

BENDING TOWARDS JUSTICE

Habakkuk 2: 1-3

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On this July 4 weekend, I have learned about an American I never before knew - his name is Theodore Parker, a minister in New England in the 19th century. I know about some of more famous friends like Louisa May Alcott, who wrote Little Women, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. They were all part of the anti-slavery movement, social reformers also concerned with improving conditions for the poor, for women, and for prisoners. Parker is best known for this quote, which he first spoke in reference to the abolition movement. He felt confident that things would change for the better, that America would live up to its promise and values and abolish slavery once and for all:

"I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice."

You might recognize this quote as influencing Martin Luther King, who paraphrased Parker's words in a statement at the end of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and again in what was to be his last sermon, delivered on the steps of the Alabama state capitol. Listen to a brief excerpt from that sermon -

"Last Sunday, more than eight thousand of us started on a mighty walk from Selma, Alabama. We have walked through desolate valleys and across the trying hills. We have walked on meandering highways and rested our bodies on rocky byways. Some of our faces are burned from the outpourings of the sweltering sun. Some have literally slept in the mud. We have been drenched by the rains. Our bodies are tired and our feet are somewhat sore.

The battle is in our hands. And we can answer with creative nonviolence the call to higher ground to which the new directions of our struggle summons us. The road ahead is not altogether a smooth one. There are no broad highways that lead us easily and inevitably to quick solutions. But we must keep going.

I know you are asking today, "How long will it take?" Somebody's asking, "How long will prejudice blind the visions of [people], darken their understanding, and drive bright-eyed wisdom from her sacred throne?" Somebody's asking, "When will wounded justice, lying prostrate on the streets of Selma and Birmingham and communities all over the South, be lifted from this dust of shame to reign supreme?" Somebody's asking, How long will justice be crucified, and truth bear it?" I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because "truth crushed to earth will rise again."

"How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.

There are people in the United States today asking, again, "How long?" The question is asked in former coal-mining towns where unemployment is high and the only jobs offered are minimum-wage service and retail. How long until someone notices us? How long until the rest of the nation cares that we are killing ourselves by overdose because we have no hope for a better future?

The question is asked in America's cities. It's asked in fear and trembling...how long can we survive the hostile environment between police and citizens, each group misunderstanding the other?

Injustice brings forward the questions. How long until our nation's poorest children have the opportunity to go to school in facilities that are even half as well-equipped as schools in wealthy suburbs?

There are times when it feels as if we've made progress, and there are times when it feels like that progress has slowed, or stopped, or even that justice is moving backwards for some people.

When people think that justice is stalled, there is a sense of despair.

Despair is what the prophet Habakkuk was experiencing. The people of Israel had been captured by the Babylonian empire, an evil king was abusing the poor and the needy; it was a hopeless time. The prophet Habakkuk doesn't just speak FOR God; he speaks TO God, and he speaks very plainly. "How long, God? How long are you going to let things go? When can we expect a word of hope from you? When can we expect things to turn around for your people?"

Habakkuk says, "I'm here watching for a sign from God. I'm keeping watch to see how God answers my complaint."

And God does answer. "My vision still stands. Write it down. Proclaim it. Wait for its fulfillment."

To live in hope rather than despair means believing in a vision even if you may not live to see the fulfillment of that vision. In the book of Romans, it's put this way: "Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience." The very meaning of hope entails a confidence that there is something better to come in the future. This is the faith of Moses who leads his people towards the promised land but does not enter it himself.

Richard and Mildred Loving were about the most ordinary couple you can imagine. They fell in love, married and had children; they wanted nothing more than a quiet life built on a foundation of hard work and family. But they were living in Virginia in the late 1950's, and he was white and she was black, and so their lives went from ordinary to extraordinary.

One night, the local sheriff and his deputies enter the couple's home in the middle of the night and arrest them for breaking the state's law against interracial marriage. The Lovings

spent the next decade in a legal battle to live together as husband and wife, taking their case all the way to the Supreme Court.

They weren't seeking the limelight, far from it. They didn't set out to make headlines, they didn't see themselves as activists. They just wanted to live their ordinary lives. In fact, they chose to stay home the day of the Supreme Court ruling, instead of going to DC for the historic event. Circumstances forced them into the fight for justice.

When their lawyer was preparing their case, he asked Richard Loving, "Is there anything you want me to say to the justices of the Supreme Court on your behalf?" Richard Loving said, "Yeah, tell the judges I love my wife."

If you haven't seen the movie yet, I highly recommend it to you. It's available on DVD at the Avon Lake Public Library. What was most moving to me is the way it portrays the impact of injustice on people's everyday lives. Justice doesn't have to be an issue that only divides us, that polarizes us. The struggle for justice can bring us together when we see that what most people want is to live beautiful ordinary lives.

The arc can bend toward justice when God's people hold to the vision, and work to make the vision a reality.

What I see happening in our country right now is that the struggle for justice is dividing us more than it is bringing us together. Our country is polarized. On one side are people who think that the working class poor are those most in need of justice. "Don't let anyone else into the country," some of them say, "because they might steal our jobs." On the other end of the spectrum are people most concerned with the rights of immigrant and refugees.

There are any number of similar polarities. On one end of the spectrum are people who go to Black Lives Matter protests, and at the other end of the spectrum are people who have Blue Lives Matter flags in their front yards.

It is as if we think that there is a scarce amount of justice to go around. If one group of people gets more justice, there will be not enough left for me. Justice is like God's love. Think in terms of abundance, not scarcity. If one group of people is treated justly, our nation will be a more just place, a better place for ALL of us.

The struggle for justice does not have to divide us; it can unite us.

The United Church of Christ General Synod meeting is taking place in Baltimore right now. Last night, the Rev. William Barber spoke, saying, "We don't need a left movement, or a right movement; we need a moral movement." The church is called to speak, and act, and work, and pray, for justice for all. May it be so.