

“To Loose the Bonds of Injustice”

Isaiah 58:1-12

Ash Wednesday

“To loose the bonds of injustice.” This phrase appears in our reading from Isaiah. It’s a troubling phrase because it means a person or groups of people are being oppressed, are being treated unjustly, as going hungry, homeless, naked, or are even being put to death unjustly.

Having lived in Beatrice, Nebraska for 9 years before coming here, there is an old and true story about a man being treated unjustly. His name was William Marion. He met Jack Cameron in Kansas in 1872, and the two quickly became friends. They traveled and worked together across the Midwest. At one point, they went to Beatrice, Nebraska to visit Marion’s in-laws. Marion returned from the visit alone, wearing Cameron’s clothes and riding Cameron’s horse. He then dropped out of sight.

A week later, a man was found with three bullet wounds to the head, and Marion became the prime suspect. He was located 10 years later and was then tried, convicted and hanged for the killing of Cameron.

Four years after that, however, Cameron, the supposed dead man, showed up looking for his friend. He explained that he had ditched his clothes and horse with Marion and gone off to Mexico to avoid a shotgun marriage in Beatrice.

A hundred years after Marion's execution, Nebraska's governor offered a pardon but that was obviously no help to Marion at that point.

That's a pretty old story, but if you want something more recent, visit the web site of the "Innocence Project" which is "a national litigation and public policy organization dedicated to exonerating wrongfully convicted people through DNA testing and reforming the criminal justice system to prevent future injustice." Or to use Isaiah's words, "to loose the bonds of injustice."

The site says that as of late 2010, there have been 259 post-conviction DNA exonerations in U.S. history. Of those wrongly convicted individuals, 17 had been sentenced to death before DNA proved their innocence and led to their release. These are recent and literal examples of "loosing the bonds of injustice."

Of course, the "bonds of injustice" are an age old problem. The phrase appears in the Isaiah reading from the sixth century B.C., over 2,600 years ago.

But if there ever was a case of injustice, it was the case of Jesus Christ. Betrayed by a close friend, arrested on trumped up charges, accused by lying witnesses, tried by a court whose officers were plotting his death and executed by the consent of a public official who found it politically inconvenient to do the right thing and release him.

Jesus was bound by injustice. Such injustice always leads to suffering by somebody who doesn't deserve it, especially in Jesus' case.

Today, as we begin the 40 day Lenten journey to the Good Friday cross, as the ashes are imposed on our foreheads and we receive the bread and wine of Jesus' Last Supper, we begin to think about the Passion of Christ.

We think about the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual suffering he went through; knowing that what was happening to him was completely unjust. There Jesus was, fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy, by going about doing good, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, telling good news from God, and what happens? He gets crucified for it.

As we make our way to Jesus' crucifixion 6 weeks from now, it again won't be easy to talk about Jesus' suffering just as it's not easy to talk about our own suffering. But I think it helps to remember that Jesus' suffering, although unjust, was necessary.

The gospel writer Mark tells that as the end of Jesus' time on earth was drawing near, he asked his disciples who they thought he was.

Peter answered, "You are the Messiah." Then Jesus began to teach them that he must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after 3 days rise again."

When Peter heard Jesus telling about his impending and unjust suffering and death, he took Jesus aside and tried to tell him he was talking nonsense.

But Jesus called Peter "Satan" because Peter was voicing Jesus' own temptation to avoid suffering and death in Jerusalem. Jesus was telling Peter that what would happen in Jerusalem had a larger meaning.

It would be more costly to the world if Jesus were to avoid the suffering – no matter the injustice of it all.

Eventually, we all face injustice of some kind, usually in our relationships with one another. But as Christians, as followers of the One who turned injustice into forgiveness and salvation, we should not let injustices stop us from loving and forgiving one another.

Several years ago, Kent M. Keith, then a 19-year-old college student, looked at the injustice in human dealings and responded with a list of what he called “The Paradoxical Commandments.” He published them in a little booklet for high-school student leaders. There’s a good chance you’ve heard these before because once published, they were passed from one person to another and have since circled the globe. A slightly different version was found on the wall of Mother Teresa’s room in Calcutta.

Keith is a Christian, but he first wrote these words for a general audience. He has since applied them to Christians, as well, and he’s right to do so. That’s because they speak to us who often face injustice as we endeavor to love our neighbors as ourselves. Keith wrote:
People are illogical, unreasonable and self-centered.

Love them anyway.

If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives.

Do good anyway.

If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies.

Succeed anyway.

The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow.

Do good anyway.

Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable.

Be honest and frank anyway.

The biggest men and women with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest men and women with the smallest minds.

Think big anyway.

People favor underdogs but follow only top dogs.

Fight for a few underdogs anyway.

What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight.

Build anyway.

People really need help but may attack you if you do help them.

Help people anyway.

Give the world the best you have and you'll get kicked in the teeth.

Give the world the best you have anyway.

The injustice Jesus endured during Holy Week sets the standard for us. He faced injustice and did the right thing anyway.

So should we.

May the peace of God . . .

#803 – When I Survey the Wondrous Cross