

Bending Toward Justice

April 14, 2024

Scripture References: Acts 9:32-42; Matthew 23:23-24; Micah 6:6-8

As you already know, my mind has been unreasonably focused on justice for a long time. I did not volunteer to give a message this morning. I was asked — not because I had anything profound to say — I was asked because the calendar was blank today. Just so you know.

So I decided to draw on my recent musing on the matter of justice. Is the moral arc of the universe actually bent toward justice as Martin Luther King suggested? And an even deeper question: what is justice anyway?

I believe the word justice should be a verb, not a noun, because justice is a process. It is a movement from dogma to integration. It is not static. It is the process of merger of accountability and grace. It is the union of consequences and forgiveness. Punishment without mercy is simply revenge. Justice occurs when a victim and an offender are both moved closer to a place of healing.

So is the arc bending toward healing? It almost feels like a yoga pose. The word yoga means “union”. Yoga movements are designed to facilitate integration of body, mind and spirit. The poses, called asanas, are designed for healing. Danny Stone is now a certified yoga instructor. When he gets out and home I want to ask him if he could create a yoga algorithm to demonstrate the movement of the arc toward justice. We could start a whole new movement of Justice Yoga.

I keep in touch with Michael Ranieri. We have something in common — we are both engaged in writing a book. There are no promises of impending publication, but we both enjoy writing. He recently sent me a copy of Chapter III of his book. I was surprised when he included a story of mine which I had shared and actually forgot that I did give him permission to include the story. It is a true story from my direct experience. I will share it in the same version as I gave it to Michael.

I was in a Brethren church in Littleton, Colorado for some consultations on ministry. I was sitting alone in a back pew one Sunday morning and a young man of modest dress and slender build sat down just a couple of feet away. He was not a member there and this was the first time I saw him. I introduced myself and Matthew and I exchanged casual greetings. Following worship I chatted a bit more and he shared with me that he was searching.

He found himself confused and critical of his fundamentalist family upbringing. He had been rejected by them and had experienced other forms of social rejection and isolation. I invited him to stay for the potluck meal that day and feel free to ask questions and visit. He seemed a little lost, unsure of himself, yet curious and timidly eager to engage. When I sat for the meal, he sat next to me.

That was the beginning of a curious encounter. Matthew came and visited on several occasions. We became casual acquaintances. We enjoyed conversation. I learned a little about his life experience. He told me about his family. I learned he had struggles with depression and sensed his mental health struggles were significant.

His encounters with me and soon others in the fellowship were noticeably peaceful and compassionate. In following meetings, we embraced and greeted with compassion. He seemed like he was making a connection of significance.

Then he disappeared. I did not see him for a few weeks. Then he returned, still lost, but sensing some welcome. It happened that there was a potluck meal that day as well and we joined together once more. I did not see him again.

About two months later, on a Sunday morning, I read the news of my lost friend:

“In the early morning hours of December 9, 2007, 24-year-old Matthew John Murray opened fire at the Youth With A Mission

training center in Arvada, Colorado, killing two and wounding two others before escaping. Later that afternoon, he attacked the New Life Church in Colorado Springs, Colorado, with a number of firearms, killing two more people and injuring three before being shot by Jeanne Assam, a member of the church's safety team, who was carrying a licensed private firearm. Murray then committed suicide by shooting himself in the head.”

Encounters and events shape us. I was changed that morning. I cannot explain the change, I just know that there was a shift in reality in my world when I embraced the loss. Loss in so many ways. The impact of Matthew's life pain reverberated through the lives of hundreds. And I am sure there remain ripples to this day raising questions, doubts, criticisms, and reality checks.

I have come my own way on the matter. I have abandoned the usual question: what could I have done? I shared an encounter with a person. He saw my light. I saw his light. I am grateful for knowing him. We embraced and I learned. Matthew did what he had to do in a way to process his pain. I can wish for a different outcome, but I cannot change it. I was given an opportunity to engage with another, I completed the task. What more is there to do than to encounter justly, love tenderly and walk humbly from there? (Micah 6:8)

Matthew acted on his own need for justice in his pain. Who am I to judge? It was a sad and difficult outcome. But the aftermath of his acts, the grief of the community and his family still moved in the direction of healing. Dr. King never said we would not face injustice and violence. He knew violence first hand. But it is in the process of healing from that violence that moves communities toward justice. Our participation in any act of healing always gets noticed.

I know for sure that Matthew John Murray was impacted by his affirmation and experience with the Brethren. His pain prevented him from full integration. I believe there is a clear reason why he did not return to that Brethren Fellowship and open fire. He fired at the shame and rejection which overpowered him. I was changed by knowing Matthew.

There is a man waiting on death row in Alabama, after murdering five people eight years ago, recently said he will no longer appeal against his sentence so that his victims' families can have peace. Derrick Dearman pleaded guilty, tried by a jury under Alabama law and sentenced to death. Last week Dearman fired his attorney and requested his death sentence be carried out.

“Now it’s time for the victims and their families to get the justice they rightly deserve to start the closure,” he told the Governor and the Court. “I have laid awake many nights thinking, what would I say to any of them if I ever had the chance, the opportunity to say something?”

“That’s part of the reason I’ve made my decision to have my sentence carried out. Words don’t have any weight in this situation,” he continued.

“The only thing I would say is that everyone that was hurt by the actions to forgive me, not for myself, but for them. That way, they will free their heart up to be able to truly heal.”

“I am guilty, plain and simple,” he said in a phone interview with AL.com.

“Everybody’s trying to talk me out of it,” he said. “But, I feel in my heart this is the right thing to do.”

I thought again, another example of the arc bending toward justice and healing.

When Danny Stone was sentenced he met a young man serving a life sentence for the murder of his cousin. His name is Collin Marler from Longmont. Danny and Collin became cell friends. Collin shared his story. Danny was moved with compassion for Collin and asked me if I would follow up with him. That was the beginning of my prison pen-pal adventures.

Collins has family and friends, but he enjoys our correspondence. We talk about justice and healing. We talk about prison life. Collin has read a number of writings of Nietzsche, Carl Jung and other philosophers. He

has offered me multiple suggestions for pursuit of higher knowledge. He is clearly an intelligent, caring and extremely capable young man -- now anticipating the remainder of his life in prison.

Collin Marler on Prison Life:

“They ensure that you do not have the ability to further your education if you have a life sentence. Nor provide any meaningful employment that could allow you to make money to provide or support your family or loved ones. That has been my experience. There is a sizable population that has to choose between buying soap or ordering food or paper and stamps to write to their family. They provide everyone with only two dollars so they don’t have to provide indigent packages.

Most in here will get out without a penny and when you’re starving and unemployed as you’re an ex-con; it is far easier to rob a convenient store or sell drugs than it is to go hungry and be a good citizen. That is why people are repeat offenders and it is hard to get out and stay out.”

Collin won the heart of Danny Stone the short time they shared cells. He has impressed me as well. He is engaging, bright, articulate and compassionate. We do not discuss his case. That could damage his appeal. He is not appealing the verdict; he is appealing the sentence. He believes he should be able to be paroled some day. I see a soul worthy of redemption.

I asked Collin this question: What do you think should have been a just and proper sentence for your case? Here is his reply:

“If I were to choose, I would only sentence anyone to a max of twenty five years for any crime as the average life span of an adult male is seventy years and that is well over a quarter of a mans life. I understand it is part of the length of a sentence that deters others from committing the same crime. However, how is that man supposed to live and learn from his mistakes; especially when you may die in prison?”

Why am I writing to someone who may die in prison? I have several reasons. I want him to know someone is watching and aware; I want him to know there are people in the community who give a rats tail about one that feels hopeless and predestined. I want to support the idea that restoration, sanity and even parole could eventually be a possibility, even if that will only happen long after I am gone. I want to be a witness to hope. I want to help sway the arc toward justice.

We never achieve justice. We never reach a static state of contentment and equilibrium of justice. We are always in the process of bending ourselves and institutions toward the ideal. Our work is never done. When the offender is sent off to prison, it is only the beginning of a long hard road to healing for both the offender and the victims.

Justice always holds both sides of the violence in tension. Justice must always hold up accountability and compassion in a holistic process of redemption.

Most of us are familiar with the shooting of the Amish elementary school girls. We have heard the story of the Amish community taking food and love and conversation to the widow of the shooter. We have seen in the news their witness to the power of forgiveness. I don't know if the Amish do yoga, but they know how to bend arcs.

You have read in the news that the parents of Ethan Crumbly have been sentenced to 10 years in prison for neglecting to act to prevent his violence. Ethan was 15 at the time of the shooting. He got life without the possibility of parole, even though the US Supreme Court has previously ruled that no parole is not good justice for a minor. I have written three letters to Ethan. I have invited him to write. I am waiting.

But I have lifted up the possibility of change. He will change. His parents will change. Laws change. Judges and legal rules change. I want him to think. There could be hope. And most important I want him to know there are folks in the crowd who are not publicity fans or critics. There are simply people who care. I vote to bend the arc.

The best synonym for justice is healing. That's why I included the stories from Acts. The healing of Aeneas and Tabitha were phenomenal. Two

people raised from the dead, and not by Jesus, but by Peter. Jesus told us we could do the same things he did. Our most enjoyable challenge in life is to find purpose in the participation of the process of bending the arc of the universe toward healing and justice. You can do it.

Many of you may know the name of Tony Campolo. He for many years was the poster child preacher for the evangelical world. I have heard him preach two or three times. He is co-founder of Red Letter Christians with Shane Claiborne. In his latest years he has refused to call himself an evangelical, because he believes they have betrayed the gospel which compels us to take care of the poor and the sick and the prisoners. He tells a true story.

He was preaching at a Christian College and near the end a woman walks down the aisle carrying a young boy. He had crooked legs with braces and did not walk. She said, Dr. Campolo, "I want you to heal my child."

He said, "There are many gifts, prophesy, preaching, healing. I do not have the gift of healing." But she insisted.

He did not know what to do. The college chaplain came to his rescue. "Do you want some help?"

"Yes please."

The woman said, "You must pray for my son to be healed. "

The chaplain turned to the audience and said, "Anyone who does not believe this child can be healed, please leave, because even Jesus couldn't heal surround by unbelief." The house emptied. Tony and the chaplain, and a few Pentecostal students gathered and laid hands on the boy and prayed. The chaplain read from the book of James. Well, the boy wasn't healed.

Three years later Tony was preaching in the same area. At the end, a woman approached and said, "Tony, do you remember me?"

Tony's face fell. "Yes, I remember you. We prayed for the healing of your son."

She said, "Yes, I want you to see him."

And there he was, no braces and walking with straight legs. Tony asked "What happened?"

She replied, "The morning after you prayed, he complained that his braces were too tight, so we loosened them. That continued to happen for several days until we finally removed his braces. He is fully healed."

Never fail to underestimate the power you hold in your hands when you do to the "least of these." You and I are the folks Jesus hoped for. We are the force of change that bends that moral arc of the universe toward healing and justice. In the words of Margaret Mead: "Never doubt that a group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."