normally, when we define justice, we think of courtrooms, judges, civil protests, or things that divide us that need more balance, signified by the scales of justice. For our purposes today and as we discussed at yesterday's breakfast, we will be looking at one or two methods of more just solutions to poverty and how the passages tie into our theme, finding beauty. There are two approaches: we can create beauty by serving a need within the situation, or we can seek existing beauty in the circumstances. The first example is shown on the bulletin, and the second is our food mission participation.

The first two Scriptures of "defending the rights of the poor and needy" reflect the mission of MASS Design Group, a nonprofit architecture firm whose work seeks to heal, combining justice and beauty to fill a particular need like a hospital, doctor's living quarters, schools, or research centers. In April of 2021, the National Building Museum in Washington, D.C. hosted an exhibition with photos and narrative about their work around the world. The two bulletin cover photos show functionality and beautiful design for an impoverished and diseased area in Rwanda. Why shouldn't the poor experience beauty? This corporate mission is one example of finding beauty in the process of seeking justice for people who had no school, hospital, or qualified doctors. Many organizations came together to stop Rwanda's public health crisis, funded the needed facilities, and this architectural non-profit firm who won the contract brought a more beautiful vision to the functional need.

An example of the second approach is the food pantry. There is a well-documented need for food in our area of Annandale, Falls Church, and the West End of Alexandria. Many are aging, unemployed, or underemployed and just getting by as the rental and mortgage rates continue to rise with property values increasing. Salaries are static, medical costs and family living expenses continue to increase. Difficult choices between purchasing food or medicine are often required. There is no beauty in starvation or malnutrition. Our three churches are working very hard to alleviate one of those needs by providing a food resource of two Thursdays each month for emergencies or until a family gets processed by the County. We will continue to contribute also to ACCA which handles the County-approved families. New Beginning Missionary Baptist Church is leading this collaboration, so I hope you'll volunteer to help us meet this need. There will be physical satisfaction for those who come and spiritual satisfaction for those who help.

Beauty is not justice's reason for being, but it is something that helps us move toward justice. Elaine Scarry's book "On Beauty and Being Just" states:

Beautiful things give rise to the notion of distribution, to a **lifesaving reciprocity**, to fairness not just in the sense of loveliness of aspect but in the sense of 'a symmetry of everyone's relation to one another.' Not only are justice and beauty marked by harmony, but beauty's symmetry assists us in discovering the balance and equality that are the hallmarks of justice.

Practicing ethical fairness and kindness becomes not only a just way to live, but it becomes a beautiful expression of community. As Christ

followers, our own humility as commanded will soften the cultural greed that exists today, and in King Solomon's day. In Joan Chittester's book, *Monastery of the Heart*, we are reminded that spiritual "seekers live with one eye on the needs of everyone else as well as their own. When we find that we have accumulated good things in multiples and use few of them ever, it is time to give some of them away to those who have none . . . what we enjoy for ourselves, we must supply for others, as well."

I realize I'm preaching to the proverbial choir here because you all are generous. We find beauty not with our analytical financial or intellectual minds, but with our hearts. Justice may be defined or designed with our brains, but fairness and kindness are attributes of beauty we often overlook, even in the spiritual gifts of generosity. In our first passage, a king was to defend the helpless, judge fairly, and defend the oppressed. And in Isaiah, some say the servant was Christ, and some say it is Israel; either way, the Lord's chosen one will bring justice to the nations if he remains hopeful and encouraged. Jesus' warning and lesson in Matthew is more intense. Our choices have eternal consequences; will we be sheep or goats in our pursuit of justice or gluttony? Don't we all have enough stuff? Can you see the beauty in having less?

There is a whole philosophy in our world now, called Minimalism, where the younger generation has witnessed our generations' ravenous appetites for status and things. They decided (these are not necessarily Christians) to live with only necessities to free their minds and spirits for service to the world's needs. If you grew up in the Depression, you experienced rations and not ever having enough, so it is understandable that you want comfort and security. But this is a time of Lent, of

reflection. What beauty can you rediscover in having fewer knickknacks to dust? Fewer books you'll never read on your overcrowded shelves? Can we find beauty in the serving of others, the feeding of those in need? I believe justice can and is beautiful, balanced, and Christlike. We believers have a great capacity for kindness and love; isn't that beauty in justice? || *Let us pray.*

Merciful God, we thank you for your justice and the beauty of service. We get overwhelmed sometimes by the great need in our world for peace, abundant resources, and mutual love and respect. We ask you to open our hearts and minds to seek more kindness and fairness and the strength and hope to do our part. In your holy son Jesus' name we pray, **Amen.**