

Let's Go Deeper...

Wednesday, March 9, 2016

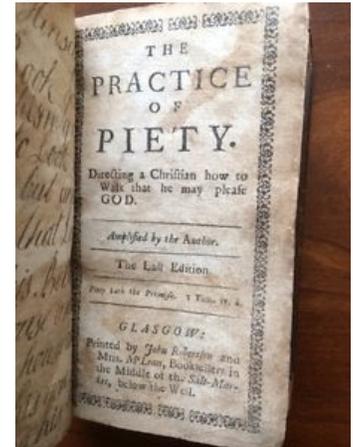
We're past halfway on our 40-day Lenten Road to Renewal. On Sunday, we passed the Milepost that read: Food for the Journey.

In the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18, Jesus names three of the primary food groups—spiritual disciplines--that have nourished the souls of God's people for ages: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. He speaks of our doing all the above as "practicing our piety." Inasmuch as "practice makes perfect," serving, praying, and fasting *perfects* (read: matures, strengthens) our souls.

Go deeper with me in pondering almsgiving and piety.

"Whenever you give alms..." says Jesus. I learned in my study last week that the words *almsgiving* and *mercy* are closely related etymologically. They have the same root.

I also learned the words *piety*, *righteousness* and *justice* derive from the same Greek word δικαιοσύνη, *dikaíosynē*, dik-ah-yos-oo'-nay. The pious person is the righteous person is the just person.



Bottom line: When Jesus speaks of practicing our piety through almsgiving, he is bundling some of the heavyweight words of Scripture into one pithy sentence. Echoes of Micah centuries before who said, "God has told you, O mortal, what is good (righteous); and what does the Lord require of you but to do (practice) justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Yes, Micah, but justice is much easier said than done. Not long after I arrived in 2014, I wrote a column for *The Call* in which I claimed that the difficulty of doing justice (being righteous/ practicing biblical piety) is rooted in four things:

1. Doing justice requires change. Something in the way society functions is not right, not equitable, not fair and needs to be changed. But we resist change. Change is hard.

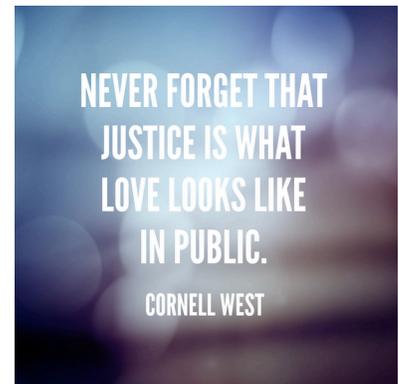
2. Doing justice is political. I mean political in the root meaning of the Greek word *politikos* (πολιτικός) meaning "the affairs of the city or citizens." Relating to citizens to effect change is a trying proposition because not all citizens see things alike—not at all. But I also mean political in the popular meaning of collectively influencing societies via the give-and-take of personal influence, legislation, and voting. The biblical prophets spoke to kings; we in a democracy address politicians. Politics in either sense leads me to #3:

3. Doing justice is messy. Anything that calls for change, involves unlike-minded human beings, and requires dabbling in the machinery of the way societies are organized and operated ushers in disagreement, negotiation, and compromise. That can be messy. Add in to that the fact there are any number of ways to try and tackle tough problems that in the end may yield only imperfect solutions and doing justice is not unlike making sausage. The result is desirable, but the process is not for the faint of heart or stomach.

4. Doing justice arises from a judgment. Something is askew. Unfair. Inequitable. A judgment is rendered: This is wrong. This must change. But many shy away from making judgments for fear of being perceived as judgmental. Or because we feel we do not have all the information to make an accurate judgment. Or because we don't like being judged. Or because some "justice-types" come across as self-righteous.

Doing justice is difficult, yet Micah's call remains: "Do justice." Given the above-stated challenges, I pray for mercy when my efforts are misguided or mistaken or shrill or arrogantly dismissive of others' perspectives or when an opportunity to speak up or speak out is missed. And I seek to be clothed in a rightful humility as I strive to articulate a response to the issues that cry out for redress.

The best definition I've heard of justice is Cornell West's "Justice is what love looks like in public." If the great commandment calls God's people to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves, then we will want our neighbor to have everything we want for ourselves and those whom we love: Good education. Healthcare. Opportunity. Safety. Advocating for those kinds of provisions for all our neighbors is what justice is all about: it's love gone public.



Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly. It's still what God requires. God help us.

Almighty God,
guide the nations of the world into the way of justice and truth,
and establish among them that peace which is the fruit of righteousness,
that they may become the kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Grant us, Lord God, a vision of our land as your love would make it:

- a land where the weak are protected, and none go hungry or poor;
- a land where the benefits of civilized life are shared, and everyone can enjoy them;
- a land where different races and cultures live in tolerance and mutual respect;
- a land where peace is built with justice, and justice is guided by love.

And give us the inspiration and courage to build it, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.