

"Governed by Justice and Love" by Rev. Dr. Peter A Thompson

Colossians 1:11-20

*Inspired by and quotes used from Shirley Guthrie's *Christian Doctrine**

This Sunday in the church's liturgical calendar is Christ the King Sunday. It is always the Sunday before Advent begins and serves as a reminder to the reign of Jesus as the Christ and the King of our hearts and lives. The following text from Colossians 1:11-20 helps highlight the Lordship of Jesus and is one of the most powerful testimonies to the reason we place our faith and trust, allegiance and dedication, commitment and loyalty to following Jesus' example for living our daily lives.

Read Colossians 1:11-20

By whatever definition you understand justice and love, how many of us believe in justice and want justice in the world? Some of us may have more passion about a few things than others. Those who protest and rally on various topics come to mind. They are fighting for the justice they believe to be right. And how many of us believe in love and want love in the world? I think we can all agree we need love more than anything else.

As children of God and followers of Jesus, who is the Son of God, Messiah, Lord of Lords, Savior, King of Kings, Prince of Peace, our hearts and minds and lives are to be governed by justice and love. But, as we will learn over the next few minutes, we are not to be governed by whatever justice and love we can come up with. Children of God and servants of Christ the King are governed by God's justice and God's love and are held accountable, when it comes to our relationship with God and what God requires, empowers, and calls us to be and do, to God's definition and embodiment of justice and love.

In the end today, I think our praise of Christ the King ultimately asks us to consider what the church, and the world, would look like if we loved each other as God loves us? Also, I think our praise of Christ the King asks us how would such a church (its members), and the world (its citizens), speak and act in relation to others who are rich or poor, oppressed or oppressing, victim or violent, man or woman, this sex or that, this race or that, across the world or in our backyard? Today as we celebrate Christ the King, we encounter what it means to be governed by justice and love, love and justice.

Let's start with love. Again, we are defining love as God's love, which emphasizes God's kindness and care in drawing near to us. One of the fundamental rules about God's love is that God is love. God is not sometimes loving and sometimes unloving, today loving some people and hating others, and tomorrow perhaps changing sides to love those who were previously hated and hate those who were previously loved. In everything God does, always, in dealing with all people, God is a loving God. Another fundamental rule about God's love is that it is not our understanding of love that defines God but God's action toward us that defines what real love is. We have only to look at God's self-revelation in biblical history and especially in Christ

to see how radically different and how much better God's love is than what often passes for love among us- even among those of us who call ourselves Christian.

- *God's love is universal.* God's love seeks the welfare of not only a chosen few but of all people.
- *God's love is unconditional.* God does not say, "I will love you if..." God's love is the love embodied by Jesus, who was the friend not only of the moral, religious, and socially acceptable, but also of the political revolutionaries (zealots), dishonest business people (tax collectors), the immoral, the social outcasts. There are no 'ifs' or 'buts', no strings attached. God's love is unconditional.
- *God's love is initiating.* God's love doesn't wait for people to come asking for love and acceptance. God makes the first move, loving before people ask for love or even acknowledge their need for it.
- *God's love is faithful.* God never takes back God's promise to love us. Even when we are faithless, God remains faithful.
- *God's love is reconciling.* Jesus commands us to even love our enemies, not just our friends, those we find lovable and those who win our approval and support because of their admirable personal morality and social and political attitudes and actions. God loves even those who have made themselves enemies of God by their sinful rebellion and enmity towards others.
- *God's love is costly, self-giving love.* In Christ, God comes to stand with us and by us, as one of us, to share our hurt and suffering. God's love is not simply a care package sent or this or that blessing from above; God's love is God's self.
- *God's love is helping and renewing.* God's love forgives and accepts us as we are, no matter what we may have done or not done. But, God's love does not leave us as we are. God's love is love that enables and empowers us to become different people. God's love is a love that sets us on our feet and sets us on the way toward becoming strong, active, responsible people growing closer to the image of Jesus.

I think we can all agree God is not only loving but God is also just or 'righteous.' God is not sometimes with some people, loving, giving, and forgiving, and at other times, with other people, strict demanding, and judging. God is always, with everyone, both loving and just at the same time. Because God is love, God's justice is loving justice, and because God is justice, God's love is just love. Not too long ago I saw a t-shirt that had written on it "Justice... Love Lived out Loud!"

This may or may not be your definition for justice, but usually justice means fair and equal treatment of all people. When justice is done, everyone is subject to the same requirements of the law and recipient of the same benefits of the law: people get either the punishment they deserve for being bad and doing what the rules forbid, or the reward they get for being good and fulfilling what the rules require. Justice is therefore administered by an unbiased or

neutral judge who is impartial in giving people what they deserve. This understanding of justice is represented by the statue of the blindfolded woman with scales in her hand who stands at the top of the Supreme Court building in Washington, D.C. She does not see racial, sexual, class, or any other differences between people, but treats all people the same, impartially meting out what is due every person or group according to the law. This concept of justice is appropriate in some cases, but it ultimately differs from God's justice.

You see, God is not a blind judge. God sees very clearly the difference between people- rich and poor, powerful and powerless, privileged and defenseless, oppressors and oppressed, insiders and strangers. God's justice, as outlined throughout the scriptures, is clearly on the side of the poor, weak, threatened, and excluded. And if this is God's justice, we are to take and use this as true human justice as well.

Also, God's justice gives people not what they deserve but what they need. In many ways, God's justice gives rights to those who have no rights. What I take this to mean is that God's justice means that God is for and not against sinful people, accepts rather than rejects them, seeks their restoration and salvation and not the punishment they deserve for what they have done or not done. In Jesus, God was the friend of sinners.

I think we often tend to hold justice and love on two separate ends in polarity, but Christ the King reminds us that God's justice is not a terrible alternative to God's love; it is God's love. This does not mean God ignores all the ways we rebel against God's laws and commandments. Scripture is clear to illustrate that God's wrath burns against sinful individuals, punishing, overthrowing, tearing down, condemning, and destroying sinful institutions and societies (including religious ones). Sometimes I have heard folks say God is not acting fast enough in hitting this target we think needs to be hit. Who are we to determine that? And sometimes, often when it might involve ourselves, we might even try to deny the wrath of God because we do not like to think of such a God. There is no point in denying it. We hear of God's wrath and automatically think of God in human terms- short tempered, vengeful, mean- or at the best a heartless, legalistic judge bound to enforce the demands of the law at the expense of human life and welfare of those who break it. But our God, the God who is love, is not a tyrant or a disinterested judge like other gods may be. God's justice is embodied like a loving mother or father.

This brings us back to the truth that God judges in order to help, not to pay back, get even, seek retribution, and wipe out. Maybe we can consider that the very idea that God can become angry means that God really cares about us and is not willing to let us 'stew in our own juice.' Can it be that God cares enough to refuse to let us get by with the chaos and self-destruction we bring into our own lives when we rebel against God and actively cause or passively permit suffering in the lives of other people?

God rules God's kingdom with these definitions of justice and love. Jesus, as God's Son, lived and taught and reigned on earth with these definitions and embodiments of justice and love. And still today, we, as God's children, are required, empowered, and called to be and do God's justice and love.

How many of us believe in God's justice and want God's justice in the world? How many of us believe in God's love and want God's love in the world? Just think... just think... what would the church, the world, our lives look like if we strived every day to reflect and reveal God's justice and God's love verses whatever version of justice or love comes our way?

If you were to ask me what I believe the world needs more than anything right now or even what I think the world wants more than anything (even if some don't know it), I would say the world is hungry for truth and the capacity to trust that God's justice and God's love are what reign and rule. And if you were to ask whether I think it is possible for this to happen, I would say, "Yes, with God's help!" and invite us to sing together as God's church a hymn entitled, "My Soul Cries Out with a Joyful Shout". It is sung to the tune *Canticle of Turning*. We are not going to sing it this morning, but as we prepare our hearts and minds to take a seat at Christ the King's table and receive his gifts of the bread of life and cup of salvation, I invite us to anticipate and feel the revolution of God's justice and love let loose in us and through us to the world.

*My soul cries out with a joyful shout That the God of my heart is great
And my spirit sings of the Wondrous things That you bring to the ones who wait
You fixed your sight on your servant's plight And my weakness you did not spurn
So from east to west shall my name be blest Could the world be about to turn?*

*Though I am small, my God, my all, you Work great things in me
And your mercy will last from the Depths Of the past to the end of the age to be
Your very name puts the proud to shame And to those who would for you yearn
You will show your might Put the strong to flight For the world is about to turn*

*From the halls of power to the fortress tower Not a stone will be left on stone
Let the king beware for your Justice tears ev'ry tyrant from his throne
The hungry poor shall weep no more For the food they can never earn
There are tables spread, ev'ry Mouth be fed For the world is about to turn*

*Though the nations rage from age to age We remember Who holds us fast
God's mercy must deliver us from the conqueror's crushing grasp
This saving word that our forebears Heard is the promise which holds us bound
'Til the spear and rod can be Crushed by God Who is turning the world around*

*My heart shall sing of the day you bring Let the fires of your justice burn
Wipe away all tears For the dawn draws near And the world is about to turn!*