

Peace and Justice

On Friday night, I went to go see *Selma* in theaters. For those who don't know, *Selma* tells the part of Martin Luther King's life that covers the historic march from Selma to Montgomery. If you're on the fence about seeing it, I can tell you that it is fantastic. The acting is superb, the directing is great, and the story telling, while it takes a few minor historic liberties, stays true to the facts. The story told in *Selma* is one of clearly defined good, triumphing over clearly defined evil. Seeing the triumph of a group of non-violent resisters over people who hate them was inspiring. What really got to me though, is that those stories, those stories of good vs. evil, of good triumphing, don't seem to happen very much anymore.

Now, it feels that life is more complicated. Our lives are dictated by various shades of gray, rather than any absolutes. Instead of people marching for the right to vote, to be treated equal, we have marches through Ferguson, protesting situations clouded with doubt, with conflicting accounts.

Rather than wars between countries, we fight wars between ideologies. Our nation's response to September 11th, the still ongoing War on Terror, has been fought with torture, wiretapping, and remote-controlled drones. Our War on Terror has only created more terror. War on its own is loathsome, but the wars we fight now grind on interminably, always on the edge of our consciousness.

And in determining right and wrong, there's no easy answer. Pick any political issue – global warming, abortion, vaccinations, taxation, lobbyists, Iran sanctions, Citizens United, what have you – and with this device in my pocket, I can find 1000s of articles that disagree with you.

There are no longer any easy answers. As Anabaptist Christians with a North American worldview, the path Jesus sets out before doesn't lead through a valley of darkness, but rather through a valley of fog and shadow, where very little is clear. We know we are called to do justice, but we don't know where to turn. What does it mean to confront evil? What does justice look like? Often, we find ourselves grasping at straws.

It's often easy to look back at the system the Hebrews had, thousands of years ago, and think that that might be simpler. In the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, we see just how black-and-white life was for the people of Abraham.

They had just been delivered by Yahweh from the hands of the Egyptians, and camped at the base of Mount Sinai, they received the laws that still govern the daily lives of many Jews up to the present day. Regulations on everything from food to clothing to family relationships to worship were handed down. Anyone who failed to maintain this lifestyle had to redeem themselves through sacrifice; even some accidents, or acts of nature, required cleansing. This seems easier, but in some cases, the rules were unflinchingly strict, and today, seem barbaric. Exodus 21:17: Whoever curses mother or father shall be put to death.

I wouldn't have made it past age 17.

Exodus 32:25-29: When Moses saw that the people were running wild (for Aaron had let them run wild, to the derision of their enemies), then Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said, "Who is on the Lord's side? Come to me!" And all the sons of Levi gather around him. He said to them, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'Put your sword on your side, each of you! Go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill your brother, your friend, and your neighbor.'" "The sons of Levi did as Moses commanded, and about three

thousand of the people fell on that day. Moses said, “Today you have ordained yourselves for the service of the Lord, each one at the cost of a son or a brother, and so have brought a blessing on yourselves this day.” Leviticus 7:27: Any one of you who eats any blood shall be cut off from your kin. And, of course, the old favorite: Leviticus 24:19-20: Anyone who maims another shall suffer the same injury in return: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; the injury inflicted is the injury to be suffered.

In the books of the law, there is no room for decisions based on circumstances, or experience. The law is absolute, and unyielding. The consequences are absolute, and the sense of justice is based on the idea that repaying evil is the same thing as solving the problem.

However, even though we may think that have strict rules to live by would be easier, the history of Israel shows us that nothing could be further from the truth. When I was at Goshen College, I took a class called the Sociology of Religion. It was a real thrill a minute, but one thing I remember distinctly was that every religion has to have a balance of prophets and priests. The church needs prophets to push the community forward, and to cry in the streets for peace. At the same time, the church also needs priests, to hold the peace together, to be the ones who see the community continue, to heal wounds. A church of only prophets will rapidly splinter, and a church of only priests will rapidly stagnate.

The history of Israel was no different – they had priests like Aaron, Levi, and Ezra to guide the people, to keep the peace, to keep order. However, they also had prophets, providing a pull to repentance, to change, to newness.

Even with this balance, though, the people of Israel still struggled to follow the rules set before them. They had priests to hold them, prophets to lead them, but again and again, they failed. Eventually, God allowed them to be exiled to Babylon. Even after their return from exile, they still failed to follow the laws of God.

As much as we want that sense of black and white, of clarity in our laws, the people of Israel had that system. And they couldn’t make the cut.

But then in the New Testament, we have this funny Christ fellow. Unique in every way, he manages to simultaneously hold up the law, while tempering the strict, legalistic justice of Moses with peace and love. Jesus combines the role of the priest and the prophet, the role of peace and of justice, into one person. In one phrase – “But I say to you” he connects the old way of doing things with his sense of justice. For instance, “You have heard it said, “An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you, do not resist an evil doer. If someone should strike you on your right cheek, turn to them the other also. “

Often, we hear this passage interpreted as saying that we should be completely nonresistant; in fact, nothing could be further from the truth. Jesus himself was not completely non-resistant, but actively fought against evil and injustice in society. In the Powers That Be, Walter Wink examines this particular passage from a historical, practical point of view.

To help this hit home, I want to give you all a little bit of a fighting lesson.

Say, hypothetically, you want to hit my right check. I’m not sure why, maybe I insulted you, or came to your church and gave a bad sermon. But say you want to hit my right check. Perhaps you would smack me with your left hand; however, for ancient Israel, the left hand was considered unclean. So, you’d have to hit my right cheek, with your right hand, and you’d obviously use a backhand. According to Wink, hitting someone with a backhand was reserved for servants and slaves, someone below you.

Now, say that after you’ve struck my right cheek, I turn my left to you. How do you hit me now? Still, not with your left, but instead with your right again, this time as a balled fist. But

in this case, only equals hit each other with a closed fist! In forcing you to hit me in that way, I have forced you to recognize my humanity, and my equality to you.

It's no way to avoid pain, or trouble. Instead, Jesus calls us to a radical sort of justice, based not on getting even, but on creating recognition of our own humanity. The adulterous woman brought before Christ in the temple was by no means innocent; the scripture tells us she was caught in adultery. The Law of Moses called for her to be stoned, and in many ways, the Pharisees expected to trap Jesus. If he condemned her according to the law, it was a validation of their own authority. If, however, he denied the harsh sentence that was called for, he could be disregarded as a fraud.

Instead, Jesus forced those gathered around to recognize the humanity the adulterous woman had in common with them.

Jesus gets down, and writes in the sand. We don't know what he wrote, some say the 10 Commandments; part of me likes the idea of a Jesus who is just doodling, waiting quietly while each person there realizes that they, too have sinned. In this moment, each accuser became the woman, huddled in the middle of the circle, undeniably guilty. In this moment, each of us is the adulterous woman. Old Testament justice calls for execution; New Testament justice calls us to a new community with other people, to recognize the error of our past ways, and to sin no more.

I think many of us have heard the story of the woman caught in adultery. At Mennonite Mission Network, I work in development, in fundraising, and what I believe is at the core of my job is to be a story teller. My role is to tell the stories of Mission Network, to share the way that the church is growing. I'd like to share a story that I believe is a modern retelling of John 8:1-11.

Until last August, David Shenk was serving in Ecuador, working with the Quito Mennonite Church. His work was centered on a refugee resettlement program for Columbians escaping the strife in their home country.

As I was in the process of writing this sermon, one of my coworkers pointed me to David's blog. The narrative I'd like to share is one that David posted back in September of 2013.

"Last Thursday I experienced an incident on a busy street in my neighborhood "El Inca" in the north of Quito that left me feeling indignant, sad and furious. That day I left the church on my bike at 6pm to head home. As I came closer to a street corner where there are various street vendors with their movies, shoes, shish kebabs, yogurt and cheese, a truck with 20 police stopped abruptly. The police jumped off the truck quickly and began to confiscate the vendor's merchandise using force, violence and with a strange sense of satisfaction and adrenaline. In a matter of twenty seconds, they had taken, thrown around and ransacked the shoes, movies and shish kebabs of the decent, hard-working street vendors of my neighborhood. In the chaos of the ambush, the only thing I managed to do was yell at the police several times saying, "*Dejen de quitarles su dignidad!*" or "Stop taking away their dignity!" as the police climbed back in the truck and drove away. Some street vendors ran after the police trying to hit them with sticks. Others sat on the sidewalk with tears in their eyes, having lost their only way to make an income. Those of us who were passing by on the street during the time of the ambush expressed our indignation and solidarity by helping the vendors pick up what was left of their merchandise, which was now scattered on the street like trash. I stayed standing on the street corner for a while longer next to the others who were also full of anger because of what they had seen. We wanted an answer; we wanted to do something for those street vendors; we wanted justice. Feelings of helplessness came to me, and I regretted not using my body and my bike as a barrier between the police and the merchandise during those brief twenty seconds of pillaging. After several minutes I decided to continue on my way feeling so outraged that tears came to my eyes.

I think on any given day that scene would have saddened me, but for some reason the incident deeply affected me on that day in particular. Maybe it was because in that scene I saw the reflection of many things that have been spinning in my head recently.

In that scene, I saw the reflection of what I have read in books about the victims of the brutal plundering during the Spanish conquest of Latin America.

In that scene, I saw the reflection of Trayvon Martin's case (and many other young African Americans), run over and assassinated not only by his assassin, but by the judicial system and systematized racism in the U.S.

In that scene, I saw the reflection of the stories that Colombian refugees tell me since they too earn a living on the street and have had similar traumatic experiences.

In that scene, I saw the violent and repressive response of the Mexican police in the current teacher's protests in Mexico.

In that scene, I saw the reflection of the images of police brutality in the famous "Occupy Wallstreet" movement in different US cities last year.

And the list could continue...

The scene that I witnessed last Thursday was a spark that brought to the surface many feelings that I have hung onto after seeing situations of injustice on the news and in everyday life. The incident last Thursday made me tangibly feel a piece of the abuses of power that cause oppression and suffering in so many parts of our world.

May God help us to know how to act in favor of those who have been trampled on and marginalized, and align ourselves with examples of resistance that bring hope and transformation.

What are Christians to do in the face of such injustice? David said that he wished he had done more, had thrust his body in between assailant and victim. But one man against 20 police officers, bent on destruction? He most likely would have been injured, if not thrown in prison. Would he have succeeded in stopping the police in their attack on the shop keepers? Who knows? But what did he yell at the police as they tore through the shops? "*Dejen de quitarles su dignidad!*" Stop taking away their dignity. Let he who is without sin, throw the first stone.

Our call to the third way begins with that prophetic cry of "Stop taking away their dignity". As we seek to establish the kingdom of God here on earth, we must begin with a life that is centered in the recognition of our common humanity. Like David Shenk, we must put ourselves in places where there seems to be little hope, and be a voice for the voiceless.

But all that said, our call must also be the beginning of a new community, of peace. Jesus called the woman caught in adultery to "go, and sin no more." David Shenk, after the police had left, stayed around to try to help the shop keepers clean up, to assist them as best he could. It is so easy to be lost in our call for justice that we forget we must be different afterwards.

Seeking justice in times such as these, when everything seems unclear, when we're not sure how to proceed, requires us to call for all people to recognize each other's humanity, and then to act. We must find the peace in each other's humanity, and then seek justice for all.

It is the prophet who yells at the police, who tells the Pharisees that they have all sinned. It is the priest who clears up the rubble of the shops, and who guides to a new path of living. As followers of Jesus, we are called to be both the prophets and the priests of this troubled world.

As we go from here, may God give us the courage to be the prophets, spreading the message of justice, of dignity, of humanity, and may God give us the restraint to be the priests, nurturing the community of peace, of joy, and of love. Amen.