

Doing Justice
A Bible study and reflection guide

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Questions for discussion and reflection.

1. The vision of Isaiah is one of abundant life, where peace and justice abide together -- built on the just distribution of resources among the community. The labor and integrity of human beings is not exploited, and the vision spans the generations. What does this vision say to us about the global community we live in today?
2. What kinds of power exist? How is power abused? How can the church use power, share power, and generate power justly to end violence?
3. What are the spiritual resources that can be drawn on in the work of justice advocacy?
4. How do we act with a sense of political urgency without making the political our ultimate goal or measure of hope? Are there temptations to be avoided in public policy advocacy work?

Prayer: *Great God, help us stay vulnerable to hope while working in ministries concerning public life and social policy. May those efforts, Holy One, be rooted in your justice ... even as we hold out hope for those who seemingly have none. Amen.*

Public Life and Social Policy
Ministry Team

Introduction

Over the past year or so as we have been preparing for the new Justice and Witness Ministries and as we have begun our new life, I have reflected on the question found at the beginning of the Micah 6 quotation that we so often use. "What does the Lord require of you?" I have asked that question as one who is bold enough to call myself a Christian, a follower of Christ. And I have asked that question as we in Justice and Witness Ministries seek to discern God's mission for us and for the whole United Church of Christ.

We all know that the answer to that question is to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God. It is important to note that answer follows the word "but." In other words, all that God requires of us is to do justice.

Doing justice sounds easy, but is oh so difficult. We in Justice and Witness Ministries have come to understand that the very first step in doing justice is understanding why we do the work that we are called to do. We are doing it because that is what the Lord requires. It's not about being politically correct. It's about being faithfully correct.

With this understanding, we have placed Bible study, theological reflection and prayer at the heart of our work. As a part of our team-building work over the first six months of our life together, each of the four program teams and the administrative team have worked on Bible studies. We chose the World Council of Churches theme for the decade beginning with 2001 -- "the Decade to Overcoming Violence" -- as the theme for our study and reflection. Reflecting on this theme, working together to identify texts and then spending time to study them has brought us closer together, has given us new insights and has informed the work of the new Justice and Witness Ministries.

In addition, beginning with the first Monday in Advent, we have begun to pray together each Monday morning, not only for ourselves and our work, but for the conferences and local churches of the United Church of Christ and for the world in which we live. We believe that prayer and serious study of the Scripture is part of that walking humbly with God which Micah calls us to as well.

We are pleased to have the Bible studies of each of the teams of the Justice and Witness Ministries be our first new publication. We invite you to use

these Bible studies with your local church, with your conference or association social justice committee, with your family and friends as you seek to learn how God would have you do justice in today's broken world. Perhaps you might choose to use them during Lent or maybe during a church leader's retreat. Moreover, we urge you to join us and other member communions of the World Council of Churches in praying St. Francis of Assisi's prayer, "Lord make me an instrument of your peace," every day during the 2001 Lenten season.

We look forward to working with you as we seek to respond faithfully to the prophet Micah's challenging and profound question for us all.

Yours in Christ,
Bernice Powell Jackson
Executive Minister
Justice and Witness Ministries
The United Church of Christ

In this Corinthians passage, Paul writes, "we are perplexed, but not driven to despair, struck down, but not destroyed, always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies." The struggle for justice, peace and the integrity of creation finds its way into and out of our very bodies if we let it. From that experience we learn to speak the truth. Many in our world die an untimely death at the hands of the U.S. military, economic or social power. What a tremendous responsibility it is to carry Jesus' death within as an advocate. It challenges self-centered thinking. It opens us to concern for others. Being a Christian may mean giving up our lives, or at least our power, so that others may be empowered and live. The meaning of Jesus' death makes false securities provided by the established order feel insignificant. Jesus' many examples of advocacy challenge us, when we decide, out of our comfortableness. We are challenged not to do nothing or wait around for things to get better, or when the right president is elected or the right technology comes along. Working for justice in public policy is about channeling hope and imagination into power for good. Too often it is used to buttress the harm and destruction that power can cause when it is grabbed by the wrong hands.

Building an advocacy strategy around the hope of Isaiah's dream of a new community is a powerful position to advocate from. Ralph Neas, director of the People for the American Way, places the role of policy advocacy in civil rights movements across our history in this way:

It is important to remember that all movements that have prevailed -- racial equality, women's rights, freedom of speech, have never had power on their side. Instead these movements have spoken truth to power, have spoken fairness to power, have spoken justice to power. The strength of great movements is always found in the people who support and sustain them.

It is truly a gift to be able to see policy work as movement building, rather than as an academic or political exercise. It is this gift of active, people-centered, spiritually-grounded discernment that the staff and supporters of the Public Life and Social Policy team prays for every day -- a gift of biblical hope.

Biblical Hope for Justice in Public Policy

Please read Isaiah 65:17-25 and II Corinthians 4:7-10; 5:16-19

No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime...

Isaiah 65:20a

Biblical hope is not a passive exercise. It is a particular way of living in the world, a choice to live differently in the present. The prophet Isaiah calls us through the past to confront our present, to challenge the authority of those who deny God's gift of life when violence is done. Undoing violence requires advocating new policies so the "breaking in" of God's future will be found in new community.

Isaiah's promise that "a child shall die a hundred years old" is a potent image of peace, yet it stands in stark contrast to the lack of concern shown for poor children at most policy tables in Washington, D.C., and state and local governments. Isaiah's dream that "one shall not plant to have another eat" is a formula for equality in both goods and power, yet how many UCC policy priorities call for compassion but fail to address the need for a true re-distribution of wealth among owner and worker, landlord and tenant, rich and poor?

Staying vulnerable to hope is a critical skill in the often disappointing work of public policy advocacy. To be claimed by God's promised newness is to experience a hope that heals our broken hearts and mends our imaginations, even if we don't always win on all of our policy priorities. If anything, the work of the Public Life and Social Policy team is about struggling to keep imagination alive in the very unimaginative political scene in Washington, D.C.

When the desire to preserve the status quo reins in public policy as a tool for massive change and justice, the voices of faith speaking new possibilities are desperately needed. Each time a local church successfully advocates for global debt relief with its member of Congress, or works through the state council of churches to secure a low-income jobs program, or joins with a legal team to stay a death sentence, the Christian belief that things can be truly new is kept alive. Then, as a biblical people, we hold out a hope for a new creation in the present. It causes us, and others around us, to rethink the often rigid human rules in public life about who is in and who is out, who is deserving and who is undeserving, who counts and who does not.

The Parable of the Talents

Please read Matthew 25:14-30.

Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed...

Matthew 25:24

"The Parable of the Talents" is Jesus' story about a ruthless master and three slaves who are entrusted with different sums of money, called "talents." While the word "talent" causes many of us to equate this story with skills and abilities, the parable is a vivid story about economics. In order to hear Jesus' message in this parable, it is important to remember that a "talent" is an amount of money, and not intended to be translated as one's ability to sing well or kick a soccer ball. To do so drastically changes the meanings we can glean from the story. Like so many of Jesus' parables, our hearing of this story has been conditioned by a language and world view that vastly differ from the perspective in Jesus' day.

Traditionally, this parable has been viewed by scholars as a message on the need for faithful stewardship of the responsibilities assigned to us. While some have equated it with parables on the end of time, some argue that this is a story told by Jesus to illustrate his listeners' realities in an unjust world. It is also important to remember the context of this parable. It immediately follows the "Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids," when Jesus urges his listeners to be watchful and not be distracted by idle or selfish pursuits, but instead to place our energies on those things that truly matter. The story is immediately followed by the "Parable of the Last Judgment," when Jesus preaches prophetically that "when you did to one of the least of these, you did it unto me." A parallel version of the "Parable of the Talents" can be found in Luke (19:12-27).

We have grown very comfortable hearing the "Parable of the Talents" as a plea for generous church stewardship, usually in conjunction with our church's annual Pledge Sunday. But maybe other valuable and profound lessons await just beneath the surface of this familiar story.

In the usual retelling of the parable, the first two servants are congratulated for their wise stewardship, while the third servant is chastised for not showing any return on the master's initial investment. We have been

conditioned to wince at the third servant's seemingly fearful response. He digs a hole in the ground and hides his talent there.

While each of us does have a responsibility to wisely use what we've been given, maybe God's call to use "wisely" is exactly what this story is all about. Maybe we have failed to hear a perspective that could deepen our faith in surprising ways, especially in a time when God is calling us to advocate for the poor in a culture that too often emphasizes financial profits over the needs of people.

In their article "Towering Trees and Talented Slaves" (*The Other Side*, May-June 1999), Ched Myers and Eric DeBode suggest that our customary reading of this parable has been lacking. Even flat out misdirected. They say the very rich master in this story was never meant by Jesus to be a portrayal of God, but just that -- a shrewd, ruthless, money-hungry master.

Even more so, they argue that Jesus' condemnation does not rest on the third servant, as we traditionally understand it. Instead, a closer look calls us to stretch our once-simplistic sermonizing. Jesus is actually confronting greed. He is challenging an economic pattern that promotes ruthless business practices, exploitation, and an increasing gap between the destitute poor and the filthy rich.

Use your imagination and envision new possibilities for this parable:

First, our modern-day cultural perspective keeps us from grasping the humorous audacity displayed in this parable of Jesus. For example, according to Myers and DeBode, a "talent" was one of the largest values of money in the Hellenistic world and equivalent to more than 15 years of wages! So, this is no small amount of money we're talking about. It's an unimaginable sum, even laughable.

Second, the first two slaves' ability to double the amount of investment might well have provoked disgust among Jesus' original first-century listeners. As Richard Rohrbaugh notes, the highest legal interest rate at the time was about 12 percent. So, a 100 percent return would have been outrageous. Certainly, a poor person hearing this story would have been angry in learning about such a rapid doubling of an already unfathomable amount. It would have been obvious to Jesus' listeners that this type of economic return could not have been achieved in any way other than destructive usury and unjust trading.

the story to illustrate that a person Judeans would have looked down upon was the person who behaved neighborly to someone in need.

Staggering is the amount of violence in our society -- physical, mental, emotional and economic. A crucial part of counteracting that violence is to beware of prejudice and attitudes against people of other racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. There is much danger in being so full of ourselves and our ways of doing things, as were the clergy person and temple worker in the story, that we do not show the love of God as we should, and respect the gifts of others, seeing God in all people. With the diversity the Creator has given us, we must learn *from each other* how to be in better relationship *with God and each other* -- just as the hearers of the parable gained a lesson by looking at a person of a different culture, and respecting the way in which that person shared love and life. We must "go and do likewise."

Questions for discussion and reflection.

1. What are some contemporary examples of the Good Samaritan story?
2. Who is our "neighbor?" What does it mean to love oneself? What does it mean to love another person as oneself?
3. How have we been beaten and stripped? How have we beaten and stripped others?
4. Whom do we look down upon in our congregation? Our society? Our world at large? Who are the "untouchables?" Why are they considered such? How is ignoring them a form of injustice?
5. What are some of the ways in which we "go to the other side of the road" and refuse to act justly? Why? How do our religious ideas, racial and cultural stereotypes, etc., prevent us from being in relationship with one another?
6. Why do we do justice? Is it the thing to do? An expectation of God? Is there some other reason?
7. What is it like to stand up for justice and do what you consider right in a situation in which you may be ridiculed and looked upon as being strange or wrong? How does it feel for people of color to work for justice in an oppressive society? How does it feel for European Americans to work for racial justice knowing there may be criticism and scorn by certain peers?
8. How do we "go and do likewise," working for justice in society?

Prayer: *Oh Merciful, Beneficent God, help us to be neighbors to each other so that in unity we can begin to build bridges. Give to your children your Spirit as we battle wickedness and racism, always remembering that we are called, not to walk on the other side, but to speak out against injustices wherever they be found. Amen.*

Called To Be A Good Neighbor

Please read Luke 10:25-37.

He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

Luke 10:27

The story of the Good Samaritan comes from the Gospel of Luke, written in the latter half of the first century C.E. During this time period, Christianity began to spread throughout the Mediterranean world. The writer, therefore, not only uses a knowledge of Jewish history, but writes in such a way that people of various traditions and ethnic groups will be interested in the messages offered. In this context comes a parable (a story told to illustrate a lesson) involving people of different cultures.

In challenging Jesus, a lawyer asks about gaining eternal life. Jesus responds by relating the tale of a man who is beaten and robbed while journeying from Jerusalem to Jericho. Along come two of the religious leaders of the people -- a priest and a Levite (a temple attendant, from the tribe of Levi). Instead of stopping to aid the victim, they avoid him and pass him by. Next, however, comes a person from Samaria who attends to the man's wounds, takes him to shelter and vows to return to check on his well-being. Jesus, after telling the story, asks the lawyer which person was a "neighbor" to the victim of violence. When the lawyer rightly replies that it was the "one who showed him mercy," Jesus tells him to act in the same manner.

It is important to examine the context of the characters. The two clerical leaders were probably concerned with religious laws that prevented the touching of a dead person (cf. Numbers 19:10b-13). Unfortunately, their worry about regulations helped prevent them from caring for a fellow human being. Perhaps, in their desire not to give assistance, they justified their inaction by hiding behind such laws.

The irony in the story is that the person who did give help was a Samaritan, a person from the region north of Judea. Samaritans and Judeans had been at cultural (and sometimes physical) odds with each other for centuries. After the reign of Solomon, Israel split into the Northern Kingdom (later Samaria) and Southern Kingdom (later Judea), and were at odds with each other. Though both kingdoms had long been conquered, there was still prejudice and ill will between the peoples of these regions. Thus, Jesus uses

So, in this study, you are invited to envision a radical departure from your past mental images of this parable. Maybe the bad guy isn't the evil one after all; in fact, maybe all the roles have been reversed. The third slave, who refuses to exploit others for the sake of profits, may actually be the hero. The first two slaves may, in fact, be the ones acting out of fear of their ruthless master, so they exploit others for their own gain.

Myers and DeBode emphasize that the third servant's eventual banishment to a place of torment and pain can be fully understood only when read with the "Parable of the Last Judgment" in close view. (Remember . . . it is the parable that immediately follows.) It is no accident that the third servant is sentenced to a life on the utter margins, a place perceived by the wealthy as one of incredible pain and sadness. Yet, without their knowing it, they are missing something phenomenal: the presence of God. From Jesus' own description in Matthew (25:31-46), God is found with those on the margins -- the hungry, the sick, the heavy-burdened, the imprisoned, the poor.

The shrewd and ruthless master is, at first glance, the winner. And the first two servants are invited to enter into the joy of their master, which is the joy of money and not the love of God. But at a much deeper look, we discover that these destructive business practices place the master and the first two slaves far from the real presence of Christ, who lives among those on the margins of society.

In our modern-day economic system, we too-often place ultimate value on the return garnered from our financial investments: stock prices, interest rates, market levels, and earned dividends. Yet, as Christians, our faith calls us to question how our money is being used within our economic system either to honor or to harm God's world, our neighbors, and all of creation.

Greed is a deadly sin. Thankfully, the accumulation of wealth is certainly not the final reality of our worth before a loving God. And yet, ironically, how we earn, invest, spend, and give our money may be the most obvious indicators of how we love or do not love God and our neighbors. And is this not the meaning of stewardship after all?

Questions for discussion and reflection.

1. How does your faith inform your approach to earning and investing money?
2. In thinking about the “Parable of the Talents,” in what ways can you identify with the motivations and fears of each of these three servants?
3. Do you know any businesses or corporations that make money unethically? What is your response as a Christian?
4. Has your congregation taken steps to ensure that its investments are more than profitable, but ethical? Have you personally explored socially-responsible investing?
5. In a global economy, how can Christians make sure that products are not made by companies that exploit poor workers?

Prayer: *God of all, in our consumer society we are constantly lured into the endless game of accumulating things at the expense of the world's poor. Instead, show us how we might live on less, so that we can have more to share with others. Teach us to be true stewards of the abundance that is already before us. Amen.*

Economic Justice Team

Sometimes churches take offense when others point out their sins. We may believe we are not accountable for our members' actions. But we are not blameless. Churches are called to serve “Samaria” and “Jerusalem,” not isolate themselves in comfort and false assurance, unresponsive to the cries of the people. God would urge them, “Cry out!”

Where is your “Jerusalem” today? What about it would provoke you to react with righteous rage?

Questions for discussion and reflection.

1. As you look at your context, are there ways in which God is showing displeasure? What situations today would God be displeased with? What are they?
2. Who are the “Micahs” of today? What does it mean to be prophetic?
3. Can any group, society or nation claim a special relationship with God that makes it exempt from the consequences of its members' actions? How do you feel about the assertion that a church needs to claim some accountability for its members' acts?
4. Just as Micah prophesied about Jerusalem, what particular Jerusalem do you have that would provoke outrage? In what possible ways can that outrage be expressed?

Prayer: *“The Place We Are At”*

Here I live in the land of sinners, and in the assembly of the righteous too, knowing the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, and praying that the Lord watches out for sinners too because they don't realize that they sin; it's just their way of life.

But they also say the way of the wicked will perish. O Lord, please bestow your glory upon the wicked and lift up their heads to a better day and a better way—the way of our Lord and Savior, O God, the righteous way.

And do not hold back your mercy from them, O Lord, because they do not know what they do. So in ending this phrase, I give praise and glory O God. I give it the righteous way. Amen.

G. B.

Written by an inmate, at the Correctional Institution, Cranston, Rhode Island, Rev. Dr. H. Daehler Hayes, U.C.C., Conference Minister, and teacher, under the auspices of the chaplain's office.

Economic Justice Team

spirit-filled persons such as Caesar Chavez, Martin Luther King, Jr., Crazy Horse, Juanita Helphrey, and Paul Sherry. You can surely name others.

Micah spoke his mind and indicted those in power, knowing that he was at risk. But he gave voice to the muted words of those who had no voice. He was not blind to the injustices that he saw around him. So he asks the biting question, "Should you not know justice?" (v.1b)

Micah disturbs us with a declaration we do not like to hear: our sinful acts have consequences. We must be careful here. One does not find in these verses a universal declaration that all pain, suffering and brokenness result from personal and corporate sins. Micah did say clearly that the suffering he saw arose from victimization and abuse by the wicked and powerful. Living in communities in which the misdeeds of persons or of corrupt institutions and systems exist will have a ripple effect. The unjust actions of some bring undeserved suffering to many.

Take, for example, the re-gentrification of low-income urban neighborhoods. In these low-income communities, disruption, dispossession, and displacement of residents occur when housing is torn down to restore a downtown area that will cater to ex-suburbanites and other higher income folks. "We are not like 'those people,'" churches may protest. "Why, we operate food banks, run clothing drives, and collect food at Thanksgiving and Christmas. We faithfully conduct feeding ministries, often using volunteers so that our members do not have to see 'those people.' We invite clergy of color to preach at certain times each year and welcome other ethnic groups to conduct services in our church basements."

Other churches do less. They sit idly by, and consequently participate in the sin, victimizing and wrongdoing. We don't want to risk offending anyone, although sometimes those in power are in our pews! However, as difficult and risky as it is, we are accountable to speak truth to power in the face of blatant injustice. God would invite us to emulate Micah, confront offense to justice, even at personal or corporate risk. The God of justice challenges us to be "excessive" in our quest for a more just and whole society. When God sends "delegated authority" to speak truth to power, we have to be bold for at that moment we are the ones with the power. Micah challenges us to remember the One whom we actually serve. To whom are we finally accountable? The answer is God.

Called to Speak Out for Justice

Please read Amos 5.

But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Amos 5:24

Amos, an Old Testament prophet, lived in the southern state of Judah during the latter half of the 8th Century, B.C. He was called by God from a relatively comfortable life as a cattle raiser and landowner in his hometown of Tekoa to issue a warning to the people of the northern kingdom of Israel. Though not a prophet by training or profession, Amos was still used as an instrument by God to do the uncomfortable task of prophetic ministry among the people of Israel.

In the 5th chapter of Amos, we are told that Amos was called to be an advocate for justice at a time in Israel's history when the country was experiencing growing prosperity for the "haves," yet growing impoverishment for the "have nots." Israel, now faced with economic disparities and a serious moral and spiritual decline in the nation, needed to be reminded of whom God had called the country to be.

It was into this social, political, historical and moral context that the prophet Amos delivered his message. It was a message that challenged a people with a great faith tradition to turn from complacency and complicity, and inaction and silence, to become a voice for justice and righteousness in Israel. Amos reminded Israel of the consequences if the nation continued to oppress the poor and scorn God. Those who oppress others (or who benefit from others' oppression), he said, will be "brought to justice" by God. However, if Israel were to act justly, he assured the faithful that God would show them mercy.

Amos was calling the people of yesterday, and is calling the people of today, to become "justice people" and not "just us" people. His ancient words to the northern kingdom can be viewed as a contemporary warning to those of us living comfortably in North America today. Amos is urging us to repent, reconcile and rebuild our land, our people, our values, and our society. His is a clarion call to "speak truth to power," to lift the yoke of oppression from the poor, and to do the work of ministry that will result in "justice rolling down like waters, and righteousness as an ever flowing stream."

Questions for discussion and reflection.

1. If the prophet Amos were among us today, what might he say to us about the injustices of our time?
2. Can you identify racial, economic and other forms of injustice that we as individuals, congregations or as a society avoid, or are afraid to confront, today?
3. Why didn't more people in Israel (or in the church) during Amos' time speak up for justice? What keeps us from speaking out against injustice?
4. Where do you see an abuse of power taking place in your community against the poor and marginalized? What role do you play in it?
5. From the perspective of the oppressed and marginalized, could the harmful effects of racial discrimination and economic injustice be viewed as forms of violence?
6. What will be our church's role in "letting justice roll down like waters, and righteousness as an ever flowing stream?"

Prayer: *Gracious and merciful God, teach us to be faithful to what you have called us to do and to whom you have called us to be. We are your people, wounded and broken, called to be in community with others who are also wounded and broken.*

May we equate righteousness with justice in our actions, that we not be oppressive to others, especially those who have been and who continue to be oppressed. May we remember your love, knowing that you are not only the God of a mighty few, but a God who welcomes and cares for all.

We recognize God, that we cannot do this task without you. Give us courage as we seek to do justice. Give us understanding as we seek to be just. Give us hope as our hearts and minds, bathed in your stream of righteousness, command a more excellent way. Amen.

Racial Justice Team

Uttering Truth

Please read Micah 3:5-8.

But as for me, I am filled with power, with the spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin.

Micah 3:8

Chapter 3 contains an indictment of the "institutional prophets," those who worked for the kings and told them what they wanted to hear. These prophets, specifically in Samaria and Jerusalem, had the responsibility for leading the people in a way that would ensure their safety and well-being. Instead, they were leading the people astray, leading them to worship other gods, and were robbing and cheating the poor. God called Micah to bring God's reaction to what was going on. Although God had promised the people of Samaria and Jerusalem a future of peace when they returned to Him, God wanted the prophets to change their ways.

Reading these verses in Micah, we can clearly see that he spoke "truth." Micah understood his calling and mission. And in that understanding he realized he was not going to be popular among his colleagues and those who thought they could control the outspoken prophets.

Verse 5 speaks of leaders who sell out, lie and fall prey to corruption. Thus, they forget from whence they originated. They neglect those whom they represent. Most important, they turn away from the One who gave them authority and power to serve as agents of peace in a prophetic way.

Verses 6-7 address the loss of these prophets' vision and revelation. God does not dwell continuously in their hearts and minds. Wealth and pleasing those in power has corrupted their purpose in life. The apostle John would say, that they have given in to the desires of the "flesh." In 6b, Micah continues: "The sun will set . . . the day will go dark." These words describe the extreme nature of God's judgment. Micah understands God to say that these supposed representatives of God no longer serve the divine mission and that it would be better if they no longer existed.

In verse 8, Micah prophesies boldly and unequivocally, convinced that he utters "truth." Having not fallen into corruption and deceit, his ears are open to God's message. He represents God, and is filled with God's powerful spirit. Our memories are filled with the "Micahs" of our time,

When we draw the circle of acceptance too tightly - these are “my people,” those people are “others, strangers, foreigners,” and so forth - we do violence to God’s gift of creation. Prejudice and bigotry flourish in an atmosphere where difference is feared rather than celebrated. Hearts constrict and minds snap shut in the desperate attempt to claim “the norm” for oneself or one’s community. Wars -- religious, economic, ethnic, and racial -- eventually erupt in such an atmosphere of fear and distrust.

We need our walls of safety and proud identification to be shaken from time to time so that we can also be transformed by God’s challenging grace. God will come to us in surprising ways, through unexpected persons and events. And God will be revealed to us in the very lives of those whom we would want to brush off. Even if we go to a place seeking solitude and rest, God will pursue us and force our hearts to be opened to a reality we could not have previously imagined.

Questions for discussion and reflection.

1. What do you think of Jesus’ responses to the Syrophenician woman in this story?
2. Describe an encounter you have had which transformed your perspective on a person or a people you were prejudiced toward.
3. How does fear of those who are different contribute to violence in your community, or in the world?
4. With whom do you identify in this story?
5. What can we do to alleviate violence caused by racial prejudice and cultural intolerance?

Prayer: *Always present God, we come before you with hearts that have so often been surrounded by walls of intolerance, mistrust and fear. We confess that often the walls are so tough and so high we don’t sense your presence at all. Give us the courage, the strength and the tools to break down our barriers to the fullness of grace that surrounds us each day. Open our eyes in holy ways so that we can sense your presence in the lessons given by everyday prophets you place before us. Help us, too, O God, to be the person who confronts injustice, separation, hunger, prejudice and other sins of the world. Give us the strength and the courage to be your voice in the midst of hurt, confusion and pain. Come to us, be with us and empower us as we work together to make known your message of radical inclusiveness in our world. Amen.*

Human Rights, Justice for Women and
Transformation Ministry Team

The Righteousness of God

Please read Psalm 146:5-10.

*... who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry.
The LORD sets the prisoners free...*

Psalm 146:7

This is a praise psalm, calling us to sing praises to God from our souls all the days of our lives. It announces the righteousness of the LORD, who made all that is, who is just, and who reigns forever. We are exhorted not to trust in mortals, who return to the earth when their breath departs, but to trust the God of Jacob and Rachel for our help and our hope, because God keeps faith forever, and executes justice for the oppressed.

The selected verses describe the nature of God as a just God who protects and upholds those who are oppressed and weak, and who ruins wickedness. God’s righteousness is expressed through rhythmic repetition of examples of justice, and reasons for us to place our hope in the LORD. The psalmist reminds us that those whose help and hope are in the LORD are blessed.

The psalmist declares the righteousness of God, but not that of human beings. In this psalm, we are not asked to be righteous. Rather, we are asked to *name the righteousness of God*, and to trust and praise that righteousness. It is Spirit that executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry, who releases the prisoners, who raises those who are bowed down. The psalmist emphasizes the mortality of humans, who cannot offer help like the God of Jacob and Rachel can offer. We are directed explicitly to the source of our help.

In the context of a violent world, this psalm assures us that God’s justice will triumph, and that we must keep faith with that truth. At the same time, we must be wary not to follow the ways of princes and leaders who bring no help to the oppressed. Rather, we must concentrate our love and faith in what is eternal, and we must find ways to praise our righteous LORD. Is there a better way to do this than to try to emulate the God we love in all the works of our hands and all the days of our lives? And yet if we try to emulate God’s righteousness, in full light of our own shortcomings, we must also find ways to discern that we truly follow a righteous path and not one of mortal longings and desires.

Questions for discussion and reflection.

1. How do we -- individually and as a corporate body -- learn to trust God?
2. How will we know if we are trusting in God and not in princes?
3. How do we praise God in deed as well as in word and thought? Are we the hands of God?
4. How do we know when we are acting according to God's vision and not our own?
5. What can we do that will please God while ensuring justice for victims of all forms of injustice?

Prayer: *Eternal God, we praise you. We are thankful for your transforming and constant love in our lives. You alone are God. Help us as we live each day to discern what your will for us is as we work on your behalf for justice and peace in the world. Keep us ever mindful that we need to walk with others who will be able to show us when we are not following the path of your will. Forgive us when we begin to act as though we were the power behind just deeds and righteousness. As we live each day, help us to trust in your truth, not the messengers of destruction, greed and selfishness. Be patient with us, O God, and give us the courage, the strength and the humility to follow the righteous path you have set before us. In your Holy name we pray, Amen.*

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An Open Table

Please read Mark 7:24-30.

But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

Mark 7:28

She came on behalf of her daughter. She came searching for the man she knew could offer healing and hope and she found him at a house where he had gone for privacy and anonymity. She was not going to be turned away.

Initially, Jesus seems irritated with this Gentile woman. He tries to tell her that what he has to offer is for his Jewish sisters and brothers -- the "children" -- not for those outside the faith, "dogs," as they were commonly called. If some pearl of wisdom dribbles down and others grab onto it, fine, but he's not going to make any extraordinary effort to teach or heal non-Jews. Or so Jesus thinks.

But she persists in spite of being brushed off and demeaned, perhaps feeling the pain of her tormented daughter with every word she speaks. "Even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Jesus, the consummate debater, realizes that she, the outsider, has had the last word on this one. He tells her to return home where she will find that her daughter has been healed.

From this moment forward in Mark's gospel, Jesus' vision for his ministry and mission embraces both Jews and Gentiles with his message of God's love, grace and forgiveness. He realizes that the table seats everyone and no one should have to keep watch from a distance for the crumbs falling to the floor. He encountered God in a woman who had broken through the societal and religious barriers of his time with a faith true and persistent enough to shake new awareness alive in God's beloved child.

Some commentators say this story is about Jesus testing the woman's faith. Others say that he even dealt with her at all by supposing she was from the upper class because this story does not project the image of the loving, "let-the-children-come-unto-me Jesus" we carry in our minds. But perhaps God used this Syrophenician woman and her daughter to strengthen and expand Jesus' understanding of God's radically inclusive and transforming love. Perhaps it is Jesus who learns a lesson here and sees for the first time that there is food and hope and Spirit enough for everyone.