

“Draw Near to Justice”  
Luke 3:10-14

Last January I watched the movie “Just Mercy”, even though I knew it was not going to be an easy experience. By the end of the movie, I had cramps and I was sweating because of the intensity of the suffering I witnessed. “Just Mercy” is based on the book by the same title written by Bryan Stevenson about the prison system and his work for racial justice in that system. This experience of being uncomfortable has been a main stay of my following in the footsteps of Jesus. I have been blessed with so many mentors and guides who have helped me to see that drawing near to those who are hurting and disadvantaged in society is an essential part of Christ’s path of justice.

That is how Bryan Stevenson’s work started. When he was 23 - in law school at Harvard – one of his assignments was to spend a month as an intern with the Southern Prisoners Defense Committee, in GA. Within a few days of starting his internship, he was given the task of going alone to a maximum security prison that housed death row inmates to tell one of the inmates that he was not going to be executed in the next year. It was a very awkward task for someone that young. But after stumbling over his own words, he was able to get the message to the prisoner. As Stevenson relaxed into the visit, he was able to have a 3-hour conversation with Henry. The one request that Henry left him with was to come back and visit him again.

Drawing near to justice starts with being willing to draw near to the pain of others, especially those who are disadvantaged by society. Bryan Stevenson recommends four things for changing the world and the first one of them is to draw near to those who are suffering. That experience of drawing near to the pain of Henry, changed the course of his career. It was the turning point he needed to begin his journey of working for racial justice for Black prisoners.

That is what John the Baptist invited people to do. John saw a world rife with injustice and corruption because people were not following God’s commands and rules. He was born into the household of a priest, yet he saw the Temple in Jerusalem as the epitome of evil and corruption because the leadership there was cooperating with the Roman Empire, the occupiers of the land at the time. As a result, John set out to draw near to justice and to help others do the same. He joined a movement of reform in the wilderness. The wilderness had a special appeal to him because it was a place where people could go back to the original ways which God gave to the people of ancient Israel when they left Egypt.

John set out to reform his religion and his country through inviting people to draw near to the suffering of others. John had specific suggestions for how to draw near. The first step was being compassionate and caring about the poor (share coats, share food). The second step was to be ethical and just in their daily dealings (don’t collect more money than prescribed). The third step was not to lust for wealth. John knew that drawing near to justice had to begin on the ground level of daily life. What John was interested in was

justice and equality, practically acted out. It is also interesting to note that the people who asked John the questions are not well-known for their high moral standards. Tax collectors were Jews appointed by Rome to collect the taxes, but they could name their own price, pay the taxes out of what they had collected and legally keep the remainder for themselves. It was rare in those days to hear of an honest tax collector. Soldiers also used their position to intimidate people and to accept bribes. Both professions provided an ideal way to become wealthy at the expense of the people. Even for those people who felt hopeless because they lived by the corrupt standards of greed and empire, the good news reached them and transformed them to people who were caring and compassionate.

This is such an incredible message of hope and joy for us today. Our drawing close to justice does not have to start with changing the laws. It starts with small communities drawing near to the pain of others and looking out for others. We know from this pandemic and the racial injustices in our country that it is so important for us to draw near to the pain of those who are suffering. It is not enough to know the statistics or the facts, we have to know the people and see them as our kin. In the coming of Jesus, we know that God came in the flesh into the realities of our pain. We have to do the same. Christmas is about entering in the flesh into these realities. Think about your social circles and daily activities. How do they help or hinder you when it comes to this kind of drawing near to the suffering of others?

There is a local group in our own community called, "Just Kings." It is made up of some of our local brothers and sisters after the murder of George Floyd this year. Their mission is "to provide a voice for the local Black community. We work to educate and mentor the youth, our neighbors and ourselves as we continue to fight to end Racism (White Supremacy)." You can follow them on Facebook and join in the community events they are hosting. I know that one of the challenges of the systems of racism is how separate people of different races live, especially in our social circles. So I invite you this Christmas to step out of your comfort zone, no matter what race you are, to reach out through this group. If you are in a different community, find a local group that will help you do the same. Draw near to justice by drawing near to your brothers and sisters of other races or religions!

In a book called, *The Home We Build Together*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks uses the image of a hotel for our life on earth. He says that we tend to live in our communities as if we are living in a hotel where what matters is only my room and there is no sense of community. What Sacks challenges us to do is to create communities together in the same way we may build a home, where all of us are invested in the making and the upkeep of our home. This model he believes can transform our societies from communities of complaint and rights to communities of compassion and responsibility. "Rights depend on law, responsibility on culture. But without responsibility, rights are a cheque on an empty account, a song on an iPod whose battery is dead. On 10 December 1948 the United Nations made its momentous Declaration of Human Rights. Yet human rights abuses have not visibly diminished since. That is why the Bible is more concerned with cultivating habits of responsibility than merely prescribing rights. Rights are legislated

by states. Responsibility is created by society. You cannot have one without the other. A system of rights must be accompanied by a culture of responsibility."

Let's take a moment to pray together and ask God to help us in continuing to draw near to justice. This is a prayer written by Desmond Tutu:

Disturb us, O Lord  
when we are too well-pleased with ourselves  
when our dreams have come true because we dreamed too little,  
because we sailed too close to the shore.

Disturb us, O Lord  
when with the abundance of things we possess,  
we have lost our thirst for the water of life  
when, having fallen in love with time,  
we have ceased to dream of eternity  
and in our efforts to build a new earth,  
we have allowed our vision of Heaven to grow dim.

Stir us, O Lord  
to dare more boldly, to venture into wider seas  
where storms show Thy mastery,  
where losing sight of land, we shall find the stars.  
In the name of the One who pushed back the horizons of our hopes  
and invited the brave to follow. Amen.