

Text: Amos 5:21-24 (CEB)

Date: February 1, 2026

Title: "Justice: Where Do We Go From Here" – What Dr. King Still Asks of Us, Wk 3

Theme: Justice is part of the work of faith, because without it, our prayers don't mean much.

## Introduction

I'm going to pick up where we left off, before we were so rudely interrupted by the snow

In our series focused on the teachings of Dr. King and on the current moment

We've spoken about truth and peace, last week Kate and I did a devotional time on discernment in difficult moments

And today I'm going to be talking about justice

Originally, this was to be the final week

But I decided to add one more Sunday

Next week I'll be talking about how we actually go about praying for enemies –

a topic I don't think I've ever heard a sermon on

But for this week, justice

## 1

Last week, I read a book by Hebrew Bible scholar Walter Bruggemann called *Reality, Grief, Hope*

And in it, he talks about two types of prophets that existed in Israel

"Insiders" and "outsiders"

The "insiders" were those associated with the temple

Those associated with the royal court

While they occasionally said some hard things

They generally emphasized and re-emphasized one strain of Jewish religious thought:

“God has a unbreakable covenant with us,  
and God has promised to be faithful to the covenant”

It’s important for God’s people to remember this, Bruggemann says

But absent any critique, that can easily turn into entitlement –  
whether then or now

So from time to time, God called outsider prophets

People who *weren’t* from the ruling class or the priestly or prophetic class

People like Amos, who describes himself as “neither a prophet; nor a prophet’s son; but a shepherd and a trimmer of sycamore trees” (Amos 7:14)

The job of these outsiders, Bruggeman says, was to remind kings and religious leaders that the promises of God also carried with them responsibilities

Namely, to act with *justice* and *righteousness*

To treat people fairly

It was Dr. Cornel West who taught us that “justice is what love looks like in public”

And righteousness means a commitment to live by biblical values that include care and compassion for the poor and the most vulnerable in society

And so throughout the Bible, the people – and particularly the leaders – are not just reminded that they are *beneficiaries* of the covenant

But also that they are accountable to it by way of *justice* and *righteousness*

These two words appear over and over again – probably 40-50 times in the Hebrew Scriptures

As the yardstick by which kings, priests, the wealthy, and powerful  
were judged  
They are often accompanied by a warning that says:  
When justice and righteousness fail at the top, the nation is not far  
behind  
I have been pondering these things – in relationship to our  
present political and historical moment – all week

## 2

Just before the passage that we read  
Amos lays out a troubling vision of the end of days  
Here's what he says:  
Doom to those who desire the day of the Lord!  
Why do you want the day of the Lord?  
It is darkness, not light;  
as if someone fled from a lion,  
and was met by a bear;  
or sought refuge in a house,  
rested a hand against the wall,  
and was bitten by a snake. (Amos 5:18-19, CEB)

It's not a pretty picture  
In this chapter, Amos is not calling for reform  
As much as he is warning of impending destruction

He's saying to the people:  
"Don't expect God's to have your back  
When you don't have each other's"  
*Justice and righteousness*

## 3

I set out with the idea that I wouldn't talk about the "I Have a  
Dream Speech" in this series

Because I worry that in predominantly white churches, we tend to only read a very few passages from it

But there's one that I think speaks directly to the call for justice we find in Amos

Remember, this speech was delivered during the March on Washington, at the Lincoln Memorial in August, 1963

Here's what it says:

"In a sense we've come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men — yes, Black...as well as white... — would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked insufficient funds.

But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt."<sup>1</sup>

#### 4

Again, this is truth-telling  
In the same way that Amos is truth-telling

He says, *God isn't interested in your worship*  
*God's not interested in your sacrifices*  
In fact, he says, God HATES them

Until, and unless, you back your worship up  
With a commitment to a justice that flows

Like a stream coming down off the mountaintop

All year round

Not like the stream beds you find throughout Israel –  
the ones that dry up in the heat of summer

That will leave you disappointed when you most need water

Our commitment to justice and righteousness

Has got to be constant

And not subject to current weather conditions

It's for this reason that the water feature at King's gravesite in  
Atlanta

Is a pool that steps down

And as the water flows over the edge of each step

The words on each step read:

"We will not be satisfied

Until justice rolls down like water

And righteousness

Like a mighty stream"<sup>2</sup>

## 5

But this is not an easy task

The church has long been comfortable with the idea of acting in  
the role of the Good Samaritan

Picking up those we find who have been hurt

And doing our best to bandage and care for them

Dr. King, though, says this is just the beginning

In his book *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*,  
he says it this way:

We are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be beaten and robbed as they make their journey through life.<sup>3</sup>

The whole Jericho Road requires a reformation in justice & righteousness

When cruelty is law and compassion is treated as a violation  
The Church – not only its leaders but its people –  
Has got to speak up for justice  
To advocate for the things that will keep people from being beaten  
on the road  
Rather than simply paying the bill for their care when they fall in  
among robbers

I know not everyone wants to hear this  
That part of the work of the Church is justice work

I often hear people say that the church's task is to help individuals  
Both practically – by providing relief  
And spiritually – by helping bring people to a place of saving and  
transforming faith

But Amos seems to indicate that if we are unable or unwilling to  
do the work of justice  
To do the things that make for righteousness  
That our prayers and worship don't amount to much

When someone says Jesus wasn't an advocate for justice  
I might remind them that he turned over the tables of the  
moneychangers in the Temple –  
His protest of the ways they were robbing & exploiting the faithful

And how he called out religious leaders publicly, to their faces:  
“You devour widows’ houses and then show off with your long  
prayers.” (Luke 20:47)

It’s exactly the same as Amos saying:  
Without justice, our prayers don’t mean much

## 6

All justice work is connected  
Dr. King reminded us of that in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* –  
That “a threat to justice anywhere is a threat to justice  
everywhere”  
But none of us can invest in everything, all at once

So this week, I want to invite you to spend some time in prayer  
What’s the ONE issue that, more than anything, makes your heart  
hurt?  
I know right now it’s hard to choose

Then, do your research  
Study the topic  
Read about it  
Come talk to me about it, if you want  
Find out what the Bible says and how it connects to faith  
Try and understand steps that might make it better

And then advocate  
Here in the Church  
With elected officials  
In your circle of friends and community

## 7

It's not sufficient for those of us on the inside to rest on the  
promises of God  
What's needed is to hear the voice of the prophet

Calling us to  
"Let justice roll down like waters,  
And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

Amen.

**By Joe Monahan, Medford UMC, Medford NJ**

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2010/01/18/122701268/i-have-a-dream-speech-in-its-entirety>

<sup>2</sup> You can see the photo here: <https://www.goworldtravel.com/civil-rights-route-mlk-atlanta-georgia/>

<sup>3</sup> King, Jr., Martin Luther. *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (King Legacy Book 2), (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), p.197.