

The Just and Reconciling Mercy and Truth of God based on Luke 13:31-35, David Jahnke, 2/12/17

So Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem to bring his mission to the powerful. And he is warned that the political leader of the day wants to kill him for the movement he has started. This is how sin and evil respond when we stand up to it. As we live more and more as Christ calls us, sin uses everything in its power-- deceit, temptation, threats, fear, guilt, calls to apathy and indifference-- all these demons try to destroy the new life God wants for us and for the world.

Now we have many shields: prayer, good spiritual friends who hold us accountable and share mercy and faith in God. This help from friends and God is so important because we personally lose many battles on this side of eternity. So knowing and having the undeserved and unconditional love and care of God and others not only *allows* us to get back up and keep fighting when we fall; it *demand*s that we do so!

I have been reading a great book called Just Mercy based on the amazing work of a Harvard-trained African-American lawyer named Brian Stevenson. He has been fighting for decades for the poor and the poorly represented; for children jailed for life or sentenced to death; for scapegoats who were easy targets so that communities would be able to rest assured that the monster in their midst was caught (even though he was not.)

Listen to an excerpt:

On the drive home from meeting Rosa Parks, I turned on the car radio, seeking news about Mr. Dill's execution-- [one of his client's]. I found a station airing a news report. It was a local religious station, but in their news broadcast there was no mention of the execution. I left the station on, and before long a preacher began a sermon. She started with scripture. "Three different times I begged the Lord to take the thorn away. Each time he said, "My grace is sufficient. My power is made perfect in your weakness." So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may work through me..."

I turned off the radio station, and as I slowly made my way home I understood that even as we are caught in a web of hurt and brokenness, we're also in a web of healing and mercy. I thought of the [time in my youth when I laughed at a new specially-abled boy outside church, thinking I was laughing with a normal boy making a joke, and my mother making me tell him I was sorry and that I loved him.] And how he [then] hugged me outside of church, creating reconciliation and love. I didn't deserve reconciliation or love in that moment, but that's how mercy works.

The power of just mercy is that it belongs to the undeserving. It's when mercy is least expected that it's most potent—strong enough to break the cycle of victimization and victimhood, retribution and suffering. It has the power to heal the psychic harm and injuries that lead to aggression and violence, abuse of power, mass incarceration. I drove home broken and brokenhearted about Jimmy Dill. But I knew I would come back the next day. There was more work to do.

The book provided so many examples of poor black men being put away for things they did not do or for unjust lengthy terms. I hope they know that the incarnate long-suffering God has been with them the whole time. Because Christ Jesus himself was unjustly persecuted time and again. And in the end, he himself was wrongly convicted and sentenced to death. Jesus knew this was coming and yet he persisted in standing up to evil.

Attorney Stevenson had a good sense that many of his pro bono cases would not go his way and yet he fought for these people; he came alongside them to show them that they mattered; and that someone cared and was on their side. We are called to no less for people who are hurting or oppressed in one way or another. Whether it is calling on someone you know personally who is going through a hard time, participating in church programs or political activism or ideally all three, God sends us out into this world every day to battle injustice anywhere. And inaction is not a Christian option.

A part of this is providing warnings about how sin and evil are real and destructive. Jesus was warned about evil King Herod and surprisingly, it was Pharisees who did so! This is a group that we normally think of as Jesus' opponents. But the gospels are always surprising us. Sometimes our seeming opponents are meant to be our friends. And those who we presume are against us might sometime be for us.

So what does God intend for the groups out there who have historically been in tension with one another? Whites and blacks; the rich and the poor; males and females; Muslims and Jews; the religious and the secular. Now it is not easy to overcome the actual injustices of history, but a critical component of this is battling the false narratives about the other that grow up around the tensions and miscommunications and injustices. And these false narratives seek to destroy the reconciliation God wants.

I just watched an amazing documentary about an Israeli girl who was murdered at her school. And as we hear about the first person charged with the murder who was a foreigner and an easy target. And as they are telling the evidence and how he eventually confessed, you become quite easily convinced that he must be the one. And then doubt is rightly introduced along with accusations against some of her female classmates who had been in the bathroom around the time she was murdered and had tension with the girl. And members of a Facebook group fighting for the first man further the accusations. You start to think that they must have been the ones.

And then the truth finally starts coming to light and it has nothing to do with either of these. But so many false narratives have been told by this time and the authorities and those committed to the story of the girls are so committed to their version of the story that an innocent man rots in prison. And a murderous crackpot goes free. [From "Shadow of Truth" now on Netflix]

This got me thinking about how easily we can be deceived. Jesus calls Herod a fox and the same is true of the devil! So what is the narrative we are building up about ourselves and others? What stories have we heard and told over and over; what negative experiences; what media impressions; what gossip...clouds our perception and our judgment and leads us to tear ourselves or others down? What false narratives need to be addressed and deconstructed?

The attacks on Jesus started and ended with false narratives about him and they ended with death. Never forget that connection. Feeling insecure and threatened leads to false narratives which can become very enticing and very dangerous. And because insecurity abounds in our current climate, we have to remain vigilant about the truth and calm and peaceful in our interactions, especially with seeming opponents.

And we have to remember how Jesus was seeking to re-orient his society to be more inclusive and caring. His followers saw his miracles and heard his amazing teachings and called him the Messiah-- the King of the world and yet he hung out with the lowly and the sinful. He was an itinerant preacher not sanctioned by the temple or the priestly class to forgive sins but he did. He warned the zealots about their hatred toward the Romans and called everyone to love their enemies. And in the end, he refused to use his power to return violence with violence.

And the question before all of us every day is which grand narrative we believe in-- the one told by the fallen world of King Herod which exalts having power over others and condemns those whom Jesus came to save and did? Or do we believe the Story of God embodied by Jesus whose power comes alongside and wants to save all-- in spirit, mind and body-- and especially those put down by this world.

Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem about which he said, “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing.” They were not willing to accept his way of peace and love toward the Roman occupiers and toward the lowly sinner in their midst. They did not believe his story about them and God’s plan for them.

Do we? Will we be a part of breaking down false narratives about others and especially the marginalized and despised? Stories that they are irredeemable or worthy of suspicion? We will commit to building up the Story of God’s love for all?

In our globalized and pluralistic world, it is easier than ever to get to know people from other worlds and learn their true story and share yours. It is also easier than ever in our information age to be a part of either furthering truth and love or furthering the enemy’s work of disinformation. Choose wisely and be on the right side of the reconciling work of all peoples which Christ Jesus finished through his death and resurrection.

And are we willing to be gathered in and a part of his gathering

So are we willing to be gathered in by Christ's Spirit of welcome, love and peace? Here is the thing. Those who joined him on the way to Jerusalem and those who carried his

mission in the world did not have a choice regarding whom he reached out to and who could join him. You had to accept them as he did. So joining his movement means reaching out to all and accepting all who are willing to walk along paths of peace, mercy, justice and love. Doing that means breaking down false narratives built up around stereotypes

Jesus knew that refusing to stand up to evil and responding to evil with violence of our own resulted in the same destruction. The only option is to follow him

Jesus knew the consequences

were wo thing

And we do this about ourselves and about those closest to us, in addition to more extended social relationships.

Whoever is not for me is against me. And whoever is not against me is for me. The big question then is do we understand who Jesus was and what Jesus is for.

And a critical piece in this regard is what we do with power. And Jesus teaches us that human power is rightly utilized in the service of God and those put down by the world. This was why he hung with the powerful and the poor. He was about healing the powerful by teaching them what their power was for. He was about healing the oppressed by coming alongside them and...

32He said to them, 'Go and tell that fox for me, "Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.

We have wonderful work to do. And if we carry it out, powers that be will seek to put a stop to it.

DO NOT BRING UP OJ...OR VERY BRIEFLY IF SO.

And then I watch a show about a rich one-- O.J. Simpson-- who got away with horrific murders because he had become an icon for sports and movies. And because he was able to hire the best team of lawyers money could buy.

DO NOT BRING UP OJ...OR VERY BRIEFLY IF SO.

impossible to stereotype anyone!! The most guilty of guilty people-- O.J. Simpson-- let off the hook. And why did he get off? And because it was their job to break down the truth based on the powers of suspicion and mistrust. And because O.J. was an icon.

uild on distrust and

Very good wealthy people

³³Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem.” ³⁴Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! ³⁵See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” ’