

Pentecost 15, Proper 20  
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

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## People

My previous church was in Killeen, Texas, the civilian city that is home to Fort Hood. Fort Hood is the largest military installation in the country, with over 200 square miles of training areas, 45,000 active duty service personnel, and a post that is a small city. There are around 20 chapels. The chaplaincy corps is a group of people I got to know. There are dozens of them at Fort Hood at any given time. Episcopal chaplains came and went. There were as many as seven, and as few as zero! Many of them became good friends of mine. I had occasion with more than one of them to discuss the potential of what we could call kingdoms conflict: Two kingdoms, Church and State; having an allegiance to the Church and to the State could create a conflict of interest. Some of them never ran into a conflict in their ministries. Some of them did and paid for it. It was always an interesting discussion.

Today is part of Fort Bayard Days. Our second service will be out in the theater building, and I will be playing the part of Chaplain C. C. Bateman, assigned to the Fort around the turn of the century. Interestingly, he fought the concept of creating a Chaplaincy Corp. In the little I have read he seems to have been concerned with the Kingdoms issue, and sought to keep allegiances clear for the chaplains.

The whole issue raises an interesting and pertinent question not only for military personnel, but for all of us. The law of the land ideally embodies a moral plumb line, yet we are all aware of the difference between legal and ethical. One can sue and win custody of a child, whether it is the ethical thing to do or not, and on the other hand one cannot legally house an illegal immigrant, even if they have the cure for cancer. On what basis does the law of the land claim legal authority? Our founding fathers understood that the law of the land cannot be an end in itself. When it becomes an end in itself the State becomes the Church, and the people are taught to worship themselves. It is a pernicious and dangerous sort of idolatry. This is what we saw in the Crusades and in ISIS today. And though their faith walks were very different from ours, from deist on one hand (Washington) to heretic on the other (Jefferson,) they understood that unless there is a moral foundation beyond the state there was no moral authority in the state.

This insight allows us to put the State and the Church on the table and look at them together. How does the moral grounding of the law compare to our moral groundings as Christians? Where they are in harmony we are in harmony. Where they are not we have a moral obligation to keep our integrity in the most harmonious way possible.

Justice as one of those places where the moral foundation under the Church and State often differ. There are many essential questions: What constitutes justice? Who should be meting it out? What are its conditions and its ends? What are its moral foundations? As Christians we must ask, “What does the Bible say about justice?”

Now let's consider something. When we read Scripture it is easy to go to the Bible expecting to find what we find. We read into Scripture from our own preconceived ideas, and we find nothing but confirmation for what we already believe. So when we read something in Scripture that challenges what we believe, there is some assurance that we are truly encountering the Word of God, and not merely our own a priori conclusions. Such is the case today. In these passages we see that God's mercy is the touchstone of God's justice. I believe that this is very different from our country's understanding of justice. We usually set justice at odds with mercy. Justice has to do with paying a moral debt to society, a kind of economic model. Mercy is a contradiction to economics. But if God's mercy is the touchstone of God's justice it changes the playing field completely.

Let's look at the passages we read today. In the passage from Jonah the prophet has been sent to preach to Nineveh. As a good Jew he has no love for the Gentile Ninevites, yet God has told him to go preach to them: “Repent or be destroyed!”

“Great,” thinks Jonah, “They won't repent, and they will be destroyed. Justice will come at last to those sinners!” But lo and behold, they do repent, and God spares the city—and Jonah is angry. “They don't deserve this treatment!” In the vision of the vine and the worm Jonah learns that neither does he—and yet he has received mercy. Why not the Ninevites? Mercy is the touchstone of justice.

In the passage from Philippians Paul is in a quandary. He is in prison in Rome, and he knows that he will soon die at the hands of the Romans. But he's not concerned. He has an unwavering confidence in the reality of heaven, which is full enjoyment of the presence of God. Being there is much better than being here, but, he still has work to do.

And so do we—we are called to live in accordance with our heavenly calling. All people are invited into heaven. Some refuse it, no one deserves it, really, but all receive the invitation. Mercy is the touchstone of justice.

In the Gospel lesson today Jesus tells the parable of the generous landowner. He hires people for a 12-hour day, others for a 1 hour day, and pays them all the same. The ones who worked all day get upset. Their sense of justice has been offended. It's an inverted sense of justice in that it deals with rewards rather than punishments, but their basic

assumption is the same. There should be consistent consequences for behavior. Economics dictates that more work gets more pay. And yet this landowner has just blown that out of the water. He seems to think that just because these people have families to support, that they need to get enough to do that, since they really had no chance otherwise. Mercy is the touchstone of justice.

Mercy as the touchstone of justice works on one essentially different assumption. People are as valuable individually as they are collectively. The individual draws his or her identity and purpose from the community, yes, but without the individual there is no community. Each person matters, not just as a cog in a wheel or a soldier in a line but as a person, for it is as people that we make community.

I read an interesting blog that someone forwarded to me recently. In it he claims that we can only do violence to people in the abstract. As long as people are merely members of a group we can do them violence without conscience. As soon as we see another human being as an individual we cannot do them violence without their ultimate good in mind. I think this author understands how God's mercy is the touchstone of God's justice.

So what does it mean for us today? Church and State are abstractions. They are categories and groups. Within both there are people, real people, with last names and stories, with futures and gifts. The people you meet are not abstractions. They are people for whom Christ died, people who have been invited into heaven, people for whom God cares like the landowner cared for his workers. They have last names and stories, futures and gifts, and no matter who they are, they are there for you to honor and bless, for mercy is the touchstone of God's justice.