

Something Greater Than Justice.” A Post-Ferguson Reflection

Colleagues,

Richard E. Mueller, senior pastor of the Lutheran Church of the Atonement in Florissant, Missouri, stepped into his pulpit on the last Sunday in August understanding that the week's events in the now notorious Ferguson, one suburb to the south, required his attention. What he said that morning got to us via a back channel, and we thought you'd want to see it too. We thank him for his permission to pass it along.

As you read, please do so with a) discernment, and b) prayer. When I called for the aforementioned permission, Rick made a point of asking for your feedback. What might he have said that didn't get said? How would you have laid out the Gospel in a circumstance similar to the one he faced? For him it's a pressing question. The agony in Ferguson is far from done, and tension is presently on the rise as people wait for a grand jury to decide whether to bring criminal charges against the police officer involved. Rick mentioned that there are children and families in Atonement's church-and-school community who will be directly affected if public protests resume. The best way of thanking him for his contribution this week will be to pray for them.

A final quick thought. Friday is Reformation Day. As Rick intimates below, justification by grace through faith is God's best response for now to our thirst for justice. Perhaps we devote this Reformation Day to some careful thinking about how this is so. By "careful," I mean the kind that opens the inner

floodgates of thanks and praise to God.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

Pastor Richard E. Mueller, preaching in Florissant, Missouri on August 30 and 31, 2014–

“No justice, no peace. No justice, no peace.” The chant resounded up and down West Florissant Avenue and echoed through millions of radios and TVs in greater St. Louis and, literally, around the world. “No justice, no peace.” And, yet, we all surely wondered, what would justice look like? What would constitute “justice”... for a family that had lost a teenaged son,... for a community that too often gets the short end of the stick,...for business owners whose establishments were in the wrong place at the wrong time,...for police and other first responders who endured long hours and more than a little abuse,...for homeowners whose property value may never recover,...for a community whose good name has been tarnished for years to come? “No justice, no peace?” What, pray tell, might “justice” look like?

In our Thursday morning Bible class, as part of a larger conversation, we reflected on the Prophet Micah’s call to “do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God.” And, we asked, “What are some practical ways in which churches today can stand for justice...in our communities and our world? And, it quickly became clear that we are much better at “loving mercy,” than we are at “doing justice.” In the wake of the recent events in Ferguson, some of our school and church folks got together and launched a drive for food and personal care items for the affected households, and people responded generously. But, when Thursday’s conversation turned to doing justice, we were all in

favor of it, but at a loss as to how we could help bring it about. "No justice, no peace," the protesters chanted. And, yet, we wonder, what might justice actually look like? We picture a blindfolded Lady Justice holding her scales and wonder what, if anything, could ever bring them back into balance.

Bishop William Willimon recounts a story from the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, about a man who described how with several drunken friends from the secret police he had laughingly shot a young man and bound up his body and then went to the young man's home, where they dragged out and shot his father in front of his wife and then dragged away his body. Now, eighteen years later, after the man confessed before a horrified courtroom, one of the judges asked the now much older woman what she would like to see done to this man. Her reply: "This man has taken away from me everything dear to me. But he has not taken away my ability to love." And, then, she asked for some dirt from wherever they buried her husband—and for the man to visit her twice a month. Was this justice? Or, maybe something greater than justice?

In fact, the Hebrew Bible has a word for this, a word that does not readily translate into English. That word is '*chesed*'. And, yes, sometimes that word is translated as "mercy," and sometimes as "loving-kindness," and sometimes as "steadfast love," or "loyalty," or "persistence," or "constancy," or "goodness," or "forgiveness." In truth, it is all of these and more. It refers to God's determination to do right by His people, and to His yearning that we will in turn do right by each other. And, as serious as God is about the need to "do justice," the rabbis were clear: God is even more insistent that *chesed* takes precedence, even over justice—

—an insistence that we find over and over again in the parables of Jesus: the parable of the vineyard owner who pays all his

workers a day's wage, even though some only worked an hour; the parable of the father who threw a welcome-home party for the son who had disgraced the family; the parable of the king who forgave his servant an unimaginable debt; the parable of the street people invited to the wedding banquet; and on and on. Was this justice? Or, maybe something greater than justice?

And, then on the Cross, suffering perhaps the greatest injustice the world has ever known, this same Jesus offers restoration to the brigand who acknowledges his guilt, and forgiveness to the mob that refuses to. Was this justice? Or, maybe something greater than justice?

Justice, Aristotle said, is when people get what they deserve. But that's far from our Christian understanding. Our understanding is that God by grace offers us something far better. He offers us *chesed*, that steadfast, persistent, merciful forgiveness and love that restores us to God and to each other, that grace that fights through all the obstacles we put in God's way, so that His love can be made known.

So, does that exempt us from doing justice? Far from it! But it does help us appreciate that justice is the bare minimum in our dealings with each other. And that, when our communities fail to offer it, we should be actively engaged in rectifying that failure: working to overturn unjust laws, to expose unfair practices, and to speak out for those who cannot speak for themselves. Micah's words still ring in our ears, because they are God's own Word: we are both to "do justice" and to "love *chesed*." All of which finally brings us around to today's Second Lesson, Paul's pointed description of what lives redeemed by God's grace and committed to both justice and *chesed* will look like—everything from genuine love to patient suffering, from hospitality for strangers to a banquet for enemies. Justice, tempered by *chesed*.

Perhaps South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, inspired in large measure by the nation's churches and Christian heritage, can even point us in a fruitful direction, beginning with truth and yearning for reconciliation. Beginning with truth—not the “truth” about “him” or the “truth” about “them,” but with the truth about me, the truth about us. To begin, not with litanies of self-justification or self-pity, but with the real truth about our own inattention, our own lack of concern, our own lack of good judgment, even our own complicity in that which causes hardship to others. (And, frankly, apart from that I have no idea how reconciliation can happen.)

That is, to begin (where our worship so often begins) with the truth, an acknowledgment of our own inattention, our own lack of concern, our own complicity—and, then, to carry that truth to the Cross, and to lay that truth at the foot of the Cross, and to hear again our Lord's own words of restoration and forgiveness. And then, and only then, will we begin to “know justice,” and we will surely “know peace.”