

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: What Should We Do?

Annie Duncan

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Scripture:

Luke 3:2-7, 10-14

² during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴ As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

"A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.

⁵ Every valley shall be filled in,
every mountain and hill made low.

The crooked roads shall become straight,
the rough ways smooth.

⁶ And all people will see God's salvation."^[a]

⁷ John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?

¹⁰ "What should we do then?" the crowd asked.

¹¹ John answered, "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same."

¹² Even tax collectors came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?"

¹³ "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them.

¹⁴ Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?"

He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay."

Transcript:

Well, good morning, to everybody here good morning. If you are online, my name's Annie Duncan, I'm the Executive Pastor here and it is so great to be with you and worship. And like Adrian said, I am 18, it's amazing, it feels good. The scripture today comes from the Book of Luke, and we're going to pick it up right where John the Baptist is in the Jordan. He is baptizing people and he is talking about the kingdom of God.

So in Luke 3:2, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the Word of God came to John, son of Zacharias, in the wilderness. He went into all the country around the Jordan preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the words of Isaiah the prophet, a voice of one calling in the wilderness, "Prepare the way for the Lord and make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low, the crooked road shall become straight, the rough ways smooth, and all people will see God's salvation."

"What should we do then?" the crowds asked. John answered, "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same." Even tax collectors came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "What should we do?" "Don't collect any more than you're required to," he told them. Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely, be content with your pay."

So God, I pray that you take these words and you make them yours because, Jesus, we've just come here to hear about you, because we're curious about who you are, we want to be following you. So, Jesus, give us your eyes to see and ears to hear so that when we leave here today, we are a little bit more like you, or a lot more like you. Amen.

Well, as some of you know, we are in this sermon series called More, taking a closer look at what it means to be a Jesus follower, not just a church attender. And each week we're looking at a different characteristic of what it means to be a disciple. And last week, Anthony, he preached on how a disciple is eager and equipped to preach the good news of Jesus, and this week we are talking about what it means to be a healer of injustice.

What does that mean? Healer of injustice, it sounds really cool. Well, if we got to go all the way back to the Book of Genesis, it starts at the beginning with the creation of humankind because humans are made in God's image. And this is the bedrock of the Bible's view of justice. All

humans are created equal before God, and they all have the right to be treated fairly with dignity and respect, no matter who you are.

And over and over again in the Bible, we see how God has this heart for justice. It's this consistent theme, which means it's really, really important to God. The word justice, it's mentioned several hundred times in the Old Testament alone. And sometimes when we see this word justice pop up in the Bible, it means just simply to treat each other fairly. But more often than not, when we see the word justice, it's calling us to take part in restorative justice, to advocate for those that are vulnerable, and be part of bringing change to prevent injustice from happening in the first place.

And what we learn about biblical justice is that God calls us to be part of it. So to be a healer of injustice means that we fix what is broken, and we redeem what is unfair. Really easy, right? Really easy.

Let's keep talking because it's not easy. I mean, you look around in our world, and we've got racism, racial oppression, segregation, human trafficking. To be a healer of injustice takes seriously that we can't simply overlook what's broken and unjust. Author Jemar Tisby says, "The refusal to act in the midst of injustice is itself an act of injustice. Indifference to oppression perpetuates oppression."

Now sometimes when we talk about acts of justice, those get confused with acts of mercy. So let's take a second just to talk about the two of them. Acts of mercy are when you do something for someone, like, "Oh, I see that you're hungry, so here's a meal." Or, "Oh, I see that you need some clothes, so here's some clothes." But acts of justice are when you do something with someone, like seeing a pattern of racism in your workplace, and so you call it out, you get to the root, why that's happening, you heal the relationships that it's broken, and then you forge a new way of working together in your workplace. Acts of mercy are transactional. Acts of justice are more relational, and they take time. Both are important, and we need both, but they are different.

So as we walk through this text in Luke together, pay attention to how John answers the crowds, the tax collectors, the soldiers. Pay attention to how he invites them to be healers of injustice in their contexts. "What should we do then?," the crowds ask. "What should we do?," the tax collectors ask. "And what should we do?," the soldiers ask. These repeated questions communicate that when we hear the gospel preach, it should engage us in concrete action. Or to put that another way, when people encounter Jesus' love, they are left changed, and therefore it changes the way that they live their lives.

And we don't do acts of justice simply to check the box on being a good disciple. Oh, Pastor Annie, she told me I need to be a healer of injustice, so I'm going to do that, check the box. No. We do these acts of justice because it's an overflow of our relationship with God. God has a huge heart for justice, and the closer that we get to God in our relationship with him, the more God is going to put his heart into our heart.

So the crowds that are gathered there at the Jordan after hearing the word of God proclaimed and they get baptized, they ask John, "Okay, what should we do then?" And the word crowds in Greek, it literally means people of the land. These were the people that were probably living in community, right there off the river, living together and living off the land as people of the land. And in response to their asking, "What should we do?" John simply says, "To provide for each other life's basic needs, food and clothing."

Now, we just talked about the difference between acts of mercy and acts of justice, and this seems like John's answer is telling them do some acts of mercy. But hold on, because as we dig into this text a little bit more, we're going to see that what John is actually asking them to do is acts of justice. So hold on to that thought for one second.

"Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one that has none, and anyone who has food should do the same." This is not a revolutionary idea. We see this over and over again in scripture where our beliefs are tied to our actions. The prophet Isaiah insisted that actions like fasting and sacrifices, those were meaningless apart from seeking justice, sharing bread with those that are hungry, and clothing the naked.

Isaiah 1:17 says, "Learn to do right. Seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless. Plead the case of the widow." And in Isaiah 58:6 it says, "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen, to lose the chains of injustice, untie the cords of the yoke, and to set the oppressed free, and break every yoke."

So John's response to the crowds, it is not to spur them to do a coat drive or a food drive. Those things are good, but that's not what he's getting at here. Because remember, these are people of the land, they're already living in community together. So when John says, give food to those that are hungry, give clothes to those that are naked, the crowds would've known exactly who John was talking about. They would've had faces pop into their mind, because they knew the people that they were living with. They knew their situations. They knew the people that needed clothes and needed food. They would've known their first and last names. They would've known their cousins, their kids. They knew because they were in community.

When asked what the greatest commandment is, Jesus said, "Love the Lord God with all your heart, and love your neighbor as yourself." So John, in calling the people of the land to heal hunger and poverty in their community, he's basically saying love your neighbor as yourself, love each other, and get to the root of those injustices by living in community together.

When the tax collectors ask John, "Well, should we do?" John has a different response, but it's still attached to that great commandment of love God and love your neighbor. He says, "Teacher", they asked, "What should we do?" "Don't collect any more than you're required to," he told them.

Now back then the Roman tax system was unjust and greedy. Tax collectors had made their living by over collecting. So for a tax collector to not over collect, that would've been a bold move because it would've meant that they were not going to have enough to provide for themselves. In other words, an honest tax collector was a starving tax collector. So it's interesting here what John says, but it's also interesting what John doesn't say. So John does say to the tax collectors, "Only collect what's required." But John does not tell them to leave this unjust system. We kind of expect him to, right? Like, "Oh, it's corrupt, leave, go find another job." No, he tells them to be part of correcting that system.

Like Anthony said last week, the message must accompany the deeds. The good news of the gospel goes hand in hand with how we live our lives, as tax collectors, as teachers, as executives, as students, as husbands, as wives, as parents, it impacts how we live our lives. So third, when the soldiers asked John, "And what should we do?" He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people, falsely, be content with your pay." So not only was the Roman tax system corrupt, but so was their military. Roman soldiers were expected to live ruthlessly, take advantage of people, and do this for their own advantage. So again, John doesn't say to the soldiers to cease and desist, but he calls them to work differently, to do their jobs differently. And John's responses to the tax collectors and the soldiers, they show that John really believed that even in difficult and compromising situations, we can behave morally, we can live decently, and we can treat others with respect, and heal some of the injustice that's in our world.

And sometimes to heal an injustice, especially in a big system like the Roman tax system, or the military, or a big corporation, or a big company, it seems like that's a very daunting task, but it has to start small sometimes, right? So even with a handful of tax collectors that maybe aren't going to over collect, or a handful of soldiers that aren't going to live aggressively in their jobs, they would've made an impact, even if it starts small. Moving people into unity, wholeness and justice takes intentionality and it takes time.

So just as we hear the crowds, tax collectors, and soldiers ask this question, "What should we do?," as disciples, as people that are trying to follow Jesus, that is also our question, "Okay,

Jesus, what should we do? What should we do?" Others of us here might hear this story from Luke and think, "Well, I'm not a person of the land, I'm not a tax collector, I'm not a soldier. This story doesn't apply to me." Yes it does. Yes it does, this applies to all of us that are trying to follow Jesus.

So who are the people in your land? Where are there unjust procedures and policies that you could have an influence on? How is God calling us individually, as well as a gathered community here, to bring about God's kind of justice. I'm going to give you three quick ways of how we can do this together. Because that's our question, what should we do? We join with the crowds, the tax collectors and soldiers in asking that question.

First, pray for eyes to see and ears to hear. Being a disciple means we are a follower of Jesus, and a healer of injustice, as we try and do those things like heal and justice, we cannot do that apart from Jesus. Jesus calls us to live a life, we cannot live apart from him. Often in Jesus' teaching, he would say, "Blessed are those that have eyes to see and ears to hear." To be healers of injustice, we need Jesus' eyes and we need Jesus' ears, because on our own, we can only see so far, and we can only hear so far.

But when we pray that prayer, "Jesus, I want your eyes. I want your ears," we are going to start to see and hear differently because we're not just doing it on our own. And when we pray that prayer, "Jesus, give me eyes to see and ears to hear," that doesn't mean we just passively sit on our couch and watch Netflix and wait for injustices to pop in front of us. But no, we are disciples of Jesus, we are following him, we are filled and equipped with Jesus' spirit, so as we go about our day in our workplace, in our community, we pray that prayer, "Give us eyes to see and ears to hear." Did I say that right? Yeah, eyes. I messed it up in the other service.

And it's going to impact, it's going to impact the way that we live our lives, because we're going to start to see and hear like Jesus. So here's an example, Grace Brown, who some of you might know, she's a member of Bell Press, and one of the leaders in our justice and racial reconciliation team. She told me a story recently about how she recently joined the PTSA at her kids' school. And Grace, if you know her, she is a disciple on the lookout to see and hear like Jesus, and she noticed that the PTSA, it was led by a group of white women and met at 11:00 AM in the morning. And in joining this group, Grace helped to make a very small, equitable change for the meeting to move to meeting in the evenings, and this allowed for working parents to also participate in the group. For the group to only meet at 11:00 AM wasn't deliberately exclusive, but the result of their practice was exclusion.

When we pray for eyes to see and ears to hear, sometimes Jesus is going to show us who's missing from the community, or who is missing from the conversation. The kingdom of God is so

much bigger and fuller than we sometimes realize. Okay, so when we start to see and hear like Jesus, we're going to start looking around, we're going to start noticing things, and we're going to start asking some questions, which brings us to our second point. What should we do? Pray for eyes to see in ears to hear, and second, look around, notice, and ask questions.

Like the crowds that asked John, what should we do then? Who are the people in your land? Where has God already placed you? Start there. Like the tax collectors and the soldiers, John told them to start exactly where they were at, in their workplace, in their place of occupation. So with Jesus' eyes and ears, we can look around in our lives, in our community, and see, and notice, and ask questions. And Ryan Beatty, who's on staff with our Go and Grow team, he did just that. A couple years ago, he was on a walk early in the morning, and he took time to notice and ask questions. Ryan lives in the Kings Gate neighborhood, along with everybody else at Bell Press, and his kids attended, at the time, they attended Robert Frost Elementary School.

And early one morning, Ryan was on a walk, and he noticed a lot of young kids from an apartment complex running across this busy commuter street to head into Ryan's neighborhood where their elementary school was. And in Kings Gate, there are sidewalks and there are crosswalks everywhere, but from this apartment complex, the only way to cross this busy commuter street safely was to walk the long way, all the way to down to a light and cross there, which is why Ryan was noticing these kids scrambling unsafely across the street.

And sure an argument could be made that these kids, well, they should just follow the rules and take the long way in order to get across the street safely. But how many of y'all with young kids know that sometimes you make it to school just in the nick of time. These kids did not have time to take the long way. So, Ryan emailed the City of Kirkland and told them about the situation, and he was actually surprised, he heard back from the City of Kirkland right away. And then two months later, a raised cross walk with a flashing light and flags was put in so that kids could cross the street safely.

Now, Ryan has a lot of amazing friends that live in that Kings Gate community. Ryan could have rallied some parents together, organized a carpool to go over to the apartment complex and help kids get to school safely. He totally could have done that. But remember, mercy is when we give assistance to someone, justice is when we ask, "Why is this even happening in the first place?" Which is why Ryan took the time and asked why, which I think is a really great example of how we can use our influence in really small ways that make really big and lasting impacts.

So what should we do? Pray for eyes to see and ears to hear. Second, look around, notice and ask questions. And third, advocate for those that don't have a voice. And we see Jesus doing this all the time. Jesus advocating for people that didn't have a voice. The invalid, the leprous,

the woman caught an adultery. When we advocate and elevate people that might not otherwise have a voice, sometimes it will cause a bit of a stir. Being a healer of injustice, it comes at a cost, our time, our reputation, but doesn't mean that we shouldn't do it.

Over and over again, we see Jesus advocating for people and he sometimes got questioned about it, right? "You eat with tax collectors and sinners? What is going on with that? You heal on the Sabbath?" I mean, Jesus upset some religious people so much so that they started to plot to kill him, and eventually did. Dom Helder Camara said, "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint, when I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist." Now communism is not the answer, we know that Jesus is. And as disciples, and as we ask questions and call for advocacy, don't be surprised when maybe it causes a stir, maybe upsets some people in your community.

Heather Headland, who is sharing her testimony, you just heard her actually. She's sharing her testimony in all services today. She told me the story about advocating for families that were caught in the immigration system. When a family would go to immigration court, people that knew the family and knew their situation would write letters to the judge, and also be present at those hearings with the family. It was their way of advocating for a voice that might not otherwise be heard, and showing the family that there are people in their community that loved them and supported them.

And remember how doing justice is costly? Well, rallying alongside a family, as they went to immigration court, takes a lot of time and perseverance. It showed Heather and her colleagues how challenging the immigration system can be to navigate. Sometimes court hearings would take a year to get scheduled, and then often they would arrive at the hearings only to have the hearing canceled, and then they would have to start that process all over again.

Heather told me how emotionally draining this was for the family, as well as those trying to support the family. And she commented, "We couldn't fix those problems, but we could advocate for better policies with our legislators." It helped people caught in the system know that someone cared. So Bell Press, who in your community, or school, or workplace, needs to be advocated for? I'm going to let you think about it. Who needs to be advocated for? Who's being mistreated? Where do you see racism that needs to be called out? Where are the biased practices and policies that need to be rewritten? Think about it.

God has a heart for justice, so I am assuming that every one of us, maybe at least had one idea pop into our mind as I asked those questions just now, of where there are areas where we can be healers of injustice. Because Bell Press, we have everything that we need to be healers of injustice, because we've got Jesus, and we've got each other, and that's a really good start.

Jesus, we've got his eyes to see, and we've got his ears to hear. And as disciples that are on mission together in community, we get to ask that question, "What do we do?" And we are invited to be healers of injustice, alongside God, with his huge heart for justice, for his people. God's response to the injustice that surrounds us is to give us a gift, and y'all know what that gift is. That gift is Jesus, who himself was righteous and just, and yet died for us all.

And as disciples, we follow Jesus. We follow his lead, we receive Jesus' forgiveness, and are compelled by his command to love, love God, love our neighbor. And it's this lifetime commitment that is fueled by the words from the prophet Micah that says, "God has told you humans what is good. What does the Lord require of you? To do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God."

So Bell Press, this week, this week, what are some of the justice issues that you see in your community? Pick one. Start praying. Pray over that. Pray, pray with your all in group, pray with your friends, and start there. The spirit will lead you for what's next, as we all, together, ask that question. "What do we do?"

So God, I thank you, that you don't leave us alone, but God, you ask us to partner with you as you bring about healing for the injustices that do indeed surround us even today. So God, nudge us, speak to us, fill us with your heart for justice. It's in your name that we pray. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Icebreaker Question:

- Looking back at when you were younger, what was your silliest fear?

Opening Question:

- Looking back, were you able to apply any of the things we talked about last time to your life this week? What did you do? How did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions – Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g. traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions - *Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:*

- Annie shared three ways to start being a healer of injustice. Of these, which is the harder for you and which is the easiest? Why?
 - Pray for eyes to see and ears to hear.
 - Look around, notice and ask questions.
 - Advocate for those without a voice.
- Where do you see an opportunity in your life to be a healer of injustice? In your community, workplace, school, etc.?

Closing Question and Application:

- Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing Group Prayer:

- Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.
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