

Knox Uniting Church Cluster

Sunday July 13th 2025 – (RCL: Pentecost +5, Prop10, Ord15 - Year C)

Sermon (reflection) by Russell Croxford at Boronia Road Uniting Church

Bible passages: Amos 7:7-8, Psalm 82, Luke 10:25-37

'A measure of justice'

During the last week the breaking news came through that the jury in the murder trial of Erin Patterson had finally, after a mammoth 10 weeks in court, reached its verdict: "Guilty of murder". One newspaper headline I read declared, "Justice has been served". That headline got me thinking. In what way has 'justice been served'? Certainly, in a legal sense, there has been proper justice, handed down by the court, to account for a crime, after the due process of investigation and inquiry. End of story.

But it's not the end of the story. Justice and injustice in this story must surely go far beyond our judicial system. I wonder, for example what injustices have taken place in Erin Patterson's life, over the years, causing such hate, malice or jealousy that led to this terrible outcome. We don't know her motive, but something (an injustice of some kind?) has distorted her thinking about herself or others. And, what about the scores of other people's lives, now deeply affected by this? Somewhere, somehow, injustices have distorted the way things should be, and it's caused a roll-on effect. Injustice runs far deeper than a simple guilty verdict. In fact, most injustice, happening all the time, doesn't even make it to a courtroom!

If an injustice is a distortion of the 'way things should be', we might then ask, "What is God's justice?" In the Old Testament we find a myriad of passages suggesting that God's justice is essentially about good people being blessed and wicked people being punished. It seems like a simple formula. But then we need to ask, 'Well, what does it mean to be good or wicked?' How might God measure justice verses injustice?

In Psalm 82, God gives us a clue about how he measures justice, with a few clear examples. Unlike most Psalms which contain human feelings expressed to God, this Psalm contains God's feelings expressed to humans – in particular to humans who have power or influence over other humans. Look at God's words: "How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked." (v2-4). This Psalm is really a Psalm of lament by God. He is sad and angry about injustice and cries out to us demanding justice where there is injustice, and he names just a few of the countless injustices that must give him grief.

One way God names injustices to his people is through his prophets. Amos is one of those prophets. Amos came from the southern kingdom of Judah, but he had travelled north to Israel with a message from God which was so disturbing and uncomfortable that King Jeroboam and Amaziah the priest wanted him to be quiet and go home (7:12-13). It was disturbing and uncomfortable because, through Amos, God named the injustices being done against helpless people and needed to bring judgment on that nation as a result.

One of Amos' prophecies, in today's reading, comes in the form of a 'vision', and this is a vision of God on top of a wall holding a plumbline (v7), and saying, "See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will spare them no longer". (v8)

These days builders mostly use laser devices to measure true vertical and horizontal. But for thousands of years, they used a plumb line [make reference to the picture on the screen and/or a real-life example] to measure true vertical. And this plumb line is used metaphorically in our reading as a measure of justice. When something is 'out of plumb' it is out of alignment. God sees what is out of alignment with the way things should be. And what is out of alignment therefore needs to be judged and corrected. The challenge for us here is to also see what is out of alignment and do something about it as God's people.

This brings us to the New Testament, to Jesus in the gospels, who spoke about what it meant to truly align with the way things should be according to his Father in heaven. In today's story from Luke 10, a teacher of the law confronts Jesus and asks him "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (v25). He could well be asking, 'what is true alignment with God's ways?' Jesus ends up answering him with a parable, in typical Jesus style.

Is this the best-known parable of them all, do you think? Maybe the 'Prodigal Son' is equally popular. The risk with these well-worn parables is that they are so well worn and smoothed out, they tend to lose their sharp edge – and this parable does have a sharp edge. It actually contains a sharp judgement on injustice. This parable drops a plumb line on injustice. But where exactly *is* the injustice in this story?

Well, a man gets bashed and robbed and left for dead. That's a huge injustice right there! But there's another injustice in this story which becomes the main point of the parable, and it's the *lack of response* from the priest and Levite who supposedly are the injured man's friends – in the sense that they are probably fellow Jews and also God's representatives, being workers of the temple. It would have shocked listeners to hear Jesus say that they did *not* help the dying guy.

By contrast, a Samaritan, for all intents and purposes an *enemy* – ie, *not* a friend, shows compassion. That would have shocked the listeners too. True justice was carried out by an enemy, proving that there should be no boundaries around who our neighbours are and who deserves justice. We call this the 'parable of the good Samaritan'. It should be called 'the parable of the 'good enemy'! It asks us whether we are being 'good enemies'.

As I thought again about this parable, it hit me that the difference between those who perpetrate an injustice, and the one who provide justice comes down to which way they face. Two people turned away. They turned their backs. They showed indifference and apathy. Another turns towards the man in need. So, it comes down to posture. A posture of turning away or a posture of facing towards the need. This is a real challenge to me. What is my posture towards injustice in the world. Am I looking away from it or facing it?

There is a well-known saying – it's not clear who said it, but it's profound: "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good people to do nothing". Am I a good person who turns away?

I guess this should cause us to reflect on what it means to 'face towards injustice'. The Samaritan went to the 'nth degree' with the injured man. Not only did face towards the injustice, he gave love, care, practical help, finances and follow up care. Is that what's required of us? Obviously, we can't help everyone in practical and financial ways. That's impossible. But once we turn our hearts towards need it's a huge step forward for a hurting world. Just think of the difference our prayers or words of advocacy can provide, let alone financial or practical help. We can all turn towards injustice.

There are so many questions we can ask about this parable. I guess the most vital question is about how it affects me personally. How does it challenge me personally? So, I did a bit of reflecting on justice and injustice in my own life. What do I turn towards? What do I turn away from? I do have a strong sense of justice and injustice, but often about justice and injustice done to me.

I have my pet hates I do admit – and thus the things I judge harshly. People who jump queues; Selfish drivers who don't consider other drivers; People who dump litter – especially when they intentionally drop loads of trash somewhere knowing they would be found out. I could go on.

What am I doing there? I'm actually judging those that do an injustice – usually towards me. In one sense, that's okay because it means I'm holding the plumb line against all various kinds of injustices. But what I'm really doing is focusing so much on the injustices of the priest and the Levite that I'm forgetting to be more like the Samaritan and love the people who annoy me (the 'priests and Levites' whom I've judged!) What I'm doing is often failing to put God's plumb line up against *myself*, which was Jesus' challenge to the teacher of the law who asked, "Who is my neighbour?" In essence Jesus was saying, "Put the plumb line against yourself".

This is one of those parables that asks us many questions. Who am I in the story? Am I the Priest, Levite, victim, Samaritan? Who or where is Jesus in the story? Is he the Samaritan or the victim? Who is to be helped? Maybe it's the priest and Levite who are in the most need of help. But the thing is, it all comes back to the one message – *Love in action*. That's God's justice.

As we read earlier in Luke, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you" (Luke 6"27-28). That's what the Samaritan did. That's God's justice.

