

Mercy and the Justice of God
John 8:2–11
Sunday, March 22, 2026 (Lent 5)
Lenten Series: Tell Me Something Good

Let us pray: Lord, as we draw closer to the cross and the tomb and the resurrection of Christ, speak to us a word that will lead *us* to new life, in him. Amen.

Two weeks ago, I got up early and got ready to come here for worship. I drove down our street and turned right onto Contention Lane, like I always do. But this time I had to stop and turn around, because there were police cars blocking the road with their lights on. The night before, about 10:45 p.m., a woman who lived just a couple of houses away from us was driving home, when she was shot in her car. A 53-year-old mother of three and nurse at the Children's Hospital. She was taken to the hospital, where she later died. Police searched for her killer, who turned out to be a 44-year-old homeless man suffering from some sort of mental illness and psychotic break. He was convinced that there were people following him, and when he saw her car, he must have thought she was one of them, so he fired his gun at her car. He didn't even know her. It was a totally random act of violence.

It feels so incredibly *unfair*. A family has lost a wife and mother, and the community has lost a friend who devoted her life to helping others. Over *nothing*. And while that man will probably go to jail for the rest of his life, will he really be held accountable if he wasn't in touch with reality and doesn't really understand what he *did*?

And it's not just *this*. Not even 24 hours later, 20 miles away, a 40-year-old State Trooper was shot and killed in a random traffic stop for absolutely no reason. A man was driving erratically and stopped his car at an intersection, the trooper walked up to the car, and the driver shot him. Again, over *nothing*. He

leaves behind a wife and 7-year-old daughter, and then the man who shot him killed himself, so he can't even be held accountable.

What does *justice* look like in that situation? In *any* of the situations that we see on an almost daily basis, where innocent people suffer for no reason, and no one is really held accountable. There seems to be a lot of very powerful people in our country who were involved in some absolutely horrific things with Jeffrey Epstein – child sex trafficking, rape, possibly even murder. Some of the survivors have come forward and testified about it, but...*nothing*. The people involved are so powerful that they have been able to keep the information from coming out. Will they ever be held accountable? Will there ever be *justice*?

Over the past few weeks, we have been talking about where the good news is in Lent. Well, where is the good news in a world like this? Is there justice in this world, and what does justice even *look like*?

That is essentially the question that is being asked in this story of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery. The Jewish religious leaders bring a woman to Jesus who, they say, was caught in the very act of committing adultery. We don't know any of the details, just the accusation. And they say to Jesus, "Jewish law commands us to stone her to death. What do you say?" This puts Jesus in kind of a tough spot. If he says, "No, don't kill her," then they can accuse him of violating Jewish law. But if he says, "Yes, kill her in accordance with the law," then they could actually accuse him of *violating* the law due to a lack of witnesses and an incomplete legal process, both of which are required by Jewish law. *And* the Romans who are occupying and ruling Israel have said that the people of Israel cannot use capital punishment. They *cannot* legally execute her for violating the law; only the Romans can do that, and what do the Romans care if she violated a religious law that's not even *theirs*?

Jewish law *commands* the death penalty here, but Roman law forbids it. Either way Jesus goes, he loses. It even says that they are doing this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. What does justice look like here?

Well, like he does so often, Jesus refuses to get caught in the *either/or*. He finds a third way. He bends down and writes something in the dirt with his finger. We have no idea what. But when he stands back up, he says, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” Then he writes something else. Again, we have no idea what. But it says that, one by one, the people start walking away, until it’s just Jesus and the woman standing there alone. Jesus says, “Where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She says, “No one.” And Jesus says, “Neither do I. Go, and from now on do not sin again.” And that’s it. She leaves, and that’s the end of the story.

So let me ask you, is that justice? Think about it this way. If the police caught the man who killed the woman in our neighborhood, and Jesus suddenly appeared and said, “Let anyone among you who has never sinned be the first to arrest him,” would they just let him go? Would Jesus just tell that man to go and not sin again? Would that be justice?

So much of this has to do with our *understanding* of justice. We tend to think of justice as “getting what you deserve.” You hurt or kill someone, you break a law, you should be *punished* for that. And if you can’t be punished in *this* life, then you should be punished in the life *to come*. That’s *justice*. But there are actually different *kinds* of justice. Justice is about setting right that which is wrong, balancing things out, making them even, equal. And there are different ways to *do* that.

There is *retributive* justice, where the way to right a wrong is to punish the person who has committed the wrong. As the term implies, it has to do with *retribution*; making someone pay. If you do something

wrong, hurt someone, you must somehow be *punished* for it. You break a law? You will be fined or put in jail or (depending on the severity of the crime) killed. An eye for an eye. A tooth for a tooth. That is retributive justice.

There is another way to understand and attain justice that is *not* based on retribution, and it is called *restorative* justice. Restorative justice does not seek to *punish* the wrongdoer, but to bring about healing and wholeness between the parties involved. I think back to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa after apartheid, when the South African government said to the people who were in power *during* apartheid, “If you used your position of power to commit a crime, to hurt someone, oppress someone, kill someone, come before this commission, face the person or the family of the person that you wronged, confess your crime, accept responsibility for it, and you will be forgiven.” Because they felt that *punishing* people would not help the country *heal*. They wanted to hold people accountable for what they did, but their *ultimate* goal was helping *all* people (the victims *and* the perpetrators) heal. They wanted to restore peace, wholeness, and harmony. *That is restorative justice.*

Retributive justice sends the drug addict to jail. Restorative justice sends him to rehab.

Which one does Jesus use here? Well...*neither*. Retributive justice would have been punishing the woman for her sin, and Jesus clearly doesn't do that. Restorative justice would have meant bringing about healing and wholeness between the woman and the religious leaders who are accusing her and maybe even her husband, who is the one that she has wronged. But as far as we know, Jesus doesn't do *that*, either. He tells the religious leaders to consider their own sin, and he tells the woman not to do it again. They all go their separate ways, but it somehow doesn't feel *resolved*. The woman still has to go home and face her husband. The man she was committing adultery *with* has somehow been left out of this altogether. And I would *bet* that when those religious leaders see her around town in the future, they

are going to be harboring some sort of resentment against her. It doesn't feel like there is complete healing and wholeness here. So if it's not *retributive*, and it's not *restorative*, what kind of justice does Jesus use here?

He uses *mercy*. We don't often think of mercy as justice. There is either mercy *or* justice, right? We tend to think of justice as when someone gets what they deserve (good or bad), but *mercy* is when you *do not* get the punishment that you deserve. And what Jesus shows us is that the justice of God is rooted in mercy.

Mercy does not always make sense to us. It's not always *practical* or *logical*. It's not equally beneficial. It doesn't make us money, and it doesn't always make us look good. Mercy doesn't always line up with the way of the world. But Jesus calls us to a *different* way. And I *know* that we cannot base our legal system on mercy. If a judge just showed mercy to the man who killed the woman in our neighborhood, he could very well go and do it again. Mercy can be taken advantage of. But I'm not talking about our legal system. I'm talking about the Kingdom of God; *God's* justice. I'm talking about *you* and *me* and the ways that *we* can work for a more just world by showing mercy to others. If someone wrongs me, hurts me, they may have to face legal consequences. If they break a law, the state has to hold them accountable for that. But I get to choose how *I* respond. I get to choose whether I hold on to anger and grudges and a desire for vengeance. I can choose to let go of it and trust God to take care of me.

When Jesus was dying on the cross, unjustly condemned to death in an act of retributive justice, he cried out to God. But he did not say, "Father, avenge me! Strike them down! Punish them eternally!" He said, "Father, *forgive* them, for they don't even know what they're doing." On the cross, Jesus turned *retributive* justice into *restorative* justice by *showing mercy*. By forgiving them, he restored them – *and us* – to a right relationship with God. His *mercy* brought about our *salvation*.

And *our* mercy can help save *others*. Maybe not from the legal consequences of their actions; they may have to face those. But our mercy can help set them free from shame and anger and fear. Because the experience of mercy can transform people. Jesus didn't wait until we changed to show us mercy and forgive us. He showed us mercy, he forgave us, and that experience of mercy makes us *want* to change, to live differently, to live for *him*, to live *like* him.

I do not know what justice looks like for that murdered woman or that State Trooper or Epstein's victims. I don't know what it looks like in Ukraine or the Middle East. There is not always justice or mercy in this world. But the *good news* is that, in Jesus, there *is* justice, and that justice *is* mercy. And *we* can *choose* to be people of mercy in this world, giving others not the *bad* thing that they *deserve*, but the *good* thing that they *don't*. Because that is what God has done for us in Christ. And when we do the same, it makes us more like him. And this world could use more people like Jesus.

So let's *be* them. Let's be people of mercy. And let's be the good news that people need, in Christ.
Amen.