**October 13, 2019 – Jazz Vespers – “Do Justice”**

"Frans" de Waal (born October 29, 1948) is a Dutch [primatologist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Primatologist) at [Emory University](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emory_University). His work inspired the field of [primate cognition](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Primate_cognition) that today flourishes around themes of cooperation, [altruism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Altruism), and fairness among monkeys, chimpanzees and apes.

In one of his more notable experiments, he and his research team gave a task to capuchin monkeys. The team trained the monkeys to pick up a small granite stone and bring it to the researcher within one minute. When a monkey was successful, the researcher rewarded it with the a slice of cucumber. The scheme worked well. It was a happy lab as long as each monkey received the same reward. It all turned sour, however, when the researchers varied the pattern. The researchers did this by giving one monkey a grape for its reward. Indignation broke out among the other monkeys. First they refused to pick up a stone. Later they began to throw the granite stone and the cucumber slice. Apparently, the researchers offended the monkeys’ sense of justice. [Google monkey justice]

A common synonym for “justice” is “fairness.” The monkeys demonstrated their sense of unfairness by throwing away the cucumber slices. If youngsters are served different sized portions of dessert, we’re likely to hear whining “It’s not fair. . ..” Or how about teenagers who complain that “all the other kids can go—why can’t I? It’s not fair!” Or there’s the proverbial mother who thinks she’s teaching justice: "One day you'll have kids, and I hope they turn out just like you!"

Many—if not most—complaints about unfairness are very subjective. What we consider unfair or unjust has to do mostly with our personal interests. In contrast, there exists kinds of justice and fairness that result from something beyond the persons involved. Parents can draw on some standard or principle they consider important. More broadly, we can speak of social structures and institutions within which we all function. Health care providers perform according to professional and legal standards. I recently encountered a discussion about whether or not the organ transplant systems that operate in our country are fair, or just. Parallel conversations occur in law, finance, and a host of other fields of human endeavor. In general society, we follow systems of thought and practice that have evolved over decades—and even centuries. We need such customs and rules, rituals and regulations for society to work. Otherwise, life would be anarchy. There have to be standards!

The story in our reading from Luke portrays a widow who seeks justice from a judge. We can assume that someone didn’t follow certain rules in dealing with her. *Help me against my opponent!* [GNT] the widow calls out to the judge who tries to ignore her. *My rights are being violated. Protect me!* [MSG]

According to the standards of justice in Jesus’ day, the judge’s lack of action is quite appalling. Widows in the ancient world, along with orphans and aliens/strangers, deserve special protection. Because of the precarious social and economic position of such marginalized groups, story after story in the bible makes provision for them. The fact that this particular widow has no one from her family to help her plead to the judge highlights her extreme vulnerability. Yet she not only beseeches the judge. She persists in her pleas for justice until the judge is on the edge of social embarrassment—or an even worse public reaction.

Her persistence and call for justice is such that the judge characterizes her actions as those of a boxer. This is not the image provided in most biblical translations. In this evening’s reading, the translation from the original Greek reads, “. . . because of all the trouble this widow is giving me, I will see to it that she gets her rights. If I don't, she will keep on coming and finally wear me out!” Some New Testament scholars articulate what they think is a better translation from the original Greek of the judge’s opinion; for them, the judge says: “because this widow causes trouble for me, I will give her justice, so that she may not, in the end, give me a black eye by her coming” (verse 5). By using the verb thatmeans “to give a black eye,” Luke situates the judge’s language within the arena of boxing metaphors. It’s an image that sharpens the widow’s tenacity, as well as her status as a “trouble-maker.”

Doing justice is a major theme of the biblical writers. Poverty is not seen as something caused by those who live in poverty. Because poverty is neither virtuous nor desirable, ancient Judaic Law commands that the poor (like widows, orphans and strangers) are to be respected and protected. The Torah instructs Jews to resist any temptation to view the poor as somehow different from themselves. For example, the poor were to be protected from being exploited or cheated when in debt.

In essence, the poor are "protected by God."We have, therefore, certain requirements for benefitting the poor. The tradition called the Jubilee Year was part of this tradition. According to Leviticus (25:8-13), every fifty years slaves and prisoners would be freed, debts would be forgiven, and the mercies of God would be particularly evident throughout society.

The widow in Luke’s story is a trouble maker. We can safely speculate that her issue involved money. She was demanding justice, and the recalcitrant judge was aware of the standards that she demanded be kept. If he didn’t know what was required to be just, potential embarrassment wouldn’t have been an issue for him.

Who are the trouble makers in today’s society? Probably pretty much the same as they were in Jesus’ time as well as during the centuries both before and after Jesus lived. Those who live on the margins of society. Those who don’t have the educational opportunities that are pre-requisites to participating in our economy and society. Those who don’t have family networks to support their growth and development. Those who have to cobble together part-time jobs and still live below the poverty line in their communities. We can extend this list ad infinitum.

Our modern equivalents of widows and orphans and strangers don’t dominate a political or economic system. But God calls on people like us who do dominate those systems to treat widows and orphans and strangers—those who don’t have the power—to treat them with justice and fairness—to resist any temptation to view the poor as somehow different from ourselves—to not treat them as if they deserve the conditions in which they live. And we should expect that those who are treated unjustly will challenge those who have the power to set things right—to practice justice.

Our short reading from the prophet Micah follows a description of how the ancients had not remembered all that God had done for them. So they ask what they’re supposed to do: ***6****What shall I bring to the Lord, the God of heaven, when I come to worship him? Shall I bring the best calves to burn as offerings to him?****7****Will the Lord be pleased if I bring him thousands of sheep or endless streams of olive oil?* They’re asking what goods from their dominant economic system must they give up to please God?

The prophet explains: ***8****No, the Lord has told us what is good. What he requires of us is this: to do what is just, to show constant love, and to live in humble fellowship with our God*.

May it be so for us and for all whom we love.

Anonymous. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frans_de_Waal>

Anonymous. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_views_of_poverty,_wealth_and_charity>

<Lose>, David. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2966>

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