

## The Justice of Jesus

Isa. 42:3

Gregg Chenoweth, President  
Bethel University Chapel  
December 2019

In this turn from Thanksgiving to Christmas, mental images come. What do you see? For Christmas, Jesus in a manger. For Thanksgiving, I see Brits angrily pack their bags and speed walk to the harbor, loading a boat.

Think of their audacity! How unjust must your circumstances be to abandon your home, possessions, family, and jobs?! Motivating them was profound unfairness of taxation, sham electorate representation, and a constrained religious liberty.

Their outrage at that injustice inspired unusual courage. Think of this: early cartographers – map makers – used default language at the edges of their maps. If they didn't know what lies beyond a charted territory, they would write on the map, "There be dragons out there!"

These defectors sailed West toward America, staring down dragons. Injustice will do that to you. Outrage begets Courage.

Are those events so long past, they now seem a fiction? Are there injustices today provocative enough to prompt outrage, or even life-altering courage?

There is one injustice happening right now which should stir the ire of every student in this room: College students at Christian schools in Michigan had their state financial aid vetoed by the Governor, while students at Public colleges remain fully funded. That is unjust. And it stirred enough outrage to marshal courage. Students and administrators did something most have never done before -- lobby their legislators to get their tax dollars back!

Injustice, Outrage, Courage.

.....

Now what does this have to do with the baby in a manger at Christmas? As we celebrate the birth of Jesus, we remember he not only came to save souls, but bring justice. And that cause didn't end with his earthly ministry. It remains in the heart of the living Jesus. Rom. 8:34 tells us that he now sits at the right hand of the Father, in constant intercession for us. What is on his mind and heart as He sits there?

**Isaiah told us (Isa. 43:3) and Matthew confirmed it (Matt. 12:17-21): Jesus will not falter or be discouraged until he establishes justice on earth.**

What is this justice of Jesus?

Injustice is easier to feel than define. Did you feel it a minute ago, when you learned that students like you, at a school like Bethel, are having their State Aid ripped from their tuition

budgets? Yes, even if we can't define it, we know it when it happens: it's when *you were treated unfairly* and are not receiving your due; it's when things need to be set right again; or it's when *groups of people* experience *recurring, unfair disadvantages*, and it needs to be set right again.

Certainly, there are calls to justice echoing through our society that are detached from the mission of Jesus. Liberation Theology, for example, is so preoccupied with legislative and economic systems for revolution that Marxism gets more talk time in it than Jesus. Also, the message of the church can get hijacked by “social justice warriors” if more energy is put into accosting privilege than cultivating piety.

The thing really driving the justice of Jesus isn't some intellectual assent to an abstract theory, nor vague community values like Midwest Nice or even Compassion. It is *assuring the dignity of all people, because they are carriers of the image of God, and assuring that wronged people get restoration.*

Ron Sider says as much in his book, *Just Politics*. As professor of Theology and Public Policy at Palmer Seminary, he believes the Scripture reveals our obligation to justice is precisely because God is just and wants us to assure a just society. Countless texts make this clear:

- Isa. 61:8 – I, the Lord, love justice.
- We are His agents to manifest justice. In II Chron. 19:6-7 we hear instruction to people in the seat of decision. When you hear this, don't think only Kings or Presidents or Judges, but Professors, Administrators, and Student Leaders. (quote) “Consider carefully what you do because you are not judging for mere mortals, but for the Lord, who is with you when you form a verdict. Judge carefully, for with the Lord our God there is no injustice.” (end quote)
- Some projects for justice are closer to the heart of God than others. There are literally hundreds of verses about the orphan, widow, foreigner, poor, the oppressed (which refers to authorities creating unjust hardship for people). For example, Jesus announced his identity in Luke 4 saying, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to proclaim good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom for those held captive, recovery for the blind, to proclaim God's favor”; Or look to Deut. 10:18-19 – “God executes justice for the fatherless and widow, and loves the foreigner, giving him food and clothing”; Also, God so closely identifies his mission with the poor that, in Prov. 14:31, “Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker.”

It is not that God hates the rich. He hates wealth that comes by unjust gain, such as mistreating the poor.

When God gives special attention to the poor, widow, orphan, oppressed – and calls us to do the same – *He is not biased with an agenda against someone, but shows fondness for someone*. There are ways of lifting the needy without damaging the stable. Consider how good firefighters do not spend equal time at all houses; they spend more time on what is burning. Loving parents with a child who struggles in school will not provide equal tutoring time to the children who don't struggle.

This is why Scripture says God takes up the cause of the weak. When he shows special fondness for the need of the widow, he is not biased against married people. It's just that married people likely have a lot more stability, and are in need of God in other ways.

God demonstrated his fondness for the oppressed when He set up structural solutions for Israelite society.

1. When the Israelites were in slavery under Egyptian Pharaoh, he owned all land, one man. In the same era, near countries had a feudal system of land-lording, keeping land in the hands of just a few. But once Israel took the Promised Land and became a nation under God, each Tribe was given their land, and each family given land within their Tribe. It was decentralized family farm ownership. Larger Tribes did get larger portions, but in this way God established equal economic opportunity.
2. If poverty forced someone to sell their land, the Kinsman Redeemer provision meant a relative had the right to purchase it back before others could, to keep the land in the family. Lev. 25:25.
3. If over multiple generations land ownership came into dispute, the Year of Jubilee provision meant that every 50 years the land must be returned to the original owners. Lev. 25, Duet 15.
4. If individuals got lost in all of this and became destitute, land owners were instructed to leave the corners of their fields to the poor, and allow them to gather and eat wheat or corn or grapes that were dropped during harvest. Lev. 19:9-10.

Of course, we don't have that Theocracy today. The ceremonial and civil laws for the Hebrew people were for a particular people of a particular time. This is why we are not penalized today for wearing clothing of mixed fibers. It's why we don't stone adulterers in public.

Still, modern Christians can and should follow the moral principles in those laws. Elevating morals above law is always wise because no change is permanent in a person until it penetrates their vision of life. Law and morality are different projects. Law can restrain evil, but never neutralize it; Law can promote the common good, but that good gets contaminated by sin so that good is never fully realized.

Christians will never legislate enough of the faith into regulations because we live in a nation committed to pluralism. Thankfully, ours is not a *secular* society, like the country of Turkey who assume all religious influence is bad and must be removed from civic interests. When I traveled there some years ago, College students were prohibited from wearing clothing that connotes Islam, to keep religious values out! But while our *pluralist* culture assumes religious influence is good, the laws protect different convictions. This means law can ONLY EVER BE a proximate activity for an insoluble diversity.

Democracy is very difficult because of our diversity (of thought and experience). To love and promote freedom of speech, freedom of thought, freedom of religion, and freedom of conscience is great! But this also means people of different convictions will collide hard and do so publicly, to the great psychic angst of any witness to it.

Even in rare cases that the legal agendas align – like wanting to assure access to food, education, housing, and health care -- all of that costs public money, lots of it, too much of it. Even in America, as the wealthiest and freest nation in history, we cannot fully fund what people say are rights.

So, this could get depressing! Our nation, our state, even Bethel cannot fulfill a justice mission by mere policy or budgets.

**This is why the Justice of Jesus is deeper. To put it most directly, He delivers justice through *people more than policies, through behavior more than budgets, through initiative more than institutions.***

It's on you and me.

You see it in the way Jesus always translated the abstract, external law to the interior, moral life. In the Sermon on the Mount, he said:

- The Old law says do not murder, but if you hate someone in your heart you are guilty of this
- The Old law says do not commit adultery, but if you lust after a woman in your heart you are guilty of this

So, when rights collide, and when external funds are short, where, specifically, might the justice of Jesus be executed through us? Here are three types of justice that every one of us can participate in:

1. Fair standards: Jesus watches for justice in us when we apply standards evenly or not. Think of your informal agreements, like a pledge or promise, or even the formal contracts you sign. Prov. 16:11 – the scales and balances of commerce belong to the Lord. Lev. 19:35 – do not use dishonest standards when measuring length or quantity, for I am the Lord your God.

Question: What happens to a student who discovers their grade is lower than a peer while meeting the same criteria? This is injustice by unfair standards.

Question: What happens to a campus club or team when a couple of members don't abide by the campus lifestyle covenant and are not disciplined while others uphold that covenant? Injustice by unfair standards.

2. Fair process: Jesus watches for justice in our processes. Ex. 23:6 – do not deny justice to the poor during law suits. Do not accept bribes. This is why transparency is a high Christian value -- giving due process, being unbiased, honest, visible, open, frank.

Question: What happened to a Hispanic person who discovers he was not invited for a job interview when a White person with the same credentials and experience got the job? This is injustice by unfair process.

What happened to a student or professor or administrator who is publicly criticized but was never confronted personally by their accuser? Injustice by unfair process.

3. Fair opportunity: Jesus watches for justice in how goods, services, and opportunity are divided. Do people have fair access to education, housing, food, mental health counseling, a job?

*This is not a project dedicated to equal outcomes, but equal opportunity.* In fact, unequal outcomes are fair when they can be attributed to reward for personal risk, or reward for unusually hard work, or reward of rare talent. For example, students who graduate Bethel then go to Medical school surrenders many years of income and acquire lots of debt to specialize in a skill, who then earn superior wages, and by their unique services attract lots of patients which end up employing 8 or 10 other lesser paid people in support of an industry created by that physician. That isn't a story of equal outcomes, but is one of access or opportunity.

However, there are some Christian values that might drive "opportunity justice" like rescuing somebody out of a traumatic, hopeless circumstance; it's like Jesus who said he would leave 99 sheep who are doing fine to chase down the 1 who needs recovery.

This means the Justice of Jesus will sometimes show fondness to the disadvantaged without bias against the others. Sider says we should:

1. Support needs of the poor over wants of the rich.
2. Create opportunities for the disadvantaged over additive liberties for the powerful.
3. Open up time and space for a marginalized person to speak and be heard, rather than preserve norms that keep those with more advantages comfortable.

Let me illustrate. It might not be obvious to you that not everyone here pays the same for a Bethel education. We give merit-based scholarships reward rare talent and unusually hard work for their OUTCOMES in academics, the arts, athletics, things like that, but also give need-based scholarships BEFORE the outcomes of a Bethel education can be seen.

The student who receives least financial aid comes from a comparatively wealthy home, has average grades, and isn't involved in a talent-based activity. The person who gets the most financial aid comes from the poorest circumstances, has excellent grades, and uses their co-curricular talent to advance our mission. *This shows fondness to some without bias against others. It is just.*

## Conclusion

Imagine a University community which doesn't wait for a policy or program, but participates personally in applying fair standards, protecting fair process, and creating fair opportunity. Imagine this University community showing fondness for those under hardship.

We would be *in* the justice agenda of Jesus. And we would *know* He who “will never falter and never grow discouraged in bringing justice to earth” is, in fact, working through us!

So, as we conclude, I charge you in three ways.

First, let this elevate your standards and process in dealing with people. A couple years ago, a Bethel student wanted an article of clothing from our Bookstore. She took one off the rack, was delighted to realize she could afford it, but then noticed that one article price was mismarked substantially. All the others were \$20 more. So, instead of demanding they sell it to her for the mis-marked price, she acknowledged the error and didn't feel right about taking advantage of that. She turned it in. That was the Justice of Jesus in fair dealing.

So, what did we do when we found out? We gave her the clothing, and \$1,000 of donated funds, to honor her integrity as an example to the rest of us.

Second, let this inform your prayer life. When you experience injustice, it can be so angering that you can't even pray. Or you can get mad at God for permitting it in your life. I have learned one secret of the Christian life: God delays His answer to our prayer because it creates the most efficient pathway to personal holiness. He is not merely a moral God wanting us to be moral; He is a holy God guiding us into holiness, and as the Scripture says, “Without holiness no one can see the Lord.” Hardship is a more efficient path to holiness than anything else. So, pray this Scripture back to Jesus: “You have said, Lord, you love Justice, and you will never falter or grow discouraged until you bring full justice to us. I put my hope in this and in you, but I am tired of waiting. I need you to deepen me. I can't manage that on my own. And I need your justice in X, Y, Z.” Whenever you pray the Scripture, you are very close to praying His will. And if we ask according to His will, one day it will be done.

Last, let this influence your own good deeds. Meet someone's social need or tangible need they cannot meet on their own.

Today is a chance to practice that.

**For more than five years, Brenda Quiggle** has served Bethel as the Admissions Operations Assistant, focused on communication. You might not have known it, but the life of every student in this Chapel has been touched by Brenda because your recruiting mail and letter of acceptance came from her.

Brenda met Dave at their Christian college 32 years ago, and were then married, and adopted two kids, Kati and Dylan, now in their 20s.

Many years ago, Dave was diagnosed with MS, a disease that breaks down your motor control. Some people can no longer stand, walk, or even feed themselves. Despite our medical

advances, there is no cure. Dave did pretty well for a long time, but couldn't work for the past two years. In particular, his MS challenged his ability to swallow and eat.

Brenda had to carry many extra responsibilities for the home, including dealing with a basement flood, yardwork, and day to day life. And of course, she cared directly for Dave when he couldn't care for himself. That is love.

Not long ago, Brenda was forced to hire a hospice nurse to care for Dave in ways she couldn't, and so she could work, here at Bethel, to provide for their household.

Sadly, in October, only about 5 weeks ago, he *succumbed* to this disease, and passed on to Heaven. He was 56.

Brenda is in this auditorium today. No doubt, this is a very difficult story to re-live for her. It is such a fresh wound in her life. But we are her community. And we are God's people. So today, in keeping with God's fondness for the widow, we want to do something for Brenda. During the months she had to be gone from work to care for Dave, she exhausted her paid personal days off, and lost about \$700 in wages. That just compounded her misery and heightened anxiety. So, we want to gift her the wages she waived, and maybe ease the pain a bit, with a \$1,000 check of donated funds.

Let's express our care and condolence and support for Brenda Quiggle.

Students, in the coming days and weeks, especially during Christmas holiday, this is how I would hope you pray:

God, you love justice. Use me to deliver it ... here and at home. Speak to me about any area where I might be your agent for justice.

Lord, do I apply standards fairly? (work, school, friends)

Do I disadvantage others by an unfair process?

Do I block others from fair access to opportunities?

In what area would you develop compassion in me for those for which you hold a special fondness: the widow, orphan, poor, alien/foreigner, the oppressed?

We cannot be Christian without developing eyes for the Justice of Jesus. Help us, Lord, to be your agents for Biblical justice.