



**“Seeking Justice”**

**Isaiah 58:1-9a**

**Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones**

**February 20, 2011**

I still remember the last spanking I received. I was six years-old and playing in a neighbor’s yard. My mother came charging out our front door when she heard Gaylen howling. I was sitting on top of him, forcing his head to the ground and he was begging for mercy. My mother screamed, “Gregory Jones, get over here right now!”

As a child, there were only two occasions when I was called ‘Gregory Jones.’ When the teacher was reading the class roll on the first day of school and when I was in deep trouble.

I could see the fire in my mother’s eyes as I ran toward her. I tried to explain, but her fury had rendered her ears inoperative. She started spanking me as soon as I reached her. I was howling, “It’s not fair! You don’t understand!” But she was in no mood for a discussion.

The tears began to flow and Mom marched me into the house. After I stopped crying, she chastised me for fighting and especially for picking on someone smaller. But when she paused and asked me to explain, she realized that she had misread the situation.

Gaylen had been shoving a smaller boy. I told him to stop, but he kept taunting and pushing the little fellow. Finally, Gaylen threw the little boy to the ground and the little one burst into tears. That’s when I lost it. I tackled Gaylen and held him down so the little boy could run home. It was at that moment Mom walked out our front door.

Although at six years-old I could not spell or define the word “justice,” I knew what it was. It was not fair for someone larger to pick on someone smaller. No one needs to be taught this, because we know in our bones that it is wrong for the strong to take advantage of the weak.

From an early age, we have within us a sense of what is fair and what is not, and when we encounter unfairness it makes us angry. Anger at injustice is a normal response. It takes years of conditioning to become indifferent to injustice.

Today’s Scripture comes from the prophet Isaiah, whose writings cast a powerful influence on Jesus. The Gospel of Luke tells us that when Jesus gave his first sermon in the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth, he read a passage from Isaiah nearly identical to today’s reading.

Several centuries before Jesus, Isaiah spoke to people who were either confused or suffering from amnesia. The Hebrew people have returned home after living in exile and they have gotten off track with God. Convincing themselves that faithfulness to God entails acts of personal piety, they have persuaded one another to believe that they will be in harmony with God if they simply fast and pray. When their lives remain empty and God seems aloof, they whine: “God, why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”

Through the prophet Isaiah, God cuts to the chase, saying, “You serve your own interests and oppress your workers...if you seek to be devoted, if you truly desire to do what is right, then here is what you will do: break the chains of injustice, let the oppressed go free, share your bread with the

hungry, bring the homeless poor into your house, clothe the ill-clad and make yourself available to your extended family.”

Commenting on this text, one theologian says, that God is calling people of faith to shift from “a cultic act to a compassionate one, from self-absorption to an ethical vocation.”<sup>1</sup>

Be careful not to twist the words of the prophet. Isaiah is not saying that spiritual contemplation is unimportant. He is not saying that prayer is superfluous. He is saying that personal acts of piety are self-serving and misguided if they do not inspire us to deal fairly with others and to seek justice in the wider community.

Jesus provides the prime example. There were occasions when he took a break from his ministry to spend time alone reconnecting with God. We assume this entailed prayer, fasting, Scripture reading and reflection. Following each such occasion, he was reenergized to combat dark forces that were robbing people of the life God desired for them.

Jesus was channeling Isaiah and the other Jewish prophets when he sought justice for the mistreated, freedom for the oppressed, dignity for those at the bottom of the heap and when he warned that wealth has an insidious way of blinding us to the obstacles that menace the poor.

The prophet’s call to the Hebrew people 25 centuries ago is equally as relevant to 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians living in North America who imagine they can be faithful to God by adding a spiritual component to their lives that is focused entirely on prayer, devotional readings and a personal relationship with Christ. They imagine that following Christ entails engaging their hearts and minds, but not their hands and feet. They warm to passages about believing in Jesus, but ignore his teachings to care for the poor and the desperate. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus issued a warning to such souls. He said, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who *does* the will of (God).” (Matthew 7:21)

Jesus embodied the fundamental characteristics of God: love and justice. We middle class Americans are comfortable talking about Christ urging us to love others, but tenuous in embracing his call to seek justice. We forget that justice is one of the foremost expressions of mercy. Because God loves all people, God cannot bear to see some crippled by injustice.

As we watch protests spread from Tunisia to Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Libya, Jordan and Iran we are witnessing what happens when people are oppressed and denied justice. Populations can be controlled by intimidation and fear only so long. Eventually, individuals will say, “Enough! I will not take it any longer!” People will risk their lives to be free. They will risk everything to be treated fairly.

People want decent working conditions and a salary that will enable them to afford the simple necessities of food, housing and clothing. Not only that, they want to be rid of constant intimidation. They want to be able to talk with their neighbors without the government eyeing them with suspicion. They want to be able to speak their minds without the butt of a rifle smashing out their teeth. They want to be able to go about their lives without the threat of imprisonment, torture and death. They want to be liberated from an atmosphere that stifles and suffocates. They want to be able to breathe.

What comes to mind when you picture an Egyptian protestor in Tahrir Square? A 20something young man? I want to tell you about someone who rushed to the square to join the protests but was not caught on camera. Perhaps you have heard of Nawal El Saadawi. She is a diminutive, white-haired, 80 year-old woman; a physician, a writer and an advocate of women’s rights since she was 10 years-old and foiled her family’s attempt to marry her off to an older man.

In late January, when the crowd of protestors began to swell in Tahrir Square, she became very excited and felt compelled to join them. She went to the square to add her voice to those calling for an end to the dictatorial regime of Hosni Mubarak. As she walked among the throngs of young people, she said, “I am breathing!” Then, suddenly, the square was invaded by horsemen and men on camels with weapons. She was nearly trampled, but young people carried her away from the melee because she looked like their grandmother. She refused to remain at home because she has been fighting for human rights for 70 years. Nawal has suffered under and outlasted the regimes of Farouk, Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak.

As a bright young woman she went to medical school, and became the Director of Public Health. However, when she spoke out against female circumcision she was fired. In 1981, Anwar Sadat imprisoned her for her political writings. Many professors and intellectuals sold out because they were afraid, but this small in frame, giant in courage woman continued to speak out against the injustices perpetrated by Egyptian rulers.

She has been forced to live in exile inside and outside of Egypt. But, she says the fight for freedom is more important than all that has happened to her.

Nawal remembers the night when there was loud banging on her door. A gang of 20 policemen broke it down. They threw all her books on the floor and searched for incriminating evidence. They tossed her into prison and placed her in a cell with political prisoners. She asked for a pen and paper, but a guard said that if he found pen and paper in her cell, it would be more dangerous for her than if he found a gun.

The cell of the political prisoners was next to the cell of the prostitutes. The prostitutes were allowed to have books, paper and television. The political prisoners were denied everything.

Quietly, Nawal asked one of the prostitutes if she could obtain a pen and paper. The next day, the prostitute handed her a roll of toilet paper and an eyebrow pencil. Nawal began writing during the night hours. She dug a hole and placed the paper in a tin can to hide and preserve her words.

After Anwar Sadat was assassinated, she was released, but Mubarak despised her. A friend of hers, another political activist was murdered and Nawal was told that her name was next on the list. The police showed up again and said they were there to guard her. She knew the police were in collaboration with those who wanted her dead and told them that she did not want them to guard her. They said, "Too bad. We will protect you against your will."

She protested, "You will protect me against my will?"

They said, "Yes, because you do not own your life. It is the state that owns your life."

There was an earlier time when she was in prison and surrounded by people who were terrified and she lost all hope. But after awhile she realized that hope is power and she resigned herself to never again give in to despair.

In the last few years as she was aging, she was convinced that she would not die until she saw the Mubarak regime fall, and now that it has happened she is on fire with new energy. At 80, she has stopped writing the book she was writing and now has begun a new novel. She says, "It is as if I am 20 years of age again!"<sup>2</sup>

Her story reminds us that we are never too old or too busy to seek justice. The reward is life with a noble purpose and renewed zest and vitality.

Living in a land where our ancestors had to fight for their freedom, we can appreciate the struggle of the Egyptian people. But in a nation with a constitution designed to insure justice for all, and thriving, as most of us are, in a privileged segment of the population, it is easy for us to focus on being charitable rather than doing the heavy lifting of seeking justice.

Yet there are still questions of justice that cry out to us. Can we do nothing about unequal educational opportunities in our communities? Why do our tax dollars support Israeli settlements on Palestinian land? Is there lax enforcement of regulations governing coal mines and Wall Street? Can we not do more to protect our neighborhoods from crime? Is it right for a CEO to make 200 times as much as the average worker who is having his health care benefits cut?

Human beings are not created to support governments; governments are created to serve human beings. A society has not fulfilled its purpose when it delivers only order and stability. God commands us to create just societies where people can flourish.

## NOTES

1. William K. McElvaney, *Becoming a Justice Seeking Congregation*, (New York: iUniverse, Inc., 2009), p.21.
2. An interview with Nawal El Saadawi on American Public Media's *The Story* on February 14, 2011.