

“Paradox Two: God Is Just and Merciful”

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Based upon Isaiah 42:1-9; Luke 4:14-30

Last week, on the eve of a holiday weekend created in part to inspire us to reaffirm our commitment to justice for all, in honor of Martin Luther King Jr., a magistrate judge of the U.S. District Court of the District of Arizona convicted four women of leaving jugs of water and piles of canned food in a desert near the border, where migrants have frequently tried to cross into the United States from Mexico. Noting that more than 3,000 migrants have died in the harsh conditions of that particular desert since 1999, the women, who were volunteers with an organization called “No More Deaths,” argued that theirs was a vital and moral ministry of compassion. But the judge was not moved. Stating that the women should have known better than to believe that they would not be prosecuted and would only be fined or banned from the refuge for their crime, the judge convicted them of violating federal law by entering a protected refuge without a permit, and of harming its “pristine nature” by leaving food and water there for travelers. Around the same time that the judge was reprimanding them for putting humanitarian efforts before litter laws, the border patrol in that region, which was caught on video tape dumping out the jugs of water they had found in the refuge, defended their actions on the grounds that they were simply enforcing immigration laws. “If giving water to someone dying of thirst is illegal,” the convicted women wrote in a published statement afterwards, “what humanity is left in the law of this country?”¹

Their question is worth pondering. How much humanity should there be in the law, which many would argue by definition is a black and white kind of construct? If everyone is allowed to do what his or her conscience dictates apart from the law, then how will there ever be order or justice? Yet if the law does not take into account the basic needs of human beings, how can it protect them and/or make the world a better place? What do you think Jesus would have done if he had been sitting on the bench instead of the magistrate? Christians have always understood our triune God to be a just God. Yet we also affirm that God is God of mercy, who in Jesus Christ repeatedly spoke out against legalism, and ultimately seemed to throw the whole Law out the window when he chose to save human beings from eternal separation from God rather than convict us for our sins. It’s one of the great paradoxes of our faith that we affirm God is both just and merciful. So today, as the second part of my series on Christian paradoxes, I’d like us to think about exactly what it is that we are affirming.

In order to answer the question “What would Jesus do in Arizona?” and therefore have a better understanding of how today’s paradox works, we first have to consider what he did in his own time on Earth. Today’s text from *Luke* is a great place to start because scholars consider it to be Jesus’ mission statement (at least according to *Luke*). Combining verses from Chapters 58 and 61 of *Isaiah* together, and then announcing that the prophecies were fulfilled in him, Jesus kicked off his ministry by expressly allying himself with “the least of these”— the poor, the imprisoned,

¹ Phillips, Kristine, “4 who left food, water for migrants are convicted,” THE WASHINGTON POST, Jan. 20, 2019, A2.

the blind, and the oppressed. But when he also affirmed that the “year of the Lord’s favor” had arrived in him, Jesus made it clear that he had more in mind than a pastoral ministry of visiting the down and out. The “year of the Lord’s favor,” according to Jewish Law, was the year of Jubilee. *Leviticus* 25 states that every fifty years, the “Jubilee” year, the nation of Israel was commanded to practice what amounted to a holy do-over. No one was allowed to work. Slaves had to be freed. All outstanding debts had to be cancelled, and land returned to its original owners. It was a year that was supposed to reset the economic balance of the nation to ensure that there would not be a class of very rich and very poor. It was a year to reset the nation politically too, by ensuring that everyone was free and heard and empowered, and finally, it was a year to reset Israel spiritually, by reminding them that they were called to be a different kind of nation from the rest in the world. They were servants of Yahweh and stewards of Yahweh’s Promised Land. That meant that the land was not theirs to sell or keep as they wished, nor were their profits from that land, especially if they were gained in violation of the letter or spirit of God’s Law. God did not want the nation of Israel to be known for its inequitable economy or a corrupt political system. God wanted Israel to be a nation where everyone’s needs were met equally and completely because everyone in the nation served Yahweh, the God of justice and righteousness.

Jubilee was good news for those who were oppressed, indebted, and captive, which is why the poor and oppressed Jews in Nazareth were at first thrilled with Jesus’ claiming this text as his own. But the Jubilee requirements were not good news for those who had wealth and power, and for that reason, not surprisingly, there is no evidence that the ancient Jews ever complied with this Law before, during, or after Jesus’ day. God’s justice under the Law was radical in its demand for equity and equality, and radical in its expectation that all would work together for communal wholeness more than individual profit. Therefore, the fact that Jesus told his neighbors that this kind of justice was going to be at the heart of his ministry tells us that we cannot even begin to argue about whether God is just, until we first recognize that God’s idea of justice is quite different from our own.

According to Paul Tillich, human beings typically define justice in some kind of “tributive” way.² Justice for us means *retributive* justice, which is punishing those who do wrong, or *distributive* justice, which is giving to everyone proportionately what is their due, or *attributive* justice, which is giving to them what they deserve based on merit, status, or social role. But according to both God’s Law on its face, and especially how it was embodied in Christ, God’s idea of justice is more redemptive and restorative than tributive. That means that God’s justice is about ensuring that the systems of the world work in such a way that all people have what they need to be whole. God’s overriding concern is not protecting property or enforcing law. God’s concern is that human beings are not kept by their sins, or the sins of others, from experiencing the abundant and righteous lives for which God created them.

² Tillich, Paul, *Love, Power and Justice* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1954), 62-71.

There's a legend about the famous New York mayor, Fiorello LaGuardia, which illustrates what this kind of redemptive justice looks like in economic and political terms. The story is probably apocryphal, although Snopes has not been able to confirm that.³ Anyway, according to the story, in 1935, during the middle of the Great Depression, then-mayor LaGuardia turned up one night at the court that served the poorest ward in the city, and dismissed the judge for the evening taking the bench himself. The first defendant was a tattered old woman who was charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She told the mayor that her daughter's husband had left her, her daughter was sick, and her two grandchildren were starving. The shopkeeper was not moved by her tale of hardship. "It's a bad neighborhood, your Honor," he said. "She's got to be punished to teach other people around here a lesson." LaGuardia sighed and said, "I've got to punish you. The law makes no exceptions. Ten dollars or ten days in jail." Then he reached into his pocket, took out a ten-dollar bill, and tossed it into his hat saying, "Here is the ten dollars which I now remit, and furthermore, I am going to fine everyone in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant."

If we take this legend as a parable, then Jesus is LaGuardia, focused on the justice of the situation both in terms of the law, and in terms of fairness, mercy, and wholeness. The God we know in Christ does not condone systemic injustice simply because the law is the law. Instead, God offers mercy, while simultaneously calling everyone to greater accountability to create a system in which individually and collectively people's needs are met equally and completely.

When you apply this framework of justice measured both by law and mercy to Christ's work for our spiritual wholeness, it is easier to understand how God can forgive sinners, even those we think should not be forgiven. To punish all sinners won't do any good because that's all of us – every single one. We'd never be made whole. Yet to punish only some of us, is equally problematic because then you have to decide which crimes are worthy of condemnation and which are not, and that's much more complicated than we like to think it is when all of the variables are considered.

There's a funny, weird hit show on TV on Thursday nights called "*The Good Place*," which illustrated this just a week ago.⁴ The show is a quirky, yet surprisingly deep comedy the plot of which is way too complicated for me to explain. It mixes slapstick humor with elevated moral philosophical theory every episode through the adventures of six characters in the afterlife. But basically, it is a show about who deserves to be in heaven and hell, and how we decide good from bad. Ted Danson plays a demon turned good guy, who discovers that the point system the "Judge" uses to decide who gets into the Good Place and who does not has become so skewed against the reality of human existence that no one can get in anymore. In last week's episode, he tried to explain this to the judge with a hypothetical about buying a tomato. He said something to the effect of "that single act, according to the point system, was worth more than 12,000 negative

³ Mikkelson, David. "FACT CHECK: Fiorello La Guardia Legend," SNOPE.COM, Oct. 31, 2012, retrieved Jan. 22, 2019, from <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/laguardia-angel>.

⁴ "*The Good Place*," T.V. show created by Michael Schur, (starring Kristen Bell, Ted Danson, Jameela Jamil, William Jackson Harper, D'Arcy Carden), NBC, Thursday nights. (It is now in its third season.).

points because to buy a ripe, pretty tomato was inevitably to condone the use of toxic pesticides and unjust labor practices, and contribute to practices that furthered global warming and more.” “Humans think they are making one choice,” Danson’s character explained, “but they are really making hundreds of choices. They can’t possibly determine which are the choices that are good enough to get them in.”

The primary objection people make to the idea of a just God being merciful is that there are people who do not deserve that mercy. People like Ted Bundy, or Hitler, or Judas, or those in the crowd that cried out that Jesus should be crucified. But often times, those who object to their crimes are, according to the standards of Jubilee justice, guilty themselves of making decisions daily which also harm thousands or millions of people. The wealthy, comfortable, and powerful of the world allow huge numbers of people around the globe to suffer and die by creating or participating in systems which allows gross economic disparity to flourish. Those who benefit from unjust systems effectively turn their backs on children who are starving because they can’t see them, and/or allow discrimination to continue because it doesn’t affect them. Systemic injustice is a product of sin and promotes sin, yet we typically discount it in our assessment of ourselves. How many points should we get for participating? “Oh, well then,” we argue, “it’s intent that really matters.” But then how shall we assess the “intent” of bad people who cannot make the right choices because they suffer from mental illness, or because of dysfunctional upbringings, or if, like the grandmother in the legend, their circumstances leave them no choice?

Human beings are bean counters. We like to rank the relative sinfulness of those around us. We like to think a point system would work because we feel we would get a lot of points. But if all God cared about was the beans, then not even good church folk like us, who try to help those in need, would be able to earn our salvation. We are all a mix of good and bad, all selfish to a degree, and therefore all in need of God’s mercy and grace. We are also all beloved children of God, which means God knows the why behind our good and bad behaviors even better than we do. Thanks be to God, therefore, that in Christ, we receive mercy instead of condemnation. We receive it because God is just *and* merciful. God knows that life is complicated and hard, filled with thousands of obvious choices and millions of hidden ones. God knows even the best among us couldn’t get to the Good Place on our own even if we tried.

When we truly recognize this, we also recognize that it’s not really cheap grace we are being given in God’s grace. It’s a reprieve and a commission. Knowing that we all stumble, we are called to help those who stumble find the healing and help they need. Knowing that systemic injustice is an evil that hurts us all, we are called to work to restore justice to our world, both by speaking out against that injustice, and by standing as Christ did with those who are oppressed by it. We may not have laws which require Jubilee liberation in our nation. But we are still called by our faith to work to set the captives free, to help those who have been buried by debt, or enslaved by circumstances outside of their control. We cannot call ourselves “just” or “righteous” in God’s eyes if we do not, even if our laws say that we are.

Thinking about God's way and our way more poetically, Parker Palmer, in his book on Christian paradoxes, tells about something that happened to naturalist Loren Eiseley.⁵ Once he was staying in a seaside town. Plagued by insomnia, he would get up very early in the morning to walk along the beach. When he did, he would inevitably see townspeople combing the sand for the starfish that had washed ashore to sell them for commercial purposes. For Eiseley "it was a sign, however small, of all that ways the world says no to life." But one morning Eiseley went out every earlier than usual and discovered a solitary figure on the beach. He too was gathering starfish, but each time he found one that was alive, he would pick it up and throw it as far as he could out beyond the break of the surf to the ocean where it would be safe. This man went out every morning regardless of the weather to do this. Eiseley named him the "star thrower" and wrote about how he contradicted everything he had been taught about the survival of the fittest. "On that beach in Costabel, the strong reached down to save, not crush the weak. Eiseley wondered if there was a star thrower at work in the universe, a God who contradicts death and whose nature is mercy."⁶

In Christ we have seen that the God Eiseley wondered about is real. God wants a world where the strong do not crush the weak or take advantage of their vulnerability for commercial gain. God wants a world where everyone has an equal chance and where justice leads to redemption not destruction. So, God came in Christ to use God's strength to redeem us, and Christ's power to set us free. God is a star thrower and calls us to be as well, not because the law requires, but because it's the merciful and loving thing to do, and the way, ultimately, that we will all find life in God's grace. As we have received God's Jubilee justice through Christ, so may we make liberating and redeeming our world our mission, for God has shown us that it is the best way to wholeness and righteousness and peace for us all. Amen.

⁵ Palmer, Parker J., *The Promise of Paradox: A Celebration of Contradictions in the Christian Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1980), 40-41.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.