

Amos

We're going to start today's message with a question – it's a non-rhetorical one so I'm looking for your answers.

How do you define justice?

<answers>

Classically, there are four kinds of justice.

When someone commits a crime and has to do jail or prison time, we say that justice is done. That's called retributive justice – retribution is the consequence of wrong-doing.

Another aspect of justice where the court system is concerned is whether or not the courts treat everyone the same. This is often called procedural justice. Do the systems treat everyone equally? Under a given set of circumstances, are sentences and judgments the same, regardless of social or economic standing?

They weren't in Amos's day. In verse 12 he talks about pushing away the needy at the gate. When the bible uses the term gate, it's not just like a gate to your pasture or backyard fence. It's an arched entry into a city with a sort of hall or alley. It was an entry, but it was also the place where important meetings might be held, or courts were held.

In verse 12, Amos condemns Israel's wealthy citizens because they're able to bribe the courts in their favor. So maybe in a property dispute, a rich person might be able to bribe the court to take away property of someone who can't afford a bribe.

Another type of justice is called distributive justice, or economic justice. That is the type of justice that relates to the distribution of material wealth. Is it fair?

It wasn't in Amos's day. We didn't read it, but one of the most scathing lines in all the prophets comes from Amos. He's speaking about the rich privileged women in Israel. Here's what he said: Hear this word, you cows of Bashan

    who are on Mount Samaria,  
who oppress the poor, who crush the needy,  
    who say to their husbands, "Bring something to drink!"

Then he goes on with threats of grave consequences.

The final kind of justice is called restorative justice. It's where situations and relationships are set right...where people and institutions are restored to something that works for all God's people.

So, which of the four types of justice – retributive, procedural, distributive, or restorative – are God's style of justice?

<answers>

It's kind of a trick question, because at one time or another in the Bible, it's all of them. Some people have been scarred by a belief that retribution is God's primary justice – punishment.

But it's not. The ultimate is restorative justice – it's really what the goal of the other types of justice would be. God's desire from the very beginning was to set things right – to create conditions where all life could flourish.

So let's use an example to look at how that might work. Let's start with retributive justice – someone goes to prison for wrong-doing. Justice can't just stop there.

I think most of us, especially I'm guessing those who work in corrections – would hope more than punishment happens. We also want that person to get what they need to not reoffend once they're out. We want them to be restored to the sort of person who can flourish once they're out.

So restorative justice works alongside retributive to restore the person to a place in their community.

All of the prophets spoke God's judgment against Israel and Judah.

God had two judgments against the nations. Idolatry and injustice – especially against the poor. Most of the prophets take up both idolatry and injustice.

But Amos's prophecy is entirely about justice, mainly procedural and distributive justice.

So, at this point, maybe a couple of things have occurred to you. One might be that we still deal with those issues. I'll come to that in a minute.

But the other thing you might note is that this sounds awfully political. It is. The prophets were. You can't preach on the prophets without talking politics. Not politics like we often think. But politics that's about real people living real lives that are impacted by the structures, institutions, and actions of those in power. God has always had something to say about that.

And the prophets were very vocal about how off the beam those in power were. Prophets still are. Martin Luther King, Jr. famously used the last line of today's passage in his I have a dream speech.

But then, what's up with this tirade against worship towards the end? I hate, I despise your festivals! I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Remember, this is God speaking through Amos – the I is God. *God* hates their worship!

Take away from me the noise of your songs.

I mean, I thought God wanted us to worship him.

But what God really wants is justice...righteousness. Righteousness is what happens when things are set right – when restorative justice happens.

What the Israelites were doing was showing up for worship which may have been as inspiring as all get out. But it didn't impact how they lived. They went to worship, offered their sacrifices, sang their rousing songs, and then went back out to trample the poor and exploit the powerless.

When our worship doesn't lead to work to set things right – to bring justice, then our worship is phony. Worship...and everything about our faith lives should shape us into people who work for justice – especially for the most powerless.

So how do we stack up today?

One of the other images in Amos's book is that of a plumb line. A plumb line helps you see if a wall is straight. (kids' sermon)

If we use the different kinds of justice as our plumb line, how do we stack up?

Let's start with retributive justice – punishment for crimes. This one might be the one we do best at. To be sure, sometimes people do something wrong and either don't get caught, or get off even though they're guilty.

But we at least seem to be pretty committed to creating a lawful society and law enforcement officers and corrections people mostly work hard toward that lawful society.

How about procedural justice? Does the justice system work the same for rich and poor? How about black, brown and white?

The answer to that appears to be at least sometimes no. People of color are greatly over-represented in prisons. Either you have to decide that they are born more criminal, which is

racist and not borne out in other ways to look at crime, or you have to decide something about the systems, or procedural justice, is off.

An example: the cash bail system means that people with money can make bail and those without can't. If they can't make bail, they either sit in jail until a trial, which can be months, or they plead to a lesser crime, even if they didn't do it, just to see the light at the end of the tunnel. Poor people, again disproportionately people of color are most impacted. So that plumb line is off.

In this week of the Thanksgiving holiday, we're also reminded that procedural injustice was viciously applied to deprive the indigenous people of their land, livelihoods...and lives.

How about distributive, or economic justice? There have been inroads made against poverty, especially globally. But the wealth gap between the richest people and everyone else is the biggest it's ever been and growing.

I'm no expert in economics, but continued widening of that gap has to be unsustainable. And in this country, the wealth inequality between black and white people created by slavery and Jim Crow policies has never been undone.

Total material and financial equality on any basis is never going to happen on this side of the complete reign of God – society has found no way to do it that doesn't end disastrously.

But if the gap is too wide, or is disproportionately based on race or gender, as seems to be the case, there's something wrong with the system – the plumb line is off.

How about restorative justice? I think we mostly don't know how to do this. It involves all three of the others, but goes beyond. Ultimately, restoration is the work of Jesus. But Jesus has a particular way of doing that.

Ultimately, perfect restorative justice will likely not happen until Jesus returns and the reign of God is fully established.

But that doesn't mean we have nothing to do but sit and wait. The message of the prophets is our message, too. The message of Jesus is also a message of restorative justice. The message of Jesus envisions a world in which all the kinds of justice come together to build a world where things are set right so all life can flourish. The message of Jesus is intended to inspire us all to work toward that justice. That's what it means to love our neighbor as ourselves.

So, we come here to worship. We sing our own songs. We participate in the sacraments. – (pitcher) – the waters of our baptism roll down and destroy the forces of injustice within us and raise us to be people of God.

The word of God wells up in us like an everflowing stream, drowning the selfish impulses and self-righteousness that lead to injustice...and raises us to walk a new path.

Those living waters fill our hearts as we worship...and then we are sent out into the world that those living waters may flow from our hearts...out and into a world longing for justice.