

## **Justice, and Justice Only, You Shall Pursue**

**Deuteronomy 16:18-20 Luke 4:14-21**

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Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

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Today marks the beginning of the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Next Sunday Rev. Christie Ashton, pastor of Hope Presbyterian Church, and I will do our annual pulpit swap. This swap began in 2001, and we have done it almost every year since then. I tell them they are my “other” church and to be sure not to tell you.

This emphasis on Christian unity is an occasion for us to reaffirm that there is only one Church. There is only one Church, and that one Church has many names—Baptist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Episcopalian, Catholic, Methodist, and many others. It has many looks—high liturgical worship with all the smells and bells, small groups gathered in homes or backyards, charismatic congregations that lift hands to God and speak in tongues, meditative gatherings where they quietly listen for the voice of the Spirit, evangelical groups that stress the urgency of personal salvation, social justice bodies that work to change the social system, and others. And, of course, we meet everywhere—all across this country, Central and South America, throughout Europe, Africa, the Middle East, everywhere there are people.

Including Indonesia. Each year a body of Christians is asked to develop the theme and worship aids for the Week of Prayer. This year they come from Christians in Indonesia. Al Jimmerson, in the choir behind me, grew up in Indonesia. His parents were missionaries there. Back in the 1960s and 70s, Al remembers the Indonesian people as very friendly and open. They loved conversations with the missionaries and other Christians. There was little or no hostility. With the turn of the century, the political climate of Indonesia changed. And so did the majority religion—Islam.

Today the population of Indonesia is about 265 million, slightly less than the U.S. population. Eighty-six percent of the population is Muslim. Indonesia has the largest Muslim population of any country in the world. Only about 10% of the population identifies as Christian. The country has more than 17,000 islands, 1,340 different ethnic groups, and over 740 languages. They hold this great diversity together by practicing the principle of *gotong royong*, which I'm sure Al can confirm I've grossly mispronounced. It translates roughly as "joint bearing of burdens." It is the practice of reciprocity, mutual aid, communal work that is common in Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, and other countries of Southeast Asia. In rural areas, farmers help other farmers. In the urban areas like Jakarta, neighbors work together to create safe neighborhoods. Political and economic changes have seen this traditional practice of mutual support and assistance give way to social and economic competition. Corruption has infiltrated politics and business. As a result the gap between the rich and poor, which was already wide, has widened. Today anger brews in Indonesia. Militancy has grown. Religious intolerance has fueled a new generation of religious terrorists. In a country rich in natural resources, the poor are left out and oppressed. They recite this traditional Indonesian proverb: "A mouse dies of hunger in the barn full of rice."

Against this backdrop of injustice, Christians in Indonesia challenge Christians worldwide with this theme for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. It comes from the book of Deuteronomy:

*Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue.*

The book of Deuteronomy is Israel's "second law." The Ten Commandments are repeated there. Their great patriarch, Moses, reaffirms the law and its role in creating order for the people. The judicial system of Israel is established there. In our text from Deuteronomy 16, Moses told the people to appoint judges in every town and tribe. They would adjudicate local disputes. "Render just decisions for the people," Moses challenged the judges. "You must not distort justice; you must not show partiality; and you must not accept bribes," he admonished, "for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of those who are in the right."

But what if a wealthy family came before a judge bearing lavish gifts for the judge? “You must not show partiality,” Moses said.

What if someone slipped the judge a fat envelop full of money under the table? “You must not accept bribes,” Moses said.

What if it’s a family member? What if the judge’s father or mother comes before the judge? “Render just decisions for the people,” Moses said.

Here is the expectation of God:

*Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue.*

It is a demand for *tsedeq*, the Hebrew word translated as “justice.” It means “rightness,” the way things ought to be, where everyone is treated rightly. The Hebrew concept of justice is not punishing people for wrong behavior. They had rules for dealing with criminals, which we see those throughout the Law of Moses. Their concept of justice also included this sense of rightness, “being right in the world”—acting, thinking, and being in accord with God’s desire for people and the world. That meant that everyone had to be treated fairly. The powerless and the powerful. The poor and the rich. Women and men. Their judges were to be impartial, evenhanded, even if people came bearing lavish gifts, or envelopes stuffed with bribes, or even if it was a case involving the judge’s father or mother. The concept of *tsedeq*, justice, was closely related to the Hebrew concept of *shalom*, peace. *Shalom* wasn’t just the absence of conflict. It was the presence of rightness, fairness, which paves the way for social harmony—peace.

The Christians in Indonesia lay before us a challenging word today. Sometimes it is hard for us to hear. Cries for justice rise around the world. The poor in Indonesia are crying out for justice. That’s not hard for us to hear. Girls in Africa and the Middle East who face forced genital mutilation are crying out for justice. That one’s not hard. Women who have been sexually assaulted by powerful men are crying out for justice. Adolescents enslaved in sex trafficking are crying out for justice. Some are harder to hear. African American males who feel targeted for harassment are crying out for justice. Those who work full

time and who still can't afford decent housing are crying out for justice. Of course, we can add many more to this list, people who feel they will never have a fair chance, that the playing field will never be level. They are all crying out for rightness, fairness, impartiality, evenhandedness. They're crying out for justice.

And here is a truth of history. It has been repeated over and over and over. Until there is *tsedeq*, justice, there will never be *shalom*, peace. History has shown us that that little dog that is kicked again and again eventually will bite.

A mouse must never die of hunger in a barn full of rice.

Here's what Jesus said about this. From his inaugural sermon:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon  
me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the  
poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim  
release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the  
blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's  
favor.*

No more mice dying of hunger. Not in barns full of rice. May the abundance of rice be shared with all. Justice, and only justice, we shall pursue.

#### Closing Prayer

Lord, we believe in rightness, even when it is hard for us to hear. So open our hearts to hear the cries of vulnerable. And may we do justice in our world. Amen.