

Sermon, First Mennonite Church of Greendale, April 2, 2000: Cry Justice!, Cry Healing! - A Christian Response to Crime

I. *Cry Justice!*

What does biblical justice look like?

A. Debbie Morris

Last year, I was privileged to hear Sister Helen Prejean speak at Western State University in Bellingham. You may know of her through the movie, *Dead Man Walking*.

In 1993 Sister Helen wrote a book by the same title as the movie about her work visiting men on Death Row in the State of Louisiana. One of those was Robert Willie, truly a sad case of humanity. He was executed Dec. 28, 1984.

One story Prejean did not tell in her book nor last year, was of another of Robert Willie's victims. Debbie (Cuevas) Morris and her boyfriend were kidnapped at gunpoint by Willie and his partner, recent escapees from Angola State Prison in Louisiana. About two nights before the kidnapping, the two convicts had also kidnapped, raped, and violently murdered Faith Hathaway. It was for that that Willie was eventually executed. Then they kidnapped 16-year-old Debbie Morris and her boyfriend. Both, remarkably, survived!

Two years ago, Morris published a book which tells of the ordeal, entitled: *Forgiving the Dead Man Walking*. In the concluding paragraphs of the book, she raises the question of justice. She writes: "I've seen mankind's idea of ultimate justice; I have more faith in God's. And even God seems to put a higher priority on forgiveness than on justice." Then she makes this startling comment: "We don't sing 'Amazing Justice'; we sing 'Amazing Grace'. (pp. 250 & 251)" It takes us to the end of the book to discover that Morris' understanding of justice is that it is in fact, *grace*, *mercy* and *forgiveness*. That is *her* conclusion, the victim of a terrible ordeal of kidnapping and rape.

B. Wilma Derksen

Wilma Derksen's daughter set out to walk home Nov. 30, 1984 in Winnipeg, after her mother had told her on the phone she could not pick her up from school that day. Wilma tells this story in her book, *Have You Seen Candace?*, which I'm sure some have read. Candace was not seen alive again by her family. She had been kidnapped, and left to freeze to death in an abandoned shack.

It took two months for her body to be found.

At one point not long after her funeral, a close friend asked Wilma, "What would be justice for you?" Wilma let herself imagine what justice for her would be. Her mind's camera began to envision no less than ten child murderers lined up for execution. And she would pull the trigger, one by one. As she did in her imagination, and watched each drop lifeless to the ground with their death hoods falling loose, she could almost taste the sweetness of revenge, and knew for a few exquisite moments that this would indeed be "justice" for her. But her mind's movie projector continued to roll. She looked up from the scene of desecration she had

just created and suddenly saw ten families like hers weeping unbearably from their loss, and knew she had now created ten other victims' families. "But that doesn't satisfy", she heard herself saying, "I think our choice to forgive is the right one. (*Have You Seen Candace?: A True Story of Faith and Forgiveness*, Wilma Derksen, 1991, pp. 224ff)." She adds: "By forgiving we can transcend the hurt and choose to be loving again (p. 227)." The subtitle of her book is: *A True Story of Faith and Forgiveness*. Justice became for Wilma and her family a choice of *mercy* and *forgiveness*.

So what is biblical justice? **Biblical justice is active *peacemaking love towards others***. In the Romans 5 passage we heard this morning, "while we were still sinners", "when we were God's enemies", "we were reconciled to [God]" and "we have now received reconciliation". That is God's action-oriented peacemaking justice! It draws a circle of inclusion around "the least of these", a circle that embraces not only the "neighbour" who is familiar, but also the "enemy" who is alien - and makes peace.

Why does this understanding of justice strike one as strange? Because, for almost a millennium, Christians have believed largely in a biblical notion of justice that elevated penal, punitive law, and forgot the "weightier matters of the law": justice, mercy, and faithfulness.

C. John Wilkes, Father Fletcher, and the Wesley's

In 1773, in England, an eighteen-year-old youth, John Wilkes, was sentenced to death for two non-violent crimes. One could be put to death at the time for over 200 criminal offences, including stealing a loaf of bread.

Wilkes appealed to Rev. Joseph Fletcher, an Anglican divine, for help in having the sentence commuted. The youth's parents had both died earlier, and Wilkes was in many ways pitiable, a fact fully known to the Anglican priest. Rev. Fletcher was universally considered an 18th-century St. Francis, "the holiest man this side of eternity", by contemporary John Wesley's account. In particular he was renowned for his commitment to caring for the poor. Nonetheless, he adamantly refused to intervene on Wilkes' behalf. After the youth's execution, Fletcher published a letter he had written Wilkes, which had urged him to "confess your crimes, and beg the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, to intercede for you, [for] it is not too late to get your soul reprieved." He continued by promising that God Almighty "will deliver you out of the hands of the *hellish* executioner" and "will help you to die the death of the penitent (quoted in *God's Just Vengeance*, Timothy Gorringer, 1996, p. 3)." According to Fletcher, Wilkes died a convert, a fact gloriously published by Fletcher after the youth's execution.

Both Charles and John Wesley, famed founders of the Methodist church, were deeply committed to caring for the poor, including responsiveness to Jesus' powerful words of solidarity with the imprisoned: "I was in prison and you came to visit me." (Matt 25:36)" Nonetheless, we read this account by Charles Wesley of his visit to Newgate prison, July, 1738, on the morning he accompanied nine prisoners, all believers, to the gallows: "Full of peace and confidence in our friends' happiness. That hour under the gallows was the most blessed hour of my life (Gorringer, 1996, p. 4)."

The Wesley's, Father John Fletcher, and their followers, were genuinely concerned for the poor. One Christian historian therefore plaintively asks: "How was it that they could see people like Wilkes, whose hopeless background they perfectly understood, go to the gallows for offences which were trivial and which involved no violence against the person, without exerting themselves to have the sentence commuted?... How is it that the question whether the law might be wrong, or even wicked, does not arise for these good Christian people? How could they come away from scenes of judicial murder feeling that this was 'the most blessed day of their lives?' (Gorringe, 1996, p. 5)"

One might similarly ask, with regard to contemporary Western law: How is it that the question whether the laws might be wrong, or even wicked, does not arise for people committed to Christian faith? How could harsh sentences to penal institutions and the death penalty be embraced as centrally Christian by followers of the One who said: "[God] has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners... (Luke 4:18)", and "I desire mercy, not sacrifice (Matt. 12:7)"; and who himself was executed by the best legal system of the day (Roman), and by guardians of arguably the high point of then contemporary religious spirituality (Judaism)?

D. God's Justice in the Contemporary Criminal Justice System

So how would God's justice look today, in Canada? It means embracing not only the surviving victim and victims' families in Tabor, Alberta, but also the then-14-year old who committed the terrible act. It means inviting into our circle of friends not only the ethnic Albanians horrendously abused in Kosovo, welcoming them to Canada as refugees, *but also embracing Slobodan Milosevic and the Serbian soldiers who committed unspeakable atrocities*. For what does Jesus say?:

Matt 5:44 - 45

But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute [...], that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

Luke 6:35-36

But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked.

Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Biblical justice is *radically subversive* of all violent responses to the neighbour or the enemy, and *astonishingly inclusive* of everyone - without exception. It is in fact "the perfect law that gives freedom (James 1:25)". It is, in the end, *love* which is "the fulfillment of the law", according to Romans 13:

Rom 13:8-10

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as

yourself.” *Love does no harm to its neighbor.* **Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.**

How is it then that *punishment*, not *love*, for most of church history, has been seen by Christians as “the fulfillment of the law”? Why has law been largely viewed in the West as harshly punitive instead of mercifully embracing? How can Christians, so profoundly forgiven, refuse offering personally, and through the state justice system, a way of pardon too? It seems the church has generally had an inverted view of biblical justice, that in the end endorses the very state violence that crucified Jesus.

In summary: *Biblical justice in relation to crime is a constant embracing love of neighbour and enemy: victim, affected community, and offender.*

II. Cry Healing!

How can one further designate what this biblical justice is?

A. Restorative Justice

This past year, I have had the privilege of sitting on a committee created by the Deputy Commissioner of (federal) Corrections for the Pacific Region to develop a new way of doing justice within the Correctional Service of Canada. This new way is often called “Restorative Justice” and is impacting justice jurisdictions around the world.

What is so heartening is its profound biblical and Christian rootedness - in the direction of restoration and healing.

A Christian response to crime means above all finding Jesus repeatedly in “the least of these”, the victim, the offender, and the community. Mother Teresa’s oft-repeated words were: “(My gift is the ability) to see the face of Jesus in its most distressing disguise.” One of those disguises in which Jesus comes is as victim and offender of, and affected broken community by, crime.

This biblical understanding is in part back of a worldwide movement called “Restorative Justice”. A significant source of this phenomenon of 25 years is Christian development of biblical themes of justice, in particular of themes underscoring justice as wholeness (*shalom*), reconciliation, peacemaking, and restoration. Restorative Justice is a *peacemaking* response to crime, rather than a *warmaking* attack on criminals. In its ideal philosophy, it refuses to scapegoat the criminal, nor to leave the trauma of the victim and community unhealed. It genuinely wants “justice and healing for *all*” in response to crime, which means new departures towards peaceful lives for everyone! It refuses to let anyone remain “unhealed”, unless by their obstinate choice.

B. Justice and Healing

Repeatedly in Jesus’ ministry, we are told he went around healing. Healing was central to Jesus’ mission. “Doing good and healing” is how Peter summed up Jesus’ entire initiative in Acts (10:38). The work of justice, biblically, is the work of healing, because it above all reconciles broken relationships. This is the message of Romans 5:6 - 11. And it is for the “enemies” of God. On the horizontal plane, we former enemies of God are then challenged to do no less than “live a life of love” in response to the wrongdoer exactly like what God did for

us in Christ. To bring salvation. To bring healing.

The justice in the Bible that God demonstrates in response to God's enemies in Jesus' death on the cross is the model for us humans in response to our personal enemies, and to society's and the state's enemies. It is God's only way. There is not one way for the state, another for the individual. There is no hint of biblical support for a schizophrenic justice ethic in response to crime. There is only one model for justice, Jesus Christ, who brings justice *for*, and healing *of*, the nations (Is. 42:1; Rev. 22:2). This way of justice is offered to the nations as a kind of advance beachhead by God for subverting all other contrary ways of justice. Until “. . . justice roll[s] on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream! (Amos 5:24)”

Restorative Justice above all is a vision and a dream of justice, restoration, and healing, part of the same biblical dream of “Kingdom Come”. It taps into some of the deepest wellsprings of human longing, but like a desert mirage, its actual attainment - and definition! - proves invariably elusive.

C. Glenn Flett

Glenn had spent several years committing robberies with violence, until one day he and a partner shot a man dead during a Brinks Armoured Truck robbery. Through Christian friends inside and outside the prison, Glenn eventually chose to follow Jesus. Changes happened remarkably quickly. But a supreme test came after a woman, a Christian pastor, was brutally murdered. She had been a grandmother figure to Glenn through all his criminal years. She had loved him unconditionally. By a strange twist of circumstances, the man who murdered her ended up in the same prison as Glenn, and finally, in an English class he was teaching! Glenn was a “wheel” in the prison, had a lot of power, and could have called in favours. He could have had this guy killed. Not only did he not do this, but ultimately helped him successfully apply for and obtain parole. Glenn's new love for Jesus helped him embrace the man who had murdered the most accepting person in his life at that time.

Today, Glenn serves Jesus by reaching out to ex-prisoners through a government-sponsored program that helps them reintegrate into society. It is called L.I.N.C.: Long-Term Inmates Now in the Community. He tells his story widely, and is well-known in the larger criminal justice community. He has told his story before to the youth of this congregation, I'm fairly certain. His wife, Sherry, serves on our board.

This is a story about Restorative Justice.

D. Diane

Diane was raped in her apartment as a relatively newly-wed. The man who raped her was eventually found not guilty, and she left in disgrace the small BC town where it had happened. Over 20 years later she heard of a new program that conducted “therapeutic dialogues” between victims and offenders in serious and violent crime. Her second marriage was failing, relationships with her kids were not good, and she feared for her job. She knew the rape from so many years previously was still an open sore, despite years of intervening counselling.

Months later through the Victim Offender Mediation Program she had heard about, Diane encountered via video and letter exchange, the man who had raped her and who was then serving time in prison as a serial rapist. Her husband wrote of Diane's subsequent healing, which continues to this day, in this way:

I have, for quite awhile now, attempted to state in the form of a letter, my appreciation to you and your program for the benefit my family has realized as a result of your efforts.

...

Outstanding, overwhelming, wonderful, marvelous, priceless and great are all words that I've used, but still they fall short of describing the results which we have been the beneficiaries of.

...

I had to deal with my feelings toward the offender, which was that he should be confined and punished forever, and any talk of his healing stuck in my craw. I now realize that offenders do eventually re-join society and if healing on his behalf has not been achieved then there is a good chance of more harm being done.

Also, it has become clear to me that most offenders are themselves victims and that some of their victims go on themselves to become offenders. The cost of this cycle to society is astronomical and therefore the value to society of breaking the cycle is also astronomical.

...

Your vision, understanding and caring is a breath of fresh air threatening to bring humanity out of the dark ages of the adversarial system.

...

Sincerely....

Restorative Justice is what this story is all about too.

E. How Restorative Justice Has Taken Root Worldwide

Two summers ago, under the auspices of the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society at the University of Victoria, I had the privilege of joining with several international researchers/writers to produce a book on "the spiritual roots of restorative justice". Two of us wrote the chapter on "Restorative Justice and Christianity".

We concluded our chapter with a brief description of several initiatives worldwide which reflect this new vision of and approach to criminal justice. This year, for instance, the United Nations is giving serious consideration to adopting Restorative Justice principles as basis of the criminal justice system for its member nation states.

Restorative Justice initiatives around the world are now legion! Close to home, there are the Victim Offender Reconciliation and Victim Offender Mediation Programs operated out of Langley; there are Conferencing processes often headed up by the police; there are Circle Sentencing procedures that permit profound community input; and not least there is the work done in our own agency, M2/W2. We build bridges to prisoners inside, help reintegrate them into the community outside, and through our Circles of Support program, work with some of the most rejected ex-prisoners amongst us to help them live peacefully in our communities.

III. Conclusion

Christians are called *now* to live out the reality of what God promises *then*. A tall order

fraught with risk and danger - but also full of overwhelming anticipation and joy. Part of our living out the *then, now* is our restorative response to crime.

One writer declares, at the beginning of a biblical study on a Christian response to crime and punishment: “The gospel is profoundly scandalous, and until we hear at least a whisper of its scandal, we risk not hearing any part of it (*The Fall of the Prison*, Lee Griffith, 1993, p. 1).” Are we really to embrace the enemy? Are we actually meant to set the prisoner free? Yes to both questions, concretely, and spiritually.

If this is your nudging, if the Spirit of the Lord is upon you to help “set the prisoners free”, consider finding the “prison of your choice”, or some other avenue, to live out the Good News of “Kingdom Come Now” in response to victims, the hurting community, and criminals.

There is a variety of literature at the back for you to look at in this regard. I’ll gladly chat with you further too.

And so we pray:

Matt 6:10

Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.

(KJV)

That prayer includes a vision for Restorative Justice. The vision is glorious and breathtaking! The time for “Kingdom Come” living is now. May we all continue to rise to its challenge. Amen.