

Missive by Greta 20230924

WHAT IS JUSTICE?

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In the Exodus passage we just heard, the Israelites were in trouble. They were starving and they were not happy about it. They followed Moses out of slavery into the desert seemingly only to die of starvation. But it says that God heard their complaining and provided them with quails and bread to eat. They are being taught to have faith in God's promise. God is demonstrating God's saving help for those who follow him. Moses says to Aaron, "Draw near to the Lord for he has heard your complaining."

I really wish that people all over the world who are in mortal need were heard. Imagine if all our cries were heard and that God responded. Wouldn't that make things a lot more just and easier? Imagine if those starving all over the world had their needs met. If those enslaved were freed. What would the world be like if God answered all the needs of the people who are in most dire need.

But this is not what God does. God does not perform miracles of manna from heaven for the hungry. God does not answer the cries of the hungry. According to the United Nations around 9 million people die every year of hunger and hunger-related diseases. And due to the pandemic and the war in Ukraine this number is rising. How is it possible that we, the good and compassionate people of God, have not eradicated poverty and starvation?

Brother Dennis and I live in an Episcopal monastery, and we are both dedicated to ministry with the incarcerated. We have offered spiritual care to our brothers and sisters

living behind bars for nearly 20 years. We were called to this path and guided by Matthew 25 which says, "I was in prison and you visited me... and what you do to the least who are my family, you do to me." And indeed, this is where and how we both feel most aware of the presence of Christ. For many men and women behind bars, there is a deep longing for connection with God and the desire to heal and transform. In fact, we consider it holy ground.

In 2010 I was facilitating a program in the girl's juvenile hall. Many of the young women told me difficult even traumatic stories but one young 15-year-old told me one of the worst. Her stepfather had been violating her since she was five years old and her mother had been physically and emotionally abusive. This child was soft spoken and tender-hearted. Miraculously, she had not become hard-hearted or bitter. I asked her one day what her relationship with God was like. She said, "Well, I prayed to God every night to keep him out of my room. But he came in anyway."

What do we say to this? How do we reconcile this with the scriptures? How does a little girl count on a God who doesn't prevent violation?

Not long after this conversation she chose to be baptized by the Catholic priest and asked me to be her Godmother. I was honored to place my hand on her back as the holy water was poured over her head. She told me she felt like a new person.

This young woman is still my beloved Goddaughter and now we are family. She works at Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles and has just had a child with a good and sober man named Dario. And guess what she named her daughter? Emanuella – *God with*

me. She has a deep faith in God. She doesn't expect everything to go her way but she feels sustained by God in her life.

In today's gospel passage from Matthew, we hear this somewhat challenging story of what seems at first glance like injustice. How could it be just for someone who labored all day in the fields to receive the same compensation as someone who labored for merely an hour? But let's take a closer look. Let's think about the workers who are not chosen and wait all day in the hot sun just hoping to be hired – what is their story? Were they not as strong? Did they have a physical disability? Certainly, they were as determined as the others to make a living to support their families. Why were they not chosen earlier in the day?

They were overlooked for some reason. We can only assume that they had all the same needs to make money as the others, but they were not chosen. And then this compassionate landowner aka God gives them what they need – work and pay.

This is an example of what is referred to as the *Preferential Option for the Poor*. You can probably think of many parables and teachings where Jesus considered the needs of the poor. Remember Matthew 25? “For I was hungry and you gave Me food, I was thirsty and you gave Me drink, I was a stranger and you made Me welcome.”

The phrase “preferential option for the poor” was first used in 1968 by Father Pedro Arrupe, a Jesuit. Later the term became popular with Catholics throughout the world. The option for the poor refers especially to the trend throughout biblical texts where there is a demonstrable preference given to powerless individuals who live on the

margins of society. Maybe just like the laborers last chosen to work in the fields in today's scripture.

Maybe there is a purpose for the suffering in the world. Maybe it is meant to inspire us, the laborers, to strive to co-create with God a more just world. One thing I do know is this: God is with us. God doesn't spare us from suffering, but God upholds us and sustains us through it. As the brilliant spiritual writer Jim Finley who suffered greatly as a child says, "It is a mystery how God does not rescue us, yet holds us close and sustains us in our struggles."

I am good with this. I can love with all my heart the Jesus who models compassion for the least. I can strive every day to see God in all things even the suffering. I can do my best to keep my heart connected to God which is love and let this love flow into the world which needs it so very much.

And let us all seek out the one who did not get hired and make them first. Let us be good followers of this upside-down thinking that Jesus asks of us. Let us elevate those who might otherwise be overlooked.

Sister Greta