

## Love and Justice

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Love and Justice, or shall we say justice and love? For we speak of love but our sense of self often demands justice. Please listen to these examples: “it’s my turn; you took more than half; that is so unfair;” each of these is a preference claim based upon justice. It is in the name of justice that we arrest petty criminals, criminalize drug use, recruit and train our youth for war, incite a war on terror, invade Afghanistan, and conquer Iraq. These may have claim to justice, not for me to judge, but even if justice, it’s not informed by love. The Hebrew prophet Micah, calling Israel to its senses, asked: “What does God require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?” I’ve heard of a righteous man, who did justice his whole life: following the 10 commandments, paying his taxes, a patriot in his country, then he died. He found himself standing before the gates of heaven certain he had lived a virtuous life and would enter. St. Peter asked one question: “Who did you love?” This man did not understand, what has love got to do with it? After all we are talking about justice! He was a just man. But salvation comes from love, who do you love and are loved by in return? Has your life contributed to more love and justice in this world or have you done it harm? What does God require of us but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

How can we distinguish justice responding to love from justice responding to greed or fear? In a case such as my mother trying to teach love and justice to her many sons, that is plain to see. However this can be rather difficult when we are dealing with politics and power. The UUA and UUSC ‘s solidarity with undocumented workers against inhumane immigration laws and raids which tear families apart, separating mothers from their children, creating fear and suffering in immigrant communities, that feels like love and justice coming up against justice and fear. Investors withdrawing funds from companies whose products support the government’s genocide in Darfur feels like love and justice triumphing over greed and fear. Raising funds to assist the victims of Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar, which killed as many as 100,000 people last week, is love certainly fueling justice. The UUSC is channeling humanitarian relief to survivors left out by traditional relief organizations. This preferment of love-inspired justice over fear, greed, or courage-inspired justice, at least historically in America, had been the providence of women, particularly mothers who understood loving justice deeply within their hearts.

That is why we read Julia Ward Howe’s Proclamation: “Arise all women who have hearts, whether your baptism be that of water or of fears! Say firmly we will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies. Our husbands shall not come to us reeking of carnage for caresses and applause... We women of one country will be too tender of those of another

country to allow our sons to injure theirs.” Justice yes, but Justice informed by love, for only loving justice makes the world better. The UUA GA will this June debate whether we can ever fight a just war now that we know the violence we do, or whether to be just we must find nonviolent solutions. Reasonable people can disagree, after all we are UUUs, but when we limit our considerations of just responses to only those that flow forth from loving kindness, rather than greed or fear, we get a different answer than if all claims to justice in the face of evil receive equal merit. The Buddha, in the Metta Sutta [his loving kindness discourse] which Anne Principe read for our opening words, or the Dhammapada [his last teaching] which Leslie used in our prayer, preached love as being the sole criteria to judge justice in this world. If your response doesn’t flow forth from loving kindness, it cannot be just, at least so taught Buddha.

Anne Principe recently shared with me a letter written by a New Orleans woman to Barbara Bush, the mother of the President of the U.S., called *When the Levees Broke*: “Dear Barbara Bush, every time that you think about what you’ve got, I want you to raise both your hands. Use your right hand for righteousness and your left hand for unjust. Everything you got that you think you got in righteousness, put a finger up. Everything that you got that you got unjust, put a finger up. And you call me and let me know, how many righteous fingers you have up and how many unrighteous fingers you have up. Because I can go back, I can go way back. When your son first came to be the candidate for president, he didn’t win the seat honest. And you know just what I mean. We shouldn’t be in war. Greed, you [always] pay for greed. Ask yourself a question... did your son win honest or dishonest? Lives are being taken and destroyed in Iraq, shouldn’t be. Yes, the bible said there would be wars and rumors of war, but it wasn’t a time for a war then. How can your son go into someone else’s house and do something and he can’t do it in his own house? You have to clean your own home before you clean up someone else’s... You know what I mean.” How will we be just?

Annie Lamont, in her letter to the pop star Madonna, brings this question into motherhood. As she writes: “First of all, your life is now totally ruined... it’s a sacred trust ... [that] will open your heart and soften you, and teach you to pay a new and deeper kind of attention.” Or as her son Sam says, “Tell the rock star just to do the best she can... give it a bottle whenever it cries and love it like it’s Jesus.” This balancing act of loving deeply while teaching justice is what I recalled when I thought of my own childhood. My mother loved me deeply, she made my big brothers include me in their baseball game, but she disciplined me when I misbehaved, and she taught me that all my actions have consequences. You too can probably remember many examples of loving justice in your life... I can see them in your eyes...

This for me is what it means to combine love with justice. To nurture and comfort while teaching and disciplining, motherhood is balance, and not all mothers get it right. Let us have empathy for those who were or are not good mothers, who for whatever life circumstance failed or fail to live up to their children’s needs. And let us feel deep sympathy and support for all

those who grew up with inadequate or absent mothers, thereby needing to learn to mother themselves as adults. There is so very much suffering in this world, but every child of God deserves to begin life with a loving mother, capable of teaching love.

A nursing mother is such a powerful image of God's love. I was surprised however when I discovered that the nursing Madonna, or nursing Virgin, Mother of God was one of the most popular images of God in Europe during the 14<sup>th</sup> century Renaissance, far more popular than the Cross was with Christians then. In statues or pictures from this period, the Virgin Mother typically presents her bare milk-engorged breast for the baby Jesus to suckle. Mary focuses only upon the child, while baby Jesus turns to look directly out of the painting at us, as if to invite us to join with him, suckling on the breast of God. This sacred nursing of the divine into incarnation was commonly loved by Christian theologians and mystics for over a thousand years. As highlighted in a recent issue of **Christian Century**, "Clement of Alexandria, Augustine, Anselm, and Bernard of Clairvaux all [also] pictured the Christian's nourishment as coming from God's breasts. And the 14<sup>th</sup> century English Christian mystic Julian of Norwich declared that a mother's love is our closest example to God's love, in that "The mother's service is nearest, readiest, and surest: nearest because it is most natural; readiest because it is most loving; surest because it is truest." It was only with the 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestant Reformation that many Christians came to prefer Jesus' gruesome crucifixion, and hence the Cross, to this wonderful image of a loving nursing baby, as the ultimate symbol of our deep connection with the Divine. In many parts of Roman Catholicism today the cult of the Madonna is still far preferred to the cult of the Cross.

So what would it mean for our sense of justice to be informed by our sense of love? We would probably need to do away with torture; such barbarity can only exist when we treat the prisoner as undeserving of our love. We may need to reconsider the large part of our own population we have chosen to arrest, to jail, so often destroying their lives, but not really from a sense of love. We may need to rethink this whole war thing, it may at times be necessary, but what would it look like if it were informed and shaped by our love for each living being? How can we justify ourselves to maim, mutilate, and kill other human beings as a way to show our deep love and affection for them? I don't think we can, hence this focus on love and justice, neither can be fully life enhancing without the other. Ideally our justice grows out from our love. As one pithy Christian expression reminds us, "When Jesus said love your neighbor, I'm pretty sure he meant to imply don't kill them!" So here, thanks to an e-mail from Jeff Cadow, is what some American 4 to 8-year old children think is the meaning of loving justly. "When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You just know that your name is safe in their mouth," Billy age 4. "Love is when you go out to eat and give somebody most of your French fries without making them give you any of theirs," Chrissy age 5. "If you want to learn to love better, you should start with a [person] who you hate," Nikka age 6. "When my grandmother got arthritis, she couldn't bend over and paint her toenails anymore. So my grandfather does it for her all the

time, even when his hands got arthritis too. That's love," says Rebecca age 8. Even small children know the difference between justice motivated by love versus justice motivated by fear, hate, anxiety, or greed. We could employ every manner of diverse and complicated rationalization, but instead we should simply choose love and justice. Amen and Blessed Be.