

Witnesses to Justice

Luke 9:28-36

March 3, 2019

The church calendar marks the last Sunday before Lent begins as Transfiguration Sunday. We encounter this amazing and very strange sounding story. Jesus climbs a mountain with James, John, and Peter. They witness his transformation into a dazzling white image and they also see two people they identify as Moses and Elijah. One of the mysteries is how they knew this was Moses and Elijah, given the lack of pictures during the time, but somehow, they knew who these two figures were.

The figures of Moses and Elijah have a deeply symbolic meaning for the Hebrew faith. Moses stands as a representative of the Law, the Torah. He received the tablets with the commandments from God on the mountaintop. Elijah is often seen as the preeminent prophet, even though we have far fewer of his words than later prophets like Isaiah. Elijah was also the prophet who was swept away by a chariot of fire.

The Law and the Prophets are pillars that support the Hebrew system of justice. Consider the Ten Commandments. Each of the commandments contributes to a just society. The Sabbath commandment insured that we would care for humans and animals. The idea of Sabbath is also tied to care of creation, since it links to the seven-day story of creation and to the idea of allowing the land to lie fallow every seven years.

The command regarding adultery is about so much more than faithfulness to spouse. When families are stable, when parents are committed to one another, there is a safe place with greater economic stability for children. The command to honor father and mother was directed at adult children whose parents had aged and now needed care. (You can find evidence of that in Matthew 7:9-13), where Jesus called religious types to account for neglect of their parents by misusing the Law.

Jesus speaks to the issue of Law and justice. Jesus said in Matthew 23, “. . . hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith.” Each commandment has a connection to justice, even the commands regarding idolatry have connections to justice and Elijah will show us that.

Jesus is following in the footsteps of the prophets, who are the ones who called out those who ignored the Law or perverted it for their purposes. Elijah was the prophet who called out King Ahab of Samaria and his wife Jezebel for their abuse of the poor and the powerless in Israel. If you focus on the common stereotype of Jezebel as being a woman of loose morals, you really miss the problem that Elijah had with her. Elijah saw in Ahab and Jezebel the problem that almost always arises with those who are powerful. They abuse law so that they can take the property and even liberty from the poorest.

When Jezebel married Ahab, she brought her religion with her – the worship of Baal. One of the reasons that the prophets warned against the idolatrous religions is the demands that these religions placed upon the economy. These kinds of demands always rested most harshly upon the shoulders of the poor. We learn in 1 Kings 18 that the prophets of Baal numbered 400. Those 400 priests had to be fed and housed from the royal treasury. That meant taxes. In a rural economy that always ends up impacting the poorest tenants of the land. While the words of later prophets like Amos would condemn the powerful for their abuse of the poor, Elijah used words combined with a little something else. He called down fire to destroy the prophets of Baal. That may be why he was considered the preeminent prophet.

Another story about Ahab and Jezebel also speaks to this issue of justice. In 1 Kings 21, Ahab covets a vineyard from a neighbor, Naboth. He offers to buy the vineyard and Naboth refuses, citing the need to keep his ancestral inheritance intact. Ahab goes home in a snit and his wife asks him what's wrong. When Naboth explains the problem, Jezebel tells him not to worry. She will fix it. She uses the royal seal to order a plot against Naboth. The town officials bring false accusations against this innocent man. Naboth is stoned and Ahab grabs the vineyard. Elijah meets Ahab and proclaims God's justice against him. Ahab and Jezebel both die in horrific circumstances. Elijah understood that God's justice is deeply concerned for the poor and the powerless.

These two powerful representatives of God's justice we see standing and conversing with Jesus. Jesus was the embodiment of God's justice. Moses and Elijah by their presence become witnesses to this justice. We stand with Peter, James and John, invited to also become witnesses to the fullness of the justice of God.

In Jesus, the justice of God promises food for the hungry, healing for the infirmed, inclusion for the marginalized, recognition for the forgotten, deliverance for the persecuted, freedom for the prisoner, hope for the despairing, liberation for the enslaved, and life for the dying. We are witnesses to that amazing good news. We are witnesses to the justice that says that all structures of oppression will be overturned, that death will not have the final answer, and that God's kingdom will come.

Christian witness is unique. As witnesses we are called at times to enact this type of justice, even at our own expense. And as witnesses we are also called to speak with our words God's justice and to live in ways that are faithful to that justice.

In other words, if we are to be effective witnesses to this, our lives need to reflect that we are followers of this Jesus Christ. Moses and Elijah were effective witnesses to God's justice because they took seriously the greatest commandment. They loved God with all heart, soul, mind, and strength. There is no shade of gray in that. If we are going to be witnesses to the justice of God in Jesus, we too must be obedient to this commandment. We must love Jesus with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

Jill Duffield, Presbyterian pastor and editor of *Presbyterian Outlook*, calls this her Jesus first agenda. She acknowledges her failure to do that and we can confess the same. Nevertheless, she also acknowledges we need to speak what this Jesus first agenda means, daily acknowledging what it means and daily asking God to forgive and give us strength to strive towards this. Listen to her compelling description of what a Jesus agenda means.

Jesus first means praying for discernment with an open mind and heart, not asking God to confirm my well-formed assumptions.

Jesus first requires confession, repentance and sincere pleas for forgiveness, not blaming or judging or condemning others.

Jesus first compels me toward those suffering in the ditch, not worrying about my safety and walking to the other side of the road.

Jesus first tells me to welcome the children, the stranger, the least of these, not build barriers to keep them away.

Jesus first calls me to give away my coat and my shirt, not build bigger barns to protect my wealth.

Jesus first pushes me to love my enemies, not seek retaliation.

Jesus first teaches me to tend creation for the sake of generations to come, not exploit its resources for my instant gratification.

Jesus first shows me that I am to wash the feet of friend and betrayer alike, not imagine that some roles or tasks are beneath me.

Jesus first commands me to visit the prisoner and proclaim release to the captive, not relegate entire groups of people to mass incarceration for generations.

Jesus first instructs me to feed the crowd, not send them away hungry.

Jesus first refuses to let me believe that anyone is unworthy of care because Christ died for all.

Jesus first reveals the joy that comes when I trust in the grace of God instead of calculate my place in comparison to others.

Jesus first evokes hope and love, not despair and fear.

Jesus first reveals that sacrificial love is more powerful than violence and cruelty.

Jesus first urges me to seek reconciliation over being right.

Jesus first entails being a steward of the mysteries of God, not an owner of anything.

Jesus first compels me to acts of mercy, not sacrifice.

Jesus first reassures me that resurrection has the last word, not death.

Jesus first relieves me of the burden of searching elsewhere in vain for purpose, worth and abundant life.<sup>1</sup>

The reason all of this is so important is that we are only effective witnesses if we do what Micah tells us is required. “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

Whether we are kneeling to help a small child who has fallen or organizing a national march to speak on the behalf of women who have been abused, we must do so with mercy and humility. That’s putting Jesus first. That’s obedience to the greatest commandment. Less of us, more of a focus on God and a willingness to love what is good, act kindly, and walk in humility.

As we approach this table we are being fed by the one who showed us what this meant. In his body and in his blood in humility and love, he gave all for the world to make full God’s justice for the world. He invites us to love him with our whole hearts and to be witnesses to a justice that will deliver all who suffer. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Jill Duffield, <https://pres-outlook.org/2019/02/my-jesus-first-agenda/>