

Whose Justice?

Amos 5:21-24; John 4:23-26

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Flying blind can be a terrible experience as evidenced by the crash of John F. Kennedy, Jr. and his wife. Investigators called it a “disorientation accident.” Kennedy seems to have had a sudden attack of what pilots call “black hole vertigo” which is a three-way disconnection between reason, instinct and reality – even an inability to tell the difference between up and down.

In other words, black hole vertigo causes a pilot to think he is flying where he is not, and then to overcompensate. Though the plane feels as if it is veering to the right, Byron Barnes of the Air Traffic Controllers Association said that the double-pointed needle on the artificial horizon dial tells you differently. (Ed Vulliamy, “Why Kennedy Crashed,” *The Guardian*, Homiletics, July-August 07, pg. 60)

God is having a quarrel with Israel. Though meeting their obligations in church and High Holy Day attendance, they are caught in a spiritual “black hole vertigo.” They think they are doing something spiritually that they are not. The overcompensation I would imagine lies in hyperactivity with regard to worship. The sacrifices, the worship gatherings, the “noise” of their songs (that is the first mention of contemporary music in the Bible), and the melody of their harps were all unacceptable to God.

Seems strange, doesn't it? A few years ago an elder whom I saw at the third church activity that week said to me, “I should be getting a few credits with God for all of the time I've spent here at church this week.” The reason is sound, but is that the way God looks at it? Black hole vertigo is that place where there exists a three-way disconnection between reason, instinct and reality. I suspect that my reason, instinct, and reality aren't necessarily God's reasons, instincts and reality.

Jesus is concerned about right worship as well. Jews and Samaritans argued over worship places. So the woman says to Jesus, “Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” (John 4:20) Jesus tells her that she is missing the point. Worship isn't about a specific place. “But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipper will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him.” (John 4:23) It is about heart. Integrity. Love. And one more thing...it is about God looking out for those who want to worship this way. “The Message” frames Jesus' words in this fashion: “It's who you are and the way you live that counts before God. Your worship must engage your spirit in the pursuit of truth. That's the kind of people the Father is looking for; those who are simply and honestly themselves before him in their worship.”

That is what is missing in Israel's worship. There is an abundance of pretention and dishonesty. But there is no integrity. There is a disconnect between who they proclaim to be and the way they live.

And so Amos speaks the mind and heart of God in the matter: “But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” Again, “The Message” offers a fresh rendition: “Do you know what I want? I want justice – oceans of it. I want fairness – rivers of it. That's what I want. That's all I want.”

In his book, [*A Quiet Revolution*](#), John Perkins reflects on the civil rights movement in the 60's. He observed that “the churches in the south with the highest regard for the authority of Scripture were the

white churches, the church which stood for segregation and discrimination” ...”The issue shifted from justice to theological correctness,” he adds. “As I saw it,” Perkins continues, “the white church had traditionally thought that to speak the word of God was more important than living it out.” (A Quiet Revolution, Perkins, pg. 97) Mark Labberton, Pastor of First Presbyterian Church Berkeley, observes the same tendency in our churches today. “According to much church culture, there’s no connection between worship and justice.” (Labberton, The Dangerous Act of Worship, pg. 17)

So how may we move from our all too human tendency to compartmentalize our worship from the way we live? We might begin with the very purpose of worship which is “to produce lives fully attentive to reality as God sees it.” (Lafferton, pg. 18) In worship we enter God’s reality, not our reality. True worship enlarges our worlds. When the disciples met Jesus their worlds were radically altered and changed. We are given something, Someone to live into. The question changes from “how does God fit into my life?” to “What is God’s doing on earth and how do I fit in?” It is to enter into God’s imagination and begin to apply God’s creative energy in our responses to issues requiring love and justice.

Arthur Aurmann was the first pediatric immunologist to diagnose an infant with HIV/AIDS. As a Christian, this changed his life. How? On the medical school faculty of the University of California in San Francisco, he began to see the global implications of this discovery. He began networking with small local clinics all over Africa to provide them knowledge, the training, and give medicines toward preventing HIV/AIDS from mothers to their babies. Jesus began to expand Art’s spiritual imagination and deepen his theological reflectiveness. He was drawn towards people, shifting from the question of “how does God fit into my life?” to “What is God doing in the world and how do I fit in?” Ultimately it involved his church which became drawn in with him. (Labberton, pg. 149)

I really like how John Perkins redefines social action. He renames it “people action,” that is, “People putting energy behind their faith and aiming it at the problems around them” (Perkins, pg. 76). We go where the people are, come alongside with our resources, love them, build relationships intentionally and then tell about why we do it – as those called to follow Jesus into the needs of the world.

In a world dominated by acts of violence, exploitation, self-interest, manipulation, hatred, in other words, negative forces diminishing life and love, we become “spiritual saboteurs.” When the Nazis conquered Holland, they forced the Dutch factories and factory workers to produce war materials. Members of the Dutch resistance would take jobs in these factories in order to obstruct productivity and deliberately subvert the German war movement. One way of doing this was to take off their wooden shoes, called sabots, and throw them into the gears and turbines of the industrial engines or machines, causing them to break down. That, supposedly, is where we get our word sabotage. (Perkins, pg. 183)

Isn’t that what Jesus did? He was the best saboteur ever by throwing himself into the machinery of sin and evil, taking it on, and through his death and resurrection broke Satan’s whole movement of destruction. And we are Christ’s saboteurs.

One way we live out Christ’s life in the world is through the larger body of Christ. We do it through our basic mission support of the PCUSA. Through our non-designated funds we are involved in denominational partnerships world-wide in meeting human need. Those responsible have networks and sources to make sure the money is spent wisely. With low overhead, the flexibility of multiple resources and the readiness to respond at will, needs when they arise can be met wisely and effectively. Within our world mission effort we also support three missionaries whom we correspond with. Some of them you have met.

Yes, we escape that spiritual “black hole vertigo” by entering into God’s reality, allowing God’s imagination to inspire and direct us. I think of Martin Luther King who proclaimed, “I have a dream.” His dream is God’s dream, that one day all of us will be judged not by the color of our skin, but the content of our character. America will be a place where people are treated justly, fairly and kindly. It is a vision which invites us to begin living into its reality. That is what God does.

King allowed God to shape his imagination and then began to live into it. We live with the humility and imagination that recognizes “that we belong; body and soul, in life and in death, not to our self but to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ.”

It starts with prayer, asking God where we fit in, reading scripture, asking God to enlarge our hearts, and give us eyes to see people in need in our immediate community and beyond. May our worship have integrity. May it be congruent with what we profess and how we live. It is God’s work and we are called as servants within it. Let us live into God’s imagination of what this world can become through him.