

*Like an Everflowing Stream*  
Amos 5:28-24, Matthew 28:1-13

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Every once in a while, a text comes along that perplexes rather than answers questions.

Amos by himself is one of my favorite proof-texts of scripture. The rhetorician in me just loves the parallelism of water rolling down and ever-flowing streams. But Amos with the bridesmaids in Matthew's Gospel leaves me afflicted with questions. And I see no reason that I should endure this state alone, so welcome to my world.

Now, Amos had a clear sense of what he was saying, and I expect its meaning is clear enough for us as well, but I wanted to know what others thought of these words, justice and righteousness, so I crowd-sourced the question, *What is Justice*, to social media last week to hear what folks have to say. If we're going to talk about justice rolling down like waters, it's probably good to know what we're talking about.

My favorite answer, by far, was the first one: a brand of cheaply made yet inexplicably expensive (insert adjective here) clothing for female tweens.

I'm not sure exactly what the tie in to clothing branding is, but it's not justice, and it's important to know the difference.

You know why it's important to know the difference and to live it?

It's because of that parade of children we saw last Sunday. If you weren't here, it was glorious. The doors opened, the choir sang, and scores of children walked down the aisle and lined the front of the sanctuary.

I was in my clergy group on Thursday and I heard a staggering statistic that 70% of children raised in mainline churches leave the church as adults – and of the 30% who do continue in faith as adults – the single factor that seemed to make a difference was whether or not the children saw faith modeled in their parents. 82% of those who were in

church as adults said it was because they saw faith in their parents' lives. Not the quality of the programming, not whether the children considered church fun, not the status of the facility, solely whether or not the children saw discipleship in Jesus Christ being modeled by their parents.

That's why I send you letters in *The Messenger* saying that attending church is important. That's why giving is important. That's why prayer is important.

Sure, my ego loves a full sanctuary – every preacher likes an audience and an amen pew – but truthfully, it's because my calling, the whole church staff's calling, indeed, the whole church's calling is to help people be disciples of Jesus Christ, and I don't believe that can be sustained apart from Christian community. If we want the children of God of every age to have a life-sustaining faith, it's not achieved apart from Christian community – *that* sustains what is done in the home. Because make no mistake about it: practices, such as prayer, giving, worshipping and learning are the building blocks that the holy spirit uses to make disciples of Jesus.

I know this congregation loves our children – I love our children – and I'm unwilling to throw in the towel on 70% of them walking away from the church.

So the calling before us is to live the faith. It's that simple. *We* have to live the faith.

We have to be disciples of Jesus - and that means *tangible and commensurate actions*.

Which brings me back to the question of justice.

So, handful of folks equated it with the legal code and getting what you deserve, but my favorite response of those was the one who went on to say, "Thank God that God doesn't give us justice, but rather mercy."

Indeed. Who among us really wants what we deserve?

Some folks quoted theologians – that’s sometimes helpful. One quote from Walter Brueggemann was that justice means figuring out what belongs to whom and returning it to them.

That one’s certainly politically challenging – I’ll leave it alone for the moment, but if it troubles you, then we probably ought to think about why it’s so problematic.

Another quoted Cornel West: Justice is what Love looks like in public.

I think there’s merit to that one too – love in the abstract is really pretty useless. To be love, it needs tangible and commensurate expression.

“Love in action,” was another definition from a friend in an inner-city congregation.

“Identifying oppression and working to end it,” was the response of a friend of mine who works with migrant workers.

Fundamentally, the question that each of us faces is whether we are on the side of justice or not, and if not, why, and if so, what is justice?

Here’s what one Old Testament theologian writes, “The picture that the word ‘justice’ brings to mind in our western tradition is that of a woman, blindfolded, holding a set of balances before her. Thus ‘justice’ is a static concept, a noun, describing the achievement of fairness and equality and symbolized by the state of balance wherein all is at rest. The image Amos calls to mind is entirely different. Justice is like a surging, churning, cleansing stream. All is in motion and commotion. Nothing is at rest. The same language is used in Judges 5:21 to describe the ‘torrent’ of the Kishon River. This is the prophetic picture of justice, it is more like an onrushing torrent than a balanced scale.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Limburg, James. Hosea-Micah in *Interpretation*. (JKP; Louisville, 1988) p107

The answers I got from my crowd-source question went on, the one that spoke the most deeply to me were two pictures that showed three children standing to see a ball game over a fence. The first picture, labeled, *equality*, showed three equal height boxes with different height children trying to look over the fence. The tallest had a great view of the ballgame, the second could just see over the fence, but could see, and the third, a little boy, was standing on his box looking at the fence. The second picture had the same children, and each could see over the fence. The tall child stood on the ground and he could see over the fence. The middle child stood on a box, and he could see over the fence. The little boy had the tall child's box stacked on his own, and he, too, could see over the fence.

That last one is what biblical justice looks like.

Does that image of justice work for you? If not, why? If so, what are you doing that is *tangible and commensurate*?

John Dominic Crossan, in his wonderful but challenging book on the Lord's prayer, pictures creation as a macrocosm of what we encounter in our own homes, with God as the divine head of household. His suggestion is that what we could consider good in our own households, if it were applied to us, represents what is good in creation. He writes, "What horrifies the biblical conscience... is the *inequality* that destroys the integrity of the household and therefore dishonors the householder,"<sup>2</sup> by which, he means, God.

He asks the troubling questions, "In what sort of household are some members exploited by others? In what sort of household do some members have far less than they want and

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<sup>2</sup> Crossan, John Dominic. The Greatest Prayer: Rediscovering the Revolutionary Message of the Lord's Prayer. (HarperOne; San Francisco, 2010) p45

others far more than they need? What sort of Householder is in charge of such a house?”<sup>3</sup>

Maybe that question doesn't bother you.

But I doubt it. I expect it bothers most all of you deeply when you think about it and I expect it also perplexes you, just as it does me, as to what represents a workable response.

Or perhaps the question is, what represents a tangible and commensurate response?

Because I have to tell you something. There really isn't a question as to what represents biblical justice. It's pretty clear.

What *is* a question is, “How do we live into it?”

I told Drew over lunch this week that this text didn't really bother me when I was an associate working with mission and youth, because I could tell you exactly how we were living into it. But now that I'm in the senior role and one of my primary responsibilities is worship, that first part of the scripture really gets under my skin, the part where God says, “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.”

I mean, seriously, we love festivals. Who doesn't love a parade, right? My job is solemn ceremonies!

It would be easy to take this the wrong way, and if we take it as God despising our worship, I'm afraid we'll have missed the point. God does love it when we worship.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

God, after all, is the object of our worship. We don't come to get our tanks filled and feel good, we come because God has already filled us to overflowing and we need to respond.

What Amos is saying is that worship without discipleship is meaningless.

Worship is not limited to 11-12 on Sunday mornings sitting in a pew. Worship is all of life. We worship God with our discipleship as well. The one is inseparable from the other.

And if 70% of children raised in mainline churches walk away from the church that raised them, then we have a crisis on our hands. That's an epidemic.

Thank God the answer lies right in front of us: be disciples in all our lives and trust God with the rest of it. Live discipleship: every difficult, wonderful, gritty Godly bit of it, because God has already filled us to overflowing and told us what is good.

The parable we encountered from Jesus today might just look like it tells us to do the opposite – to hold onto and attempt to preserve what we do have in order to avoid being found wanting. Isn't that always the temptation? And doesn't life funnel us in that direction? Nobody wants to be the foolish bridesmaid, after all. But there's more going on. It's not just about the oil, it's about when bridegroom arrived – late. Sometimes, the kingdom takes an awfully long time to manifest itself. So, to have that extra flask of oil is to be prepared that sometimes it takes a long time to see the kingdom, and we need our flasks refilled.

And that, I think, has something to say to justice.

If we are going to be serious about justice, we have to be prepared to be disciples for a long time. We have to take a long view. We can't just think about now, we have to look

way off into an uncertain future and know that what we're doing presently may or may not be what it takes to get into the place of the kingdom of God's justice.

You see, discipleship doesn't guarantee instant gratification. In fact, it just about guarantees the opposite. To be faithful disciples is to live a long obedience in the same direction, to live in the direction of justice.

Now the second clause of this marvelous turn of phrase involves righteousness. Let justice roll-down like waters, righteousness like an everflowing stream.

When Jesus talks about righteousness, do you know what he means?

He doesn't mean self-righteousness. Not ever. Jesus has a real problem with self-righteous people.

He means doing the right thing.

That's what we're called to do as disciples. The right thing.

So, last reference to my crowd-sourcing: I had a follow up conversation with the first respondent, the one with pithy opinions about the oddly named clothing line. She was swinging through the church office right as I was about to start writing, and I teased about her response, because in the great irony of things, she's a lawyer by training. And she replied, "The thing about justice is you know it when you see it."

I think more often than not, that's the truth.

I've been talking for a while now about justice, and a little bit about righteousness, and I suppose I ought to wrap it up - and you know I love to end with a story that wraps it all up and brings it home.

You know I love to tell you a story.

But here will be no closing story, because you are the stories. Tag, you're it. Your lives as Jesus's disciples tell a more compelling story than I ever could. So go. Go be justice-seeking, righteousness-doing disciples of Jesus. Live the faith, and your stories, like an everflowing stream, will fill all of our flasks.

the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.