

In the Interest of Truth, Justice, and Redemption

by Deborah Nimmons

[Today's readings: Sirach 15:15-20; Ps. 119: 1-2, 4-5, 17-18, 33-34; 1 Cor 2:6-10; Mt. 5: 17-37]

On my oath. I solemnly swear. Upon my soul. As God is my witness. On my life. Swear to God. By heaven. Hand to God.

What is an oath? We've heard that word a lot recently. And it pops up in today's gospel.

When you testify in court you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God. Elected officials swear an oath of office. A couple of weeks ago, we witnessed US Senators swearing an oath used only for impeachment trials.

So, what is an oath?

It's more than a promise. A promise is assurance that you'll do something. An oath invites God to witness that what you are saying is true. To lie under oath is to ask God to witness a lie. In the impeachment trial one Senator voted outside of party lines because as a devout man, he understood what an oath means and believed the evidence required the vote he cast. He would not ask God to witness a lie even if that meant he would suffer backlash.

In today's gospel, Jesus tells us to be so truthful that others would believe us without the need of an oath. That would require us to have strong, consistent reputations for truthfulness.

In a time of lies, manipulation, pettiness, vindictiveness, condescension, one-upmanship, click bait headlines, hyperbole as fact, demands for complete adherence to a person or party line no matter what, we are told by God... not to lead anyone astray by our words and actions, but to walk the extra mile, feed our hungry enemies, overcome evil with good, and make peace. (Romans 12:20-21) We are held to God's law and the prompting of the Holy Spirit no matter what.

Some days I feel kneecapped. The name-calling, lack of compassion, the outright lies come fast and furious, but I can't fight fire with fire?

And yet... the only way to preserve Truth is to remain truthful. Now that does Not mean silent. We are to elevate the truth and refuse the lie. God expects our voices raised in Truth. (Proverbs 21:28; 12:19; Ephesians 4:15)

After all, just because the cat had kittens in the oven, that doesn't make them biscuits. You don't have to say, "pass, the butter, please." You call a lie a lie, but the Bible tells us, you do it with love. (Ephesians 4:15) Truth is an act of justice.

In today's readings we learn that God's wisdom is given to us through God's law and the Holy Spirit. Jesus tells us that we violate the law not just by breaking a specific law, but by holding on to the state of heart that leads to breaking that law. For instance, it is not enough that we haven't killed someone with whom we are angry. The angry heart is the same whether we kill someone, speak of them with contempt or condescension, or even when we just harbor malice without saying a word or taking an overt action. ↑ "Out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks." (Luke 6:45) If we suppress hurtful feelings instead erasing them, they will influence what we say and do. Wrestling with our hearts is an act of justice and mercy.

The next thing Jesus says is that if you know that someone has a grievance against you, you are to go make peace with them. Think about that for a moment. If someone is angry with me, yes, they are responsible for the anger in their heart, but I, too, am responsible for going to them to make peace. It isn't enough that we deal with the lack of peace in our own hearts, // we need to acknowledge how we may be complicit in or at least connected to the lack of peace in someone else's heart. (repeat) We need to help each other find peace. Earlier during mass, we gave and received a sign of peace with each other to remind us of that fact. That peace we share comes from God. And when we leave today, we will take that peace into the world to share with others. Peacemaking is an act of justice.

How many of you have read Bryan Stevenson's book or seen the movie based on his book Just Mercy? (I highly recommend it.) For those of you who aren't familiar with the story, Bryan Stevenson is the attorney who founded the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) in Montgomery, Alabama in 1989. Back then the federal government provided funding to states for legal representation of death row inmates.

The subtitle for the book Just Mercy is "a story of justice and redemption." One definition of redemption is freedom or release from burden or bondage. And indeed this is a story of many instances of redemption. (Not just the most obvious one.)

When you bring a sincere love of people, their stories, and their humanity to the work for justice everyone touched by that work has the opportunity to be redeemed. Bryan does this. You see it in the lives he touches.

I graduated law school in 1990 and went to work at an office in Florida that was funded by the same government funds to do the same capital case work as EJI. Every client was on Death Row. And at the time, we had the highest death warrant rate in the country.

Capital cases take a toll, mentally, physically, and emotionally, but at the same time one thing becomes crystal clear: what really matters. What is worth your energy, attention, response, and emotion? And the answer is: the person in front of you. When you work capital cases, your work *is* life and death. When you see everyone you meet as

deserving of love and redemption, of your attention, compassion, and respect, relationships change. You change.

Some time during my first year working in Florida, I realized how much less upset I got about the little things. My view of what was a little thing versus a big thing had changed, as well. Just Mercy reminded me of how clear my soul's vision once was; how naturally I moved from that place of knowing what was important.

In this moment in time, our world's moral vision is not clear. We face challenges as every generation before us has. Some challenges are new; some are not. But the only way to create the peace and justice we seek is to make them every morning and serve them all - day - long. When the words around us are weapons, our Yes must mean Yes and our No must mean No. Our reputation for Truth, Justice, Peace, and Love must stay strong.

Lent approaches. It is a time of discernment. A time for personal and, perhaps, cultural, communal, and national discernment. It is a time to reflect honestly on: 1) what is the state of my heart, my words, and my behavior? Where have I gotten emotionally tangled? 2) What thoughts do I hold on to and gnaw on? are they helpful? 3) what habits of thought and action can I substitute that would help me stay on course? 4) what is the first step I can take to change one hurtful habit for a helpful one? 5) Who is angry with me or my "group"? How might I be complicit in the circumstances that feed that anger? 6) How might I disarm anger and trigger peace? 7) What is truly deserving of my energy and attention?

We can rid our hearts of divisiveness, and each of us can choose an overt act of justice as penance during Lent.

As Reinhold Niebuhr said, "Love is the motive, but justice is the instrument."

Peace be with you.