

You remember this one?

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.”

It’s garbage, isn’t it. It was intended, I’m assuming, to be a proverb of defiance, a child’s response to another child’s verbal bullying, a show of strength. This proverb, I’m sure, was intended to be a way to stop kids actually fighting.

Oh, the irony. Because words do hurt, they do inflict terrible harm, they do have consequences, they do cause immense pain, and they can leave a wound. And wounds accumulated change behavior. Anyone, any creature, hurt, wounded, stressed will likely, at some point, strike out and eventually cause hurt, or wound in return.

In the aftermath, this week, of a law enforcement officer killing Renee Nicole Good in Minnesota, the online news media and my own social media feeds have blown up in a war of words. There’s clearly stress, pain, outrage, and grief on both sides of the fight, and, in a way that reveals much about the culture of our society, that agony pours out in a flood of weaponized words. Words hurriedly chosen on the spur of the moment, words carefully chosen for maximum effect, words mindlessly used without thinking of their impact; the countless millions of words we collectively hurl at one another intended to wound. They wound over and over again. Whatever the brief moment of satisfaction as a sharp one-liner is thrown out - whether to a neighbor, or at a press conference, or added into the mess of a comment section, whatever brief moment of satisfaction there may be from the feeling of “that told them” .. the collective wound is now a little larger, it’s gonna be a little harder for it to heal.

Join me in a thought experiment, close your eyes if it's helpful ... I want you to think back to a time in your life when you have felt most at ease. Perhaps in this moment you're remembering, you felt gloriously connected to the people you were with, or safe in the room you were sitting in, perhaps it was a moment of awe, or you felt particularly grounded in an outdoor space, the warm sun on your face, the sound of the ocean. Perhaps you were in prayer, feeling the stillness of intentional time before God, absolute presence. Think about how your remembered moment feels in your body, a slower heart rate, relaxed shoulders, a softened jaw, traces of oxytocin – the “love” hormone – might be flowing through your veins, you can really breathe. You might experience love, or peace in a moment like this. You might remember it as a time when things felt o.k., when it felt as though all is good, all is as just as it should be. In that moment, feeling *this* way, reactivity is somewhat set down, our minds move a little more slowly... we can think a little more clearly.

Now - what kind of life, what quality of life do you believe we were created for?

In the opening verse of today's reading from Isaiah, the prophet, speaking for God, reveals the nature of the servant chosen by God, in whom *God's soul delights*; “he will not cry, or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench” – perhaps you can easily imagine this servant of God within your remembered moment. And, the prophet tells us, this servant of God will bring forth justice to the nations ... he will faithfully bring forth justice.

We live in a biting, snarling world, and in this world ‘justice’ is almost entirely bound up in ideas of procedural justice. Law and order. And in a biting, snarling world it takes more violence, more officers, more guns, bigger prisons, and an inflamed fear of all that to be seen to be getting justice done. Can we honestly reconcile the deep wisdom of the prophet Isaiah, with this kind of worldly ‘justice’? Can we honestly reconcile the personhood of Jesus with ‘justice’ as it’s played out in our world, in our neighborhoods? If we can, we’re either not risking thinking deeply about the contradictions here, or we’re putting ourselves through such mental gymnastics to affirm that violence is just, that we’re essentially convincing ourselves that no is yes, and death is life.

The Hebrew word for justice, *mishpat*, means so much more than procedural justice. *Mishpat*, in the context of much of scripture, especially the prophets, means something akin to “the way things should be,” “the way God intended things to be.” Used in this way, laws and the enforcement of laws is not justice, is not *mishpat*. Justice is a way of living and being in the world that strives to honor God and all Creation through the choices we make and the way we live. Justice is a quality of being to be possessed by each of us, a quality of righteous living, and fairness, and care; it’s a way of being in relationship, that includes not attempting to gain an advantage over our neighbor, having power over our neighbor.

Mishpat, I think, is what we experience in ourselves in those moments, few and far between though they may be, when things feel o.k., when we feel as though all is good, all is at just as it should be. This is the state of being, I believe, we should be striving for for *all* people, for all Creation.

Think of the one promised to bring justice, *mishpat*:

“he will not cry, or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench”

Mishpat for the prophet Micah:

He has showed you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.¹

Mishpat for the prophet Amos:

... let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.²

Mishpat is not violence, never violence. God’s justice has nothing to do with force, or intimidation, or killing. The system of laws in play in our society, is not justice as it’s invoked in our Scriptural texts; and for us to really understand our call as followers of Jesus it’s really important we pull these two things apart.

We may not be able to change the current landscape of violence in any broad, sweeping way. But we can change. Violence, any violence, any attempt to gain an advantage over our neighbor, get one over on them, get the upper hand, is an act of injustice, goes against *mishpat*. And I truly believe that words, far from being nothing but words, I believe that words create, our words create the space we all live in, that we share.

¹ Micah 6:8

² Amos 5:24

Words of critique, or judgement, words put to use to hurt, abuse, shame, or even just take a dig at someone else, it all contributes to creating an environment for life that's a long way from that wonderful space you just remembered, that time when all things felt just as they should be.

Our weaponized words, however benign or irrelevant we convince ourselves they are, however justified we feel in the moment, however justified we convince ourselves our words are, whenever we choose our words as a weapon, even a weapon to push back, or raise ourselves up ... whenever our words are used as a weapon, even if the 'stick' we're using to beat another person with is really small, our words add to the rot of violence in the world.

Jesus hammers this home, in the Sermon on the Mount, assuring us that if we use our words to harm or hurt we will "be liable to the hell of fire."³

Mishpat – God's justice – will be nothing less than a complete transformation of the ways we, us, ordinary folks, engage with one another.

... what does the Lord require of us but to do justice, *mishpat*, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.

Amen.

³ Matthew 5:21-22