

“When No One Is Looking”

Scripture

Micah 6: 8

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?

Luke 14:1, 7-14

¹On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath, they were watching him closely. ⁷When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. ⁸“When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; ⁹and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, “Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. ¹⁰But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, “Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. ¹¹For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” ¹²He said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. ¹³But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

Jerry Hilton was a walking buddy of mine when I lived in Michigan. Although a good fifteen to twenty years my senior, at six-foot-ten, he kept me on a fast pace. In Michigan we walked in the Lakeside Mall as soon as it opened in the mornings – about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile all the way around the edges, it was the only place for walking in the winter.

On one of those walks, Jerry paid me one of the highest compliments I’ve ever received. He told me I was well-qualified to be a minister because I was a true Christian. I wondered where in the world he came up with that one. It certainly wasn’t from all my attempts to get him involved in our church because he rebuffed those. “Oh, it’s because when we were going by the Cinnabon store as the clerk was opening and when the gate was stuck you immediately stopped to help him out.” (What Jerry didn’t realize was that I was secretly wishing I could stop and get one of their famous cinnamon rolls and so the jammed door had caught my attention!)

Nah, there are sometimes when I do nice things when no one is looking. It's that way for you sometimes, isn't it? You know so when you get caught thinking no one is looking. But looking is the key whether you are found out or not.

In talking about our question of what the Lord requires of us and focusing on the subject of doing justice, I quote for you the novelist, Iris Murdoch, who says that our capacity to do justly is based *on our vision, on what we see*. **“True vision,” she says, “occasions right conduct.... The more the separateness and differentness of other people is realized, and seeing the fact that another person has needs and wishes as demanding as one's own, makes it harder to treat a person as a thing.”** It's how we see things that let us do justly. Interestingly, that's what Jerry Hilton caught me at when I didn't know anyone was looking.

The reason I emphasize vision or seeing is because the biblical idea of justice is perhaps different than we might commonly use it in our modern world. Our modern justice is a courtroom lawsuit, nuanced in legalities, motions and rules. Sometimes the rules are stronger. Sometimes it's the legalities. But it's all of it mostly impersonal.

Biblical justice is personal. It doesn't want to treat a person as a thing, as Murdoch says. I'd say it wants to see the other person and to have them treated in ways that dignify them, with goods and respect. In the words of Walter Brueggemann, biblical justice **“sorts out what belongs to whom, and returns it to them.”** The practical consequences of that are that the poor, the widow, and the orphan get a place restored to them in society and in its wealth and well-being that may have been previously denied.

Craig Dykstra illustrates these two ways of understanding justice in a way that brings it home. He writes of a wife who feels she is being used. Keeping her complaint to herself for a good long time, she eventually blurts out her feelings: “You pay no attention to me. You act as if I am not really here. I feel that I am just an object to you, something useful to have around.” He does not understand or pretends not to understand and replies: “What do you want from me? I have given you everything. Time, a house, children, money – everything is yours! What else do you want?” In courtroom language, she has received no wrong. But when she blurts out in frustration: “What I want, what I need, is you!” she speaks a language of justice that is of a biblical kind. It sees who in particular is making the claim [and] who in particular the claim is being made of, and it validates the claim.

Jesus follows this pattern in our entertaining little reading about the dinner party where the guests seem to be playing musical chairs. “You all seem to put your stock in the conventional wisdom of rules for who sits where and how close.

What if what's right isn't set by status or position but by how the host may be gracious and/or giving? What if you sat in your front row seat and the host saw a long-lost friend who he was just dying to catch up with? Wouldn't you be embarrassed to have to go sit by the kitchen?"

But Jesus isn't just after providing us with an Emily Post etiquette lesson. He wants to articulate a vision for justice. So, he tells his host that he would do better to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind to his dinner table. Why? Well, because then his hosting would be a genuine gift, which is how God is with us. See the one who is in the most need and give to that one and you will be in the fellowship of God.

This came home to me this week in too many instances – through the value we came to see we needed to have taken more seriously for those loved and cared for, but that we had not noticed. On Wednesday evening, this was true for Bonnie and me as we were able to take out Dr. Lincoln Brownell to dinner. Lincoln had been my host when I visited Liberia in Africa, last May. He was here for a wedding celebration for a pastor friend of his. Lincoln comes to the U.S. a couple of times per year. He is the President of the Liberian Baptist Theological Seminary and he comes seeking to strengthen the seminary's support and also to find ways to provide for his family.

Out to dinner, Bonnie and I pressed him about what daily life was like for him in impoverished and war-recovering Africa. He told us that he was middle class. That meant that he had an education and worked as a professional, although it didn't mean that he made anywhere near \$50,000 or \$75,000 or \$100,000 per year like middle class folks like us do. In fact, he hasn't even been paid in four years, as I recall he said. He uses someone's credit card, gets a ticket to come over here, preach, receive honoraria and donations enough to pay for his trip and to take something home.

There are about 2000 middle class folks in Liberia, he told us, out of 3.7 million people. So, what money he makes goes to help him and his son live, and then comes the obligations to siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles, second and third cousins, and students and pastors with whom he has a relationship. What he earns helps support as many as 50 people. It gets them a couple of handfuls of rice per day and some other protein. Not much, enough to keep starvation away, but not to keep hunger away. Lincoln made sure to order cheese cake for dessert because it filled him out, and his Liberian diet will take it away in a week or two when he returns.

Bonnie and I saw that in our dinner with Lincoln. When no one was supposed to be looking we perceived someone whom God had made a special guest at the banqueting table. To do justice came a bit clearer in our vision. And even though it was uncomfortable, even though it connected us with the suffering

of others, it helped us better to see God's heart for doing right to the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind – or some such ones that Jesus would bid us to invite to dinner, who would have no way to pay us back. When no one is looking, what we can see of doing right by someone else, which is the gift of God.

Jerry Hilton had it right, helping the Cinnabon clerk with the stuck door was a way of being a Christian. I'm glad to get caught at that from time to time, even if the cinnamon rolls won't be ready until after my walk is well over.