

A New Creed: Part VI

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Back in Lent during our simple suppers we took time over the course of our meals to study lives of some Saints. One of the things that we learned that when it comes to many of the ones considered saints, that their Mothers were also considered Saints. Such was the case for St. Augustine of Hippo who wrote a great deal about his relationship to his mother St. Monica. A woman who did not stop believing in her son's goodness and potential, even while he was lost in the sins of his youth.

It was during the 4th century AD while Augustine was about 16 that his mother sat him down one day and had this long talk with him about how he ought to approach life as a Christian. Like most 16 year old boys, Augustine laughed it off. By his own testimony, in his book "Confessions," St. Augustine describes how he lived a life of wildness and lust. At 17, he left home for his "university studies" and by his own admission found that his soul had become more and more mired in darkness and blindness to spiritual things. He said that his mother, "who wept on my behalf, wept more than most mothers weep when their children die." "For she saw that I was dead by faith and spirit." St. Augustine then went on to describe how God had heard his mother's tears and wrote, "Thou heard her, Lord. Thou heard her and despised not her tears from pouring down. They watered the earth under her eyes in every place where she prayed. You heard her."

Augustine, when he finally came to the Christian faith, the faith that he had seen as work in his mother's love for him, he was inspired to see his relationship to her and to God in a different light. He began to appreciate the debt that he owed to his mother for the mercy and compassion that she extended to him. While also appreciating how this mercy and compassion that flowed through his mother had come by her own Christian faith. The debt that he owed to his mother was a debt that he ultimately owed to the presence of God in her life. He realized that to give his mother her due, was to also give God what he owed to God as he lived.

Thus for the rest of his life, while living as a monk and writing as a scholar, Augustine spent a great deal of time reflecting on the mercy and compassion that comes from God. It was

a mercy and a compassion that he saw lived out in a justice seeking life. Not a worldly justice, not a system of justice that often focuses on “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” Not a justice where people are destined to “get what they deserve” or what other people “think” they deserve. But thanks in part to what he experienced through that grace filled relationship with his mother Monica, Augustine came to believe in a justice that was mercy filled, loving and ultimately life giving. For Augustine, to do justice, was to do justice to God.

In his great works, *Confessions* and *The City of God*, Augustine found the theme of justice a recurring one. In words that have become famous, he said, "remove justice, and what are the kingdoms of the earth but large-scale gangs of criminals?" There's some food for thought. Augustine was able to comprehend as he looked at the late stages of the Roman Empire around him and the interactions of human affairs, that without the justice that comes from God, when we fail to do justice to God in our lives, it gets to a point where almost anything goes and a path of destruction surely follows.

This was the concern of the prophet Micah as he spent much of his life predicting the eventual destruction of the city of Jerusalem. In this text that Jon read for us this morning, we hear the words of a prophet who cares for justice and how the people are to seek justice in their lives. Micah, reminds an indignant people of the kind of justice that God's people had received from God through their history. A God who delivered them from slavery, a God who had been at work at other significant times during the days of King Balak, Balaam and Gilgal to deliver the people from the brink of ruin through works of mercy and compassion. That was the justice of God. And like Augustine, Micah knew that the people owed God a great deal in return. Not sacrifices of “thousands of rams or tens of thousands of rivers of oil” -not sacrifices of riches. But to instead, live lives that “seek justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God.” This is what God requires of us as individuals and as a church that confesses to “love and serve others, to seek justice and resist evil.” We return and give back to God the same kind of justice that God has sought to give us. We do justice, when we do justice to God, when we walk humbly with God.

"Doing justice to God." It can sound like a strange phrase. What could it mean? How is "doing justice to God" different from doing justice through our carefully calibrated legal system

with all its checks and balances? In many cases, the end results may look the same. But one big difference is that chasm that divides the "letter" of the law and the "spirit" of the law.

Doing justice to God requires that we return to God, with dividends that which God has entrusted to us -namely life itself. This is paying our dues to the Divine. "Doing justice to God" are the dues humans owe to God. Those things that we have received from God that we give back, pay forward and make known as we live. And this morning I want to touch briefly on three ways we can seek justice in this world and in the process do justice to God. Namely I want to focus on how we seek justice through, creativity, courage and compassion.

The first thing the Bible tells us about God is that God creates. Without the creative being that God celebrates, you and I would not be here. That we are told God created us in God's own image (Genesis 1:26) is the reason "doing justice to God" demands that we mirror God's creativity in our own lives. Genesis started the ball rolling. We and God together must keep going what Genesis started. The creative genius within us is an unfolding of God's creative spirit itself.

If doing justice to God means doing justice to the image of God we embody, then unfortunately we have let our dedication to creativity become increasingly selective. Today, we are eager to be creative in the fields of technology and science fields where the most creative concepts "pay off" the most financially, professionally, etc. Yet to open our minds to the creative possibilities of life is to open ourselves to see the creative potential and possibilities all around us. It is often too easy for us as humans to become "set in our ways" and see only one way to do something. We put limits on ourselves and limits on others. We live a life of dogmatism or a type of fundamentalism.

Sometimes, religion and religiosity have been the biggest culprit when it has come to setting such limits on what we do and how we do it. We seek to preserve a particular lifestyle and culture, maybe even a particular way of being church rather than seeking to transform it. Yet as we seek to preserve and maintain the status quo, are we really doing justice to the creative Spirit of God? The American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once referred to Christ as the "transformer of culture" and that if we truly honour the Spirit of God at work in Christ in

our own lives, then faithful living means looking at ways we move beyond the static fundamentalism of our living and instead embrace the possibility that Christ embodied. The possibility of new creation -of a different way...of our ability to let God's creative spirit move through us.

A man who showed forth this kind of creative spirit in his life was D.J. DuPree, the man who founded Herman Miller furniture. I once listened to an interview of DuPree tell the story about how he let creativity bring about justice in his business practice. It happened after a millwright in his factory named Herman Rumboldt had dropped dead of a heart attack. Following Rumboldt's death, DuPree went to visit his widow who welcomed him in, showed him around their house, and then brought out sheets of poetry that he had written. DuPree had only known Rumboldt as a mechanic who kept the machines going. He thought to himself, "Could there have been more to this man?" A few days later, after attending Rumboldt's funeral and listening to some of his poetry being read at the service. DuPree was moved and started to see his workers in a different light. He said, "the Lord was dealing with me about my attitude towards labour and how I saw the working of business. I used to operate according to a certain set of fundamentals, suddenly this all changed. I came to the conclusion that all were extraordinary, I needed to treat my employees better...see business differently." As a result, DuPree got creative with how he ran his business, started things like profit sharing and parted from the status quo of standard business practices and traditional employer/ employee relationships. When he came to that conclusion that all were extraordinary, he let loose that creative spirit as he sought to do justice to God.

A second way we do justice to God us through our courage. When you think about it, it takes great courage to stand up and stand out, even in the way DuPree had when he initiated the changes in his business practices. DuPree had many contemporaries, captains of industry who frowned upon what he did. They saw it as bad for their bank accounts and bad for business. Yet so it is for anyone who dares to challenge the status quo, we always risk the judgment and condemnation of others. This after all is what Christ faced in his own life as he sought to enact God's justice throughout his ministry. His courage took him ultimately to the cross, to the place of giving his own life for the sake of others, reminding his disciples in John 15

that there is no greater thing one can do than to lay down one's life for another. Yet he knew this is what it takes to do God justice. Courage, strength, heart -because as many of us know, the word courage comes from the French word Coeur which means "heart." One has to have a heart for what is right.

Socrates said that spiritedness makes a soul "fearless and invincible in the face of everything...it is what makes one willing to be courageous." To have a heart filled with God's spirit is to not be afraid to take a stand when necessary. The Scottish Reformer John Knox was incredibly famous for this type of spirited behavior. It was said of Knox that "he revered God so much, that he never feared any human." And so should it be for us as we seek justice and resist evil in the world. As a people of faith, we are called to have that same strength, that same heart that was in Christ, where we can know and do the right thing because we know it here. In a world where it can be so easy to discard and diminish ones who do not abide by majority opinion or fit in with the status quo. In a world that seeks so often to condemn and where we can easily lose our nerve when it comes to doing the right thing even when we know deep down that it is the right thing. We do God justice when we have the fearless courage to be the creative, forgiving, compassionate people Christ has called us to be.

For when we are creative and courageous Christians, we become the people who do justice as we *enact* compassion. The most public face God puts before us in the Scriptures is that of a compassionate God. As the prophet Micah reminds us, this is the God who delivers the hard-headed people of Israel over and over again, who comforts the weary, weeps with the broken-hearted, longs for a lasting relationship with creation. "Doing justice to God" means opening our own hearts and souls to a compassionate ache that brings about committed acts on behalf of others. Committed acts that are not pronouncements of judgement, but instead purveyors of justice.

God knows the world needs less judgment and more justice. The kind of justice that comes about from compassion. You see, too easy we can use judgement as an excuse to be less compassionate and in so doing withhold the justice of a God that practices justice with mercy and kindness. I saw this kind of thinking crop up this past week when after the news of the tragic fire that has decimated much of the area in and around Fort McMurry and displaced

so many families...immediately there were individuals who let loose in the “Twitterverse” who wanted to attribute the fire in Fort McMurray as being the result of climate change. That given the city’s relationship to the oil patch...that this was some sort of karmic payback. When I read some of those comments, I was reminded of just how quickly our rushes to judgment can mute a more compassionate response. It has been said that, “evil knows no compassion,” and I believe this to be true. What is needed in the face of such judgment is that humbler walk with the God of compassion.

I mean, any one of us can think back on times and moments in our lives when in the midst of a crisis or a tragedy, when the last thing we needed was someone wagging a finger at us or saying things like you shouldn’t have done this or you should have done that. Why we even do it to ourselves. We judge instead of seeking to be more compassionate towards others, towards ourselves. In fact, there’s a good chance we don’t share that compassion with others because we are afraid to receive that same compassion that God has offered us in our own lives.

The religious writer Karen Armstrong once said, “Compassion is not a popular virtue. Very often when I talk to religious people, and mention how important it is that compassion is the key, that it’s the *sine-qua-non* of religion, people look kind of balked, and stubborn sometimes, as much to say, what’s the point of having religion if you can’t disapprove of other people?” Yet we know, through the lives of the prophets, the saints and through the life of Christ himself, that God did not come to condemn the world, to disapprove. God has always been at work through compassion -through what the Old Testament refers to as “steadfast loving kindness” in order to save us from judgment to instead be the recipients of the compassion that creates a deeper bond of human community.

When it comes to doing justice through compassion, the Scottish writer Ian Maclaren put it so well, “Be kind. Everyone you meet is carrying a heavy burden.” Or “Be compassionate. Everyone you meet is fighting a harder battle.” My friends, those are justice seeking words. These are words that do justice to God. For when we seek justice as a people of faith, as we strive to be creative, courageous and compassionate Christians, we cannot help but to love and serve others.