

SERMON: "SWORDS & SCALES"

**TEXT: OLD TESTAMENT
NEW TESTAMENT**

**DEUTERONOMY 16:18-20 & ISAIAH 11:1-9
MATTHEW 10:5-16**

**July 30, 2023
Sermons in Stained Glass – 8**

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INTRODUCTION

I've been privileged to stand in this pulpit for eight and half years
In those eight plus years I may have repeated myself a time or two
That is intentional, especially when it comes to the benediction I use each week
I think it helps to have things you're used to hearing
Maybe a few of you can recite it along with me, the whole thing maybe

But the charge from the prophet Micah, I think that is what people remember
Can you name the three things Micah says (and I repeat) that God requires of us?
They are 'to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God'
So then here is the key question raised by that benediction and
by this last window ... "what does it look like to do justice?"

Before you get going on your answers, let me pump the brakes
As a faith leader, I need to channel my math teachers growing up
And remind you not to just offer an answer ... please show your work

Let's start with where we can find the answers as to what justice looks like
Might I suggest an order of importance, a foundation on which to build
Start with Jesus – his words, his actions. How did he 'do justice'
Think about his teaching, his many and varied acts of healing.
Think about him arguing with religious leaders, turning over tables

Then think through other passages in the bible about justice
The prophet Amos when he talks about justice rolling down like water
and righteousness like an ever flowing stream. What was he talking about?
He was criticizing their religious practices while trampling the poor in the dust

And the passage from Micah. Doesn't it seem rather obvious that doing justice
is very much related to loving mercy and walking humbly with God?

Defining what it means to do justice we start with Jesus, then other bible passages
Building from that foundation ... we also check out the last window
It is all about justice. And it includes five different images. At the top,
the Chi-Ro initials for Christ ... and four images about justice below

Being true to what I just suggested, let's start with the bible passages
that are referenced by our forbearers then move on to the images
They mentioned three passages, our passages for today

A BALANCING ACT

Actually four with the parable of the virgins (bridesmaids) and the lamps that you see in the window. I can see how that parable would relate to 'doing justice' They were patient, justice takes time. And they were prepared

The first verse mentioned in their description of the window is Matthew 10:16 These are Jesus words to his disciples as he sends them out to proclaim the good news and to heal (that is their assignment). Then he says ...

**“I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves,
so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves ...”**

He will go on to warn them that they will be persecuted, dragged before the authorities. His warning about being sent out like sheep among wolves makes sense given what he tells them is to come – persecution. Again let me state the obvious His followers are **not** sent out to be the ones doing the persecuting. They are (we are) the sheep, not the wolves.

I'll move on from that obvious distinction to focus on what I think is the primary point the window, by way of multiples images and bible references, is making. That is balance – not one thing, but a blend of many (a combo platter if you will)

That is crystalized in that last part of Matthew 10:16
Be wise as serpents ... and as innocent as doves. Interesting mix there
We remember the serpent in the garden of Eden. Wise as in crafty
And doves we've seen as symbols of the Holy Spirit
Not serpent OR dove. Both. A balance thereof

What does it look like to 'do justice'? What might that balance look like?
To be as wise as a serpent and innocent as a dove, a sheep among wolves
I always think back to the examples of those who practice non-violent protest
They worked at it. They prepared for the violence they would face.
They didn't protest wearing tactical gear or carrying zip ties. They sang hymns.

Speaking of that example, non-violent protest, I looked up the history of these windows
There are handouts on the table in the commons about the windows
Descriptions about the imagery and a bit of that history ... including the price
(\$900 per window in 1965). I looked it up in the Session minutes for 1964 / 65

You know what else I found? Multiple references to the church supporting voter registration efforts in the South ... doing justice in several ways!
Designing a window that speaks to justice and sending money to fight against injustice by registering voters who faced voter suppression and intimidation.
Doing justice is very much about balance, doing this and that

The balance of doing justice is also very much about the "how" of doing so

CHECKS & BALANCES

What we work for, what we fight for, has to be a question not just of what ... but how?
How do we advocate for our beliefs? How do we do so as sheep among wolves?
What tools or resources are we to employ? This window includes several tools
balanced scales, actual tools ... and another chain
This is what our forebearers said about those images

Next symbol is justice with the scale and sword. The scale indicates that justice implies the weighing of right and wrong, of good and evil. The sword symbolizes the enforcement of justice Deut. 16:20, Isaiah 11:4. At the right of the scale of justice is The Flame surrounded by the chain expresses the containment of passion. Just below is fortitude, the last symbol. The virtue of fortitude gives to the Christian the strength to fight the good fight, in defense, which is represented by the shield, and in offence, represented by the sword, in his own battle with his own passions, with the devil and evil.

The scale is the image that first comes to mind when we envision 'justice.'
The one in the window is a bit different from the one we see in civics lessons, the one from courtrooms, of a woman wearing a blindfold and holding scales.
This one has the scales balanced on a sword (one of two in this window)

I honestly prefer the one from our courtrooms, I like the blindfold.
It reflects the wisdom of justice showing no partiality, blind in a sense
Like the way the prophet Isaiah describes the one who is to come
the one we know is Jesus and how he will judge

He shall not judge by what his eyes see or decide by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge for the poor and decide with equity for the oppressed of the earth;

Our forebears were intentional to connect this symbol of justice, scales, to judges and to the courtroom mentioning both Isaiah and Deuteronomy, chapter 16

You shall appoint judges and officials throughout your tribes, in all Your towns that the LORD your God is giving you, and they shall render just decisions for the people. You must not distort justice; you must not show partiality; and you must not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of those who are in the right. Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, so that you may live and occupy the land that the LORD your God is giving you

The new nation needed its own laws, its own practices. Not something from Egypt. Nations ever since have needed that basic working system of justice
Every land and people need that sense of fairness. Especially in the courtroom
Or to use the biblical language – the gate (that is where they held court)

TOOLS

Can the people, wherever they live, whoever they are, count on fairness in the justice system? Can we count on the scales to be balanced?
I urge caution and care with what we hear and say. Talk of how things are quote, unquote 'weaponized' is dangerous for democracy, and for justice.
We do justice by paying attention to the facts, not the fear-mongering

But it is not just the facts that we are to balance.
The facts are of particular importance in the court of law, of course. Critical
But there is more for us to balance in our effort to do justice, lots more
We balance the wisdom of serpents and innocence of doves
We balance doing justice and loving mercy

We balance what we do ... and what we do not do
This last very busy window does a good job of that with more balancing,
more images - another sword and a shield ... and with a chain
Did you notice the flame on top of a tool, some kind of square
(to make sure things are in line, straight)? Interesting pairing of images

The description left for us tells us 'the flame surrounded by the chain expresses the containment of passion.' And it mentions passion again talking about the sword and shield (the balance of offense and defense) saying they are 'used offensively and defensively' *'in his own battle with his own passions, with the devil and evil.'*

Well now that is starting to sound like a whole another sermon there
I'll avoid the temptation to talk too much about temptation in that way at this time

Given the debates and divisions within the Body of Christ about human sexuality and in these United States – laws passed, beers boycotted, cases before the court, the pastors have a proposal before the Session to talk openly and honestly (and respectfully) with one another about those differences

We would like to schedule a two-night workshop / conversation in September that we are calling "Text and Context" to listen to God's word "what does the bible say about these things?" and to listen to each other
We think a conversation like the one we propose is how we do justice
It is how we work at being 'A Place for Everyone.'

In the time I have left I want to think of passion as more than something sexual.
Passion is much bigger than that. It is our feelings in general – all caps in a text, a rise in our blood pressure, a raised voice at home (or in a stadium), and more.

The chain around our passions (all of them) is not meant to keep them chained up (beware of dog) like passion is a bad thing. It is not.
The chain, like the scale, like the offensive use of a sword and the defensive use of a shield is about balance
How can our passion be balanced with compassion?

SUMMARY

How do we keep it all together and do justice as sheep among wolves?

Well that is an ongoing conversation. Not balanced as in it's all settled

It is balancing ... reformed and always being reformed

Balancing offense and defense, what we do and what we do not do

Balancing private and public ... personal morality and social justice

Those two are not either/or. They are both/and

Back to the courtroom to offer one particularly important balancing act

one that applies to doing justice through the justice system

balancing the facts of the case and one's own feelings about the case

Let me tell you about the one time I was called for jury duty ... and selected.

I was serving my first church in Kentucky at the time

The charge was possession of a firearm by a convicted felon

The defense attorney called four witnesses to testify

They all said the same thing. The attorney asked if they saw the defendant on the night in question. They all answered, "yes." Next question,

"Did he have a firearm?" Again, they all answered 'yes.'

The attorney continued with more specific questions, "Where was the gun?"

"In his hand." they all answered. Then one last question,

"How would you describe the defendant's behavior?"

All their answers were again the same, "he was drunk, very drunk."

A couple witnesses added, "he was as drunk as I've ever seen him."

Now remember, this was the defense attorney asking the questions.

Then came the closing arguments. The defense attorney's argument was unique. He argued, "Yes, my client did have a gun in his hand,

but he didn't know it. He was too drunk!"

With that argument in mind, the jury was sent off to deliberate.

I thought it was going to be a quick discussion. It was not.

My peers were all talking about the man's drinking, not the gun

After a few frustrating hours, we finally agreed to on a verdict

Based on the facts, we found him guilty as charged.

and we asked, if possible, the sentence might include treatment

We made our decision based on the facts.

We used the facts to do justice.