

**THE WORD FROM GILEAD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
**September 20, 2020; 25<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A**

SCRIPTURE READING

Deuteronomy 16:18-20

<sup>18</sup> You shall appoint judges and officials for yourselves, in all your towns that the LORD your God is giving you, and they shall render just decisions for the people. <sup>19</sup> You must not distort justice; you must not show partiality; and you must not accept bribes, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of those who are in the right. <sup>20</sup> Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, so that you may live and occupy the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

SCRIPTURE READING

Matthew 5:1-12

<sup>1</sup> When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on the mountainside; and after he sat down, and the disciples had gathered around, <sup>2</sup> he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

<sup>3</sup> "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>4</sup> "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

<sup>5</sup> "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

<sup>6</sup> "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be filled.

<sup>7</sup> "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

<sup>8</sup> "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

<sup>9</sup> "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

<sup>10</sup> "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of their struggle for justice, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>11</sup> "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

SERMON

"Justice, Justice, You Shall Pursue"

Rev. Martin McGeachy

Life is full of new experiences, and in 2020, every day brings something new—that's where we get the word "news." And it feels our 2020 new is overwhelmingly tragic. I'm broken-hearted over the death of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who was a beacon of hope, that tiny little old lady who left a legacy of huge change for the better in the world. And one gratitude for the new that I have today is that I've never before preached on Deuteronomy 16:18-20, and I'm glad I got to immerse myself in it this weekend. A phrase from the Book of Deuteronomy hangs framed on the wall of Ruth Bader Ginsburg's Supreme Court chamber: "Justice, justice you shall pursue." [in Hebrew,] "Tzedek, tzedek tirdof." Her life lived up to that calling, as a Justice and a woman of faith.

("Ruth Bader Ginsburg was passionate about Judaism's concern for justice" by Yonat Shimron, Religion News Service, September 18, 2020; <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2020/09/18/ruth-bader-ginsburg-was-passionate-about-judaisms-concern-justice/>)

I've noticed that when I feel strongly about something, for me to change my position, usually someone has to appeal not to what I feel but to what I think-- to offer

me a different perspective that causes me then to look at my heart. I love it when I find myself saying “I never thought of that before.” One of the things that RBG did when she was arguing Supreme Court cases to change laws about women’s equality was that she would find a man who had been discriminated against and use that as an argument to show the case of gender discrimination; a wonderful way of helping people to look at something from a new perspective.

Some would say that I have a bizarre idea of fun, but I’ll confess that I enjoyed preparing for my remarks today by exploring viewpoints from a diversity of authors on the concept of justice in the Scriptures, particularly in reference to our call from Moses in Deuteronomy to seek justice, to pursue it, even run after it. And I enjoyed being annoyed by a Jewish Rabbi’s article online asserting that the Hebrew Bible’s unique gift to the world was its “passion for justice for the poor, the weak, and the despised... [saying,] One cannot claim to love God and not be passionate about justice. That is the primary Jewish contribution to the human spirit.” I, of course, immediately got all—dare I say, “self-righteous” about it, since I read the same teaching in the Christian writings. But then I studied further, and this scholar went on to say that all too often, especially in Christian religions, we define our faith and piety as our personal relationship with God, our prayer life, and how we may be doing at keeping those ten commandments in our own lives—not seeking to make a more just world for those in need. And I began to think he had a fair point. That’s a valid criticism, and I appreciate the new perspective.

(“Justice, expressed in Parashat Shoftim, is one of the eternal religious obligations of Judaism,” by Rabbi Bradley Artson, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/justice-justice-you-shall-pursue/>)

At Gilead, as in many Presbyterian churches, we elect officers from our membership to serve the church. Elders administrate the decisions of the congregation, and Deacons are called specifically to give pastoral care to others with Christian love and compassion. “Diaconia” in Biblical Greek, the word from which we get “Deacons,” stems from the root that is translated most often in the New Testament, over 90 times, as “righteousness.” Typically, in the Christian faith, at least in the version in which I was raised, we properly equate righteousness with our personal piety and behavior, an attempt to act with values pleasing to God. But just as God is so much more than we can ever define in our finite understanding, the righteousness of God is so much more than personal piety, and certainly so much more than attempting to follow rules laid down by the prevailing dogma.

In fact, sometimes the diaconia of God’s righteousness calls us to speak for, and work for, changing the prevailing systems and structures that, though they may be solidly built in the heavy stones of long tradition and culture, are nevertheless not in harmony with the values of Yahweh. All my life I’ve heard some criticize the church for engaging in social justice, when, they say, it should only preach the saving faith of Jesus. But the saving faith of Jesus is diaconia, and though we’ve culturally, institutionally chosen to see those 90-plus times the New Testament talks about it as a reduction to our lifestyle and behavior, the literal meaning of diaconia is also “justice.” In Hebrew Scripture, Christian Scripture, Testaments Old and New, righteousness is One with pursuing Justice.

Why did the nick-named Notorious R.B.G. (a cultural reference to rapper Notorious B.I.G., the moniker “Notorious R.B.G. was coined by author Shana Knizhnik) capture the hearts of so many? Supreme Court Justices don’t tend to be celebrity icons. She was Notorious for her refusal to give up on justice, persisting in her dissent against majority injustice. Of course, there have been many brilliant orators, minds, and seekers of justice that we haven’t lionized. But there was something about her manner and physicality that really captured the very people for whom she was fighting.

Her popularity was partly because she was so tiny, the physical embodiment of what our culture imagines powerlessness looks like, a tiny, unassuming frail old Jewish woman, and yet like the shepherd boy David wearing no armor going up against the giant Goliath, she was willing to stand up and speak truth to power. “She wanted to expand opportunities and justice for all people, in particular people who had been left out of *We the People*,” according to author Irin Carmon. (“The Today Show,” NBC, September 19, 2020)

We were all inspired by her ability to do strenuous workouts in her 80’s that I know I couldn’t keep up with, but she was no superhero. She was the embodiment of that for which she fought—the small minority that was still strong and had great value. *The Washington Post* says:

As a justice, Ginsburg was dedicated to equality not only on behalf of women. She cared as deeply for minority groups, immigrants, disabled people and others. In this, her identity as a Jew played a big role. [Her father was an immigrant, and her mother the daughter of immigrants, both from Jewish families.] In a 2018 interview with Jane Eisner, then editor of the Jewish daily Forward, Ginsburg said that she grew up in the shadow of World War II and the Holocaust and that it left a deep and lasting imprint on her.

...No firebrand, she pursued a long-term strategy to chip away at discriminatory laws, one by one. “She tried to work through the system,” said Eisner. “She very much believed in institutions and incremental change. That’s an outgrowth of her experience as a Jew. The law protected minorities — not all, and not equally — but there was a great reverence among the Jews of that generation in the power of government to protect them and pave the way for their achievement.”

(“Ruth Bader Ginsburg was passionate about Judaism’s concern for justice” by Yonat Shimron, Religion News Service, September 18, 2020; <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2020/09/18/ruth-bader-ginsburg-was-passionate-about-judaisms-concern-justice/>)

These days it’s easy to lose heart that what we do makes a difference, especially in government, but I’ve always felt that our job as evangelists in our church is also to change slowly, incrementally. One heart at a time, as it were. For one thing, I know my own heart and mind change very, very slowly, so why should I expect the world to do what I can’t?

Perhaps the most vital aspect of diaconia-righteousness-justice is the recognition that we seek God’s justice, and not our own. Just as when we think of the piety of righteousness as trying to behave as we believe God would have us, instead of merely how we feel at any given moment, seeking after the justice of God frees us from the

danger of imposing our human justice on others at the expense of what we might call human rights (but which actually are the rights of God), and not self-righteousness. Our desire for justice does not allow for our bullying, brutality, or even animosity. Even if we regard someone whom we see to be an agent of injustice as our enemy, we are required to treat that one with justice—God-justice, righteousness – the love and mercy of the Great Judge Yahweh, the sacrificial life-giving mercy of Jesus, the one who at the end of days will judge us with righteousness.

When we let go the false-idol idea that justice is ours and not God's, we are freed to truly love those with whom we disagree. Ruth Bader Ginsburg, a notorious liberal Justice, was very good friends with fellow Justice Antonin Scalia, equally notorious as a conservative. They fiercely disagreed on judicial matters, but frequented the opera together and laughed about their differences. Wouldn't that be nice in our political discourse in 2020?

Today the devotional in "Our Daily Bread" told this story: In 1783, only 22 years old, Charles Simeon was named minister of Holy Trinity Church in Cambridge, England. His was a political appointment, and the congregation was not happy about it; they wanted the associate pastor appointed. So they did what unhappy congregations do; they treated Simeon unhappily. There was a good deal of opposition, rumors spread about him, insults in the street, and sometimes locking him out of the church. But with a spiritual maturity beyond his years, Simeon chose to rise above that, ignoring any falsehoods being spread, and lived by the principle "always to believe, that if the other side were heard, a very different account would be given of the matter." (Amy Boucher Pye, "Our Daily Bread," 9/20/20, Our Daily Bread Ministries)

Ginsburg was asked once how she responded when the men around her made condescending, ignorant remarks. "Never in anger, as my mother told me. That would have been self-defeating. Always as an opportunity to teach." ("The Today Show," NBC, September 19, 2020)

Ruth's mother, Celia, encouraged her independence and pushed her to excel. She had a list of "women of valor" – a biblical term referring to women who were wise and successful. Ginsburg imbibed those stories and memorized them, said Jane Sherron De Hart, professor emerita of history at the University of California at Santa Barbara, who wrote a biography of Ginsburg. (Shimron, *The Washington Post*)

That Biblical term, "women of valor," again is a new perspective for me, because it comes from the description of the "ideal woman" in Proverbs 31, which has often been mistranslated and used as a sexist description of what a good wife should be, but writer Lisa Yvonne says:

These virtues are the *fruit* of a virtuous heart that loves her Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, not actions that determine worth. None of these virtues is something to chase after in and of themselves, dear one; the Proverbs woman pursues God and these virtues naturally blossom in her life as a result of that. This woman is not one who strives to please her husband (or her virtue-listing-

mother-in-law come to that!), but please God. And that is what makes her such a blessing to her marriage and her family!

(Yvonne, Lisa (2018-02-18). "The Ultimate Guide To Becoming A Proverbs 31 Woman". *Graceful Abandon*. Retrieved 2019-01-22; <https://www.gracefulabandon.com/becoming-a-proverbs-31-woman/>)

A Woman of Valor from Proverbs 31 is a badass feminist warrior woman. Sometimes the warrior disciple, like RBG, or like shepherd boy David, or like a woman or man who tends their home, job and family striving to please God, is not BIG, not always famous. I'm also thinking today of my Uncle Sandy McGeachy, who died the day before RBG. You hear me talk about my dad all the time, the first-born among his siblings, and absolutely the favored elder son. My dad's career in the ministry, because of his personality and his privilege, bordered on celebrity, and I know it wasn't easy for Uncle Sandy to be considered sometimes by his own family as second. But he was a man of great compassion who also had a long, successful career in ministry, and loved by those he served. I appreciate the advice he gave me over the years. He was a person of valor.

I invite you today to think about what it means to be a person of Valor, what it is to be a person of righteousness and justice, yes, what it is to be notorious. Ruth said, "If you want to be a true professional you will do something outside yourself. That's what I think a meaningful life is. One lives not for oneself, but for one's community."

("The Today Show," NBC, September 19, 2020)

What do you do when your heart feels broken? Like the disciples, like RBG, persist. We're in it for the long haul. Ginsburg died on the first night of Rosh Hashanah, and according to Jewish tradition, a person who dies on Rosh Hashanah is a *tzaddik*, a person of great righteousness. I would say, synonymously, she was a great woman of valor, a great woman of justice. In fact, it hung over her head in her office: "Tzedek, tzedek tirdof."

Amen.