

Two words have been ringing in my ears all week: Maintain justice.

Maintain justice. Let's put these words in context. The Israelites have just returned from exile after generations of hardship – they have been released from slavery, survived the wilderness, and now they've been safely returned to the Promised Land.

So Isaiah is instructing them about how they are to live – how they should set up this newly restored and free nation. "Maintain justice." He goes on to tell them to be alert to any injustice around them. You see, now that they are the free ones, they are at risk of taking it all for granted, becoming just like their captors, and enslaving others.

So the prophet tells them – don't ever forget that you were once outcasts, so welcome the outcasts. Honor the foreigners. Respect the culture of those who are not like you. He says, "You people know the life-giving, chain-bursting love of God, and now you are called to use your freedom – your privilege – for the sake of others."

We are no different from those first people of God. And like them, we can easily forget our mission, and fall into the trap of comfortable living. But God calls us, too, to stay awake to the needs of the world and to maintain justice.

We are living in challenging times – as God's people always have. We know we are called to maintain justice, but we don't always know how, right? So we get anxious. We get self-righteous. We get reactive. And I think all of that happens because sometimes we forget the core of who we are and what we are doing here. We forget to be centered in our identity as God's people first.

I don't know about you, but sometimes I doubt my call. Sometimes I'm not sure I'm really supposed to do this – this speaking about God business. I mean, the truth is that sometimes I can't remember all of the Biblical history just right. I use the Table of Contents in my Bible like the rest of you. Sometimes I can't remember which ecumenical council came up with which doctrinal confession. I can't quote impressive theologians and sometimes I feel totally stupid and inarticulate in meetings with other pastors. And when I get stuck in my head, it's easy to let all of that doubt make me anxious, and that keeps me from living out God's call faithfully.

So like the Israelites, I need to return to the basics, and remember what I'm really doing here.

And when I get out of my head, and into my heart, then I remember: I'm standing here because of what God has done for me. Because *I* was once an outcast, and the wideness of God's mercy is even wide enough for me.

I'm standing here because when I had lost hope, and been overwhelmed by sin and guilt and hurt, when I felt abandoned and unlovable – I heard the good news of Jesus. I learned about forgiveness. I learned about my real identity as a beloved child of God.

And that good news of Jesus changed my life. It set me free. And so I have to share it.

That's my call story. That's the Israelites' call story. And it's yours, too.

Today our world is enslaved by sin. We see it all around us. Our country is enslaved by our history of slavery; and we are still bound by the chains of racism. And that truth has reared its ugly head this week, but it's not new. Our brothers and sisters of color have to deal with this all the time – not just this week. Our immigrant neighbors, our LGBTQ neighbors, our Jewish and Muslim and Native American neighbors and others – they're not just waking up to the reality of prejudice this week. It's been there, of course.

But if *we* are seeing something unjust, if our eyes are being opened because of the news, then we must hear today the call to maintain justice. We must stand with those who are still being cast out. We need to shout, clearly and publically, that all people are children of God, included in the mercy and love and belovedness of their creator – no one is less than another. We need to listen to what the oppressed have to say, and hear what they need from us right now. We need to use whatever voice and privilege we have for the sake of others.

Today in our Gospel reading, Jesus does not parse words. He doesn't waste time with political correctness. But to the Pharisees – the legal authorities of his time – he says that it is hypocritical to worry about the letter of the law while saying and doing immoral things.

He explains that God doesn't really care about their rules about food. Their purity laws are not what is important. What *is* important is how people treat one another. If you keep every law that's on the books, but you spew hate about your neighbor, then you've got it all wrong.

So you never jay-walk? You always return your library books on time? You never wear short shorts or say a swear word? Great. But Jesus doesn't care about that. Jesus cares about how you love your neighbor. Jesus cares about how you maintain justice.

And this point is made abundantly clear when a Canaanite woman comes on the scene. She is hooting and hollering about her tormented daughter. Clearly she is driving everyone crazy – because she's completely out of line. Not only is she a woman, who should be silent, she's also an ethnic and religious outsider. The disciples want to get rid of her because she is a nuisance to them.

(I mean, they like to be welcoming, of course. But like us, they've seen how sometimes these people who come in off the street smell bad, or speak strangely, or come in at inconvenient times). So they ask Jesus to get rid of her.

And at first he seems to let them have their way. He tries to ignore her. But she doesn't back down, and so Jesus explains to her why she isn't his concern. He says, "According to the law, lady, you're not my problem." And according to the law, he's right. He's supposed to be Israel's messiah, not hers.

Nevertheless, she persisted. And then *she* becomes the rabbi – illustrating Jesus' earlier point that it is not the letter of the law that matters to God. Reminding them of Israel's call to be a light to the nations. To maintain justice.

She gets it right. And Jesus lets her be the teacher – to show us what justice really looks like. This woman – the lowest, most despised, outsider – becomes the one whose voice is used to proclaim good news.

Friends, she is just like us. We too have felt that we must be outside of God's love – unfit for forgiveness and love. And yet Jesus *has seen* us. Has loved us. Has forgiven us and lifted us to new life. So now we are called do the same for others.

In those times when we are trying to figure out what it looks like to live out our Christian faith in the public sphere, I believe we will find clarity when we remember who we are and what we're doing here.

We didn't come here today just because we're a nice, proper, church people, and it's the nice, proper, churchy thing to do.

We came here today because we are imperfect. Because we are hungry. Because we need God's kind of merciful justice in our own lives. We came to give thanks for all God has done for us, and to ask God to keep doing it.

We've come, friends, to be reminded of our own call story – our own baptismal identity. And when we remember that – then our actions in the world can stem from a place of gratitude, and passion for sharing this amazing love of God with others.

Remember who you are. You are blessed to be a blessing. Amen.