

A drink of water

Amos 5:18-24

November 6, 2011

Walt Staton is a seminary student, preparing for ministry at the Claremont School of Theology. Walt Staton is also a criminal. He was tried in federal court, convicted, and sentenced to 300 hours of community service. His crime? Offering a drink of water to people dying of thirst.

Let justice flow like stream, and righteous like a river that never runs dry!

Let justice flow like stream, and righteous like a river that never runs dry. Can you see it? Can you feel it? Can you taste it? The cold water? The rushing stream? The everflowing river?

That's the image Amos uses for justice ... water. Justice is like a stream of water. Righteousness is like a river that never runs dry.

Why not a mountain? Let justice stand tall like a mountain, firm and lasting and unchanging! Or why not a sword? Let justice cut like a sword, cleaning dividing wrong from right!

But the image Amos chooses for justice is water. Because justice is active and in motion, not passive and still. Because justice is involved and engaged, not distant and aloof. Because justice is passionate and lively, not cold and hard and unfeeling. Justice is fluid and alive and enlivening. Justice is cooling and refreshing and renewing.

Water is vital, indispensable to life. You can live for months without food and almost indefinitely without shelter, but probably no more than a handful of days without water. Amos says that justice is like water -- vital and indispensable to life. How long can a person survive without justice?

Justice is like a stream. Justice is like a river that never runs dry. Justice is like a refreshing drink of water.

When Amos spoke these words, he was addressing the people of Israel. It was during the time of the divided kingdom. Israel was the larger nation to the north, with ten of the original twelve tribes, and Judah was the smaller nation with two tribes to the south.

Amos was from Judah, but the Lord sent him to the people of Israel. Amos was a shepherd, but the Lord sent him to the people of Israel as a prophet. And the Lord sent Amos as a prophet to speak to the people of Israel in the midst of good times. It is always a difficult and thankless job to be a prophet, but pity the one who brings a message of warning and judgment to happy people!

And they were happy people: enjoying the fruits of a booming economy, enjoying a protracted period of peace with their neighbors, enjoying -- for the first time in recent memory -- an era of stability and prosperity and international prestige. They were happy people, blessed people, people who felt blessed by their God, and they showed God their gratitude, celebrating the religious holidays, bringing their offerings, making music.

But Amos spoke this word from the Lord to them:

I hate your religious festivals; I cannot stand them! I will not accept your offerings. Stop your noisy songs!

People of Israel, your worship means nothing. It is an affront to God ... because there is no justice.

There is no justice because the growing prosperity is shared only by some, but not all.

There is no justice because there is an ever-widening gap between rich and poor, because those who are rich use their wealth to gain more wealth at the expense of the poor, because those who have power and influence use their power to gain more influence at the expense of the powerless.

There is no justice because you prevent the poor from getting justice.

There is no justice because in the midst of your own happiness, the unhappiness of your neighbors has become invisible to you.

Amos makes it clear that justice is not blind. God's justice is not blind, rather God's justice sees what the rest of us do not see or refuse to see. God's justice sees poor people. God's justice sees disabled people and disadvantaged people and disenfranchised people. God's justice sees mistreated people and disparaged people and overlooked people. God's justice sees homeless people and underpaid people and uninsured people. God's justice sees people deemed unfit, people made unwelcome, people branded as "other."

God's justice plays favorites. God's justice takes sides. God's justice is biased. God's bias is God's justice, justice that shows itself as compassion, justice that shows itself as love, justice that flows like a stream, justice that flows like a river that never runs dry, justice that is a drink of water for the thirsty.

Which brings us back to Walt Staton, the seminary student who was convicted in federal court for offering a drink of water. In his mind, it is about justice. It is exactly about justice.

Walt and other members of a group calling themselves No More Deaths carry out a ministry of planting bottles of water in the Arizona desert. As the border crossings between Mexico and Arizona have been more rigorously watched, poor Mexicans hoping to find work in the United States to allow them and their families to survive have followed routes through the Sonoran desert to gain entry. But many die along the way, from heat prostration and dehydration. Between October 2010 and September 2011, 183 people have died on the Arizona border.

No More Deaths means to accomplish just what their name declares -- no more deaths. They leave the bottles of water as a remedy for people literally dying of thirst. For them, it is simply a question of basic human dignity, of basic human need. No human being deserves to die. No human being deserves to die for no other reason than trying to survive. For them, it is simply a matter of justice, of God's justice, justice that takes the side of the poor and the powerless and the vulnerable.

But Walt and his companions were prosecuted for criminal littering. They were prosecuted in federal court for criminal littering, despite the fact that as they place the bottles of water, they carry out bags of empty water bottles and other trash that they find! Ultimately, a US appeals court overturned the convictions of some Walt's colleagues, ruling that "leaving purified water in sealed containers for human consumption is not littering."

Of course, it was never really about littering in the first place. It was about what the federal government perceived as aiding and abetting illegal immigration. The littering charge was the only charge the government could come up with to try to brand the water bottle ministry as criminal. But is saving lives aiding and abetting? Isn't saving lives, just saving lives? As the motto of No More Deaths puts it: "Humanitarian Aid is Never a Crime."

Or should we just let them die? Are their deaths an unfortunate but necessary price for the protection of our borders? After all, they put themselves at risk. Their deaths are their fault. Their desperate attempt at a better life is their problem. Their poverty is their problem. Their well-being is not our concern. Huh?

We are stewards of God's good gifts: stewards of God's mercy, of our family of faith, of the Lord's table, of our talents, of our resources. And we are stewards of God's justice. God has been just with us. God has been good to us. God has been fair to us.

Actually, God has been more than fair to us, giving us so much more than we deserve, being so much more patient and kind than we deserve! And that's the point. God's justice is not neutral and reserved and dispassionate, but strong and tender, full of compassion and full of grace. God's justice flows into us and over us like a stream of life-giving water, quenching our thirst and washing our wounds and bringing us back to life. God's justice and God's mercy are not two different sides of the face God shows to humanity. They are one and the same! Justice is mercy!

And so we honor God by being faithful stewards of God's justice. We honor God not just with our songs and our offerings and our worship, but with our acts of compassion and mercy, by doing what is just. We honor God by being like God, showing mercy to all, opening our eyes to see the ones who are invisible to the rest of the world, offering them a soothing drink of water.