



May 2024

Theme: Passion for a Life of Justice

Scripture Passage: Amos 5:21-24

Do you know hunger? I'm not talking about the sensation many of us feel at midday or late evening when it has been a few hours since our last meal. Do you know true hunger? I mean the pain in the gut that happens when you can't remember when you last ate and have no idea when you might eat again. Most of us are probably fortunate enough not to know that kind of desperate hunger. Hunger can motivate people to do things they wouldn't ordinarily do. That's why I'm struck by Jesus' words as he teaches ways to experience happiness or blessing in the Beatitudes. He says, *"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. (Matthew 5:6)"* The New Living Translation of the verse reads, *"God blesses those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be satisfied."*

This month, our prayer focus is a Passion for a Life of Justice. That may feel like a simple idea, but it raises some challenges. There could be disagreement about what justice looks like in a particular circumstance. We also have to explore whether we honestly consider our approach to justice a passion. In other words, do we hunger and thirst for what is right? Saying we "agree with" or "support" what is right is not the same as having a burning desire in our gut and an undeniable call on our hearts that propel us beyond our comfort zone to address inequities in the world.

Passion for a life of justice should matter to us because justice matters to God. It's a recurring theme in the Bible. Psalm 89:14, for example, states that *"Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; love and faithfulness go before you."* We read, *"To do what is right and just is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice,"* in Proverbs 21:3.

The prophet Amos warned the people of Israel about their failure to live justly. He spoke powerfully about their ambivalence and hypocrisy toward the most vulnerable people among them. The more powerful individuals enjoyed comfort and luxury under a veneer of faith that ignored the core teachings of God, including caring for the widow, helping the poor, welcoming the stranger, and feeding the hungry. As a result of this, Amos shares God's feelings in Amos 5:21-24.

21 *"I hate, I despise your religious festivals;
your assemblies are a stench to me.
22 Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them.
Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,
I will have no regard for them.
23 Away with the noise of your songs!
I will not listen to the music of your harps.
24 But let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream.*

God warns the people that their ceremonies and rituals mean very little in the absence of living lives that reflect God's will and way.

Jesus provides further clarity on what justice looks like. He was clear about his mission. In Luke 4:18-19, he says, *"The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."* Jesus explains what justice looks like in his teachings about the sheep and goats and the wedding banquet. He also put it into practice by welcoming women, touching lepers, and challenging the elite for their exclusionary and oppressive practices.

This is where passion for a life of justice becomes most meaningful. Justice isn't about a political agenda; it's a matter of Christian discipleship. While charity is essential, it is not the same as the work of justice. According to Feeding America, one in nine people in New York state lives with hunger, including one child in six. It is important to meet the immediate needs of the person in front of you looking for something to eat. However, Jesus calls us to move beyond charity when it comes to feeding the hungry. He calls us to work to build a world where no one is hungry. We should strive to eliminate the barriers that hinder people's ability to feed themselves. Do we seek to address deeper systemic issues that give rise to hunger, especially when hunger is concentrated in particular geographic areas and among certain peoples? Hunger and food apartheid are often the result of decisions made by a powerful few that have inflicted harm on a larger group. This is the work of justice.

Social inequities in our world are not just the result of the behavior of bad individuals acting on bad thoughts. Justice is required when certain behaviors and practices have been codified into policy that advantage some at the expense of others. Sadly, the church as an institution and individuals who claim Jesus have enabled ways of thinking that allow society to believe that some of God's children are less than others, empowering those types of policies and practices. However, none of us is less in the eyes of God. Finding ways to dismantle those systems is a critical element of a passionate life of justice. Multiple issues, such as poverty, violence, racism, sexism, are potential areas for action. Specific manifestations of these issues such as hunger, affordable housing, or mass incarceration can be where the Holy Spirit may lead a disciple of Jesus to work. However God is calling you to move, trust in God's power will keep you wherever God's call sends you.

We can look at our communities and easily determine that things are not right. The question becomes does it matter enough to us to do something about it? As followers of Jesus, we seek to love God and love our neighbors as Christ commands. As the noted scholar and intellectual Cornel West states, justice is what love looks like in public. Justice is the norm in the Beloved Community. Christ is the foundation on which we stand and love is the very air we breathe. Jesus teaches justice. Jesus models justice.

Jesus expects us to do the same. Our Lord calls us to remember the command to love, to create a world where all are welcome, where all have enough, and where God's infinitely diverse children are celebrated, welcomed, and empowered to live without barriers. May our prayer be that as we approach Pentecost, the Holy Spirit ignites in each of us a passion for a life of justice.

Prayer for the Month

Lord, you call us to build a world where justice is the norm. In a world where there is so much that is out of balance and does not reflect your will, let us be people of true justice. Not the violence that we have so often seen as the response to something illegal, but it's how love put into practice can heal wounds, rectify harm, and create a sense of healing and wholeness. We seek to build the Kingdom you taught, the Kingdom you were building. Love is the fuel, and you are the foundation of a world where we do not thrive on hierarchy, where we do not judge in ways that would tell our siblings that they are less than us. A world in which we do not create stumbling blocks, policies, and barriers that keep any of your created souls from experiencing the fullness and joy of life in the community as you have created it. We hear your call that justice flows like a river and righteousness like a mighty stream. Amen.

Prayer Queues or Breath Prayers for the Month

- May 5 – Come Holy Spirit, light a fire in me for justice. Let your passion burn in me to share your truth with those who do not understand or refuse to hear.
- May 12 – Come Holy Spirit, create a hunger in me to be your hands and feet. Let the desire to serve grow in me and drive me as my basic need for food does.
- May 19 – Come Holy Spirit, form a thirst in me for your truth. Let me seek your wisdom and your will as I hope to love and serve God and all God's children.
- May 26 – Come Holy Spirit, blow through my world, moving me from places of comfort and safety to where your work is waiting for me.



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