

“The Seasons of Righteousness”

Psalm 1; Isaiah 56:1-7– Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – September 19, 2021

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our souls might be refreshed with your living water for the work of justice. In Jesus' name, Amen.

There is a lot in these two passages that is difficult to see reflected in our experience of the world. The wicked don't seem to be perishing; the righteous are definitely not prospering in all that they do. Rather than a special, honored place in our houses of worship, those who are seen as different – sexually, racially or ethnically – are still often excluded or even condemned. The scriptures call us to maintain justice and delight in the law of the Lord, as if we will be rewarded for doing so. In just a bit, they seem to promise, God will heap riches and happiness upon you.

But this is not really how the work of justice unfolds, is it? The vision seems to tarry, and so we are forced to wait for it, while we keep working. How long? Not long – but “not long” in God's time, which is notoriously hard to predict. So we keep working, even when our labors seem to produce no fruit.

The work of racial justice is something we are all called to, as Christians, as disciples of Jesus, and specifically as big-D Disciples. Since the late 1970s, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has been committed to dismantling racism in all its many forms, in our hearts, our churches, and our society. Every year in September, we focus on this work and receive this Special Offering to support the

work. Every year it offers us a chance to reflect on what we've done, how we've lived into this commitment or not, and to weigh the fruits of our labor, if there are any. So what do we do when the fruits are hard to find?

I'm struck by the image we're offered in Psalm 1. Speaking of the righteous who "delight in the law of the Lord," the psalmist says: "They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither." What encouragement can we find in reflecting on the seasons of righteousness? What if that tree isn't each of us, as individuals, but the whole of us, the work of justice itself?

Let me say that it could be easy for me to say, as a white woman, that it's okay for us to dabble in the work of racial justice – getting involved when we feel inspired and energized by current events and taking breaks when it gets hard or risky. Part of the benefit of my whiteness is that if I feel like ignoring the impact of racism for a day, or a week, or a couple years, I can easily do so. Let us not mistake this sort of half-heartedness for faithful commitment that recognizes human limitations. That is the kind of lukewarm interest that deserves to be spit out of God's mouth. Those of us who do not bear the weight of racism on a daily basis must always be careful to ensure that we're not using excuses of "self-care" or "overload" as justifications for leaving the work behind. Let us keep that in mind as we proceed. Each of us comes to this work with a different lens, different experiences, different obligations, and different expectations. We must follow the lead of the experts, that is, the people

who are most directly impacted by the systems of racial bias and violence that shape our culture.

All of that said, how can the image of seasons of righteousness help us navigate the difficult work of racial justice? Can we find liberation in the idea that we do not have to always be producing fruit? There is a season for bearing fruit and a season to simply work at keeping our leaves from withering. Sometimes it's hard to tell which we're being asked to do until it's over. "The time is always ripe to do what is right," Rev. Dr. King reminds us, in our Reconciliation sub-theme. But the right thing is just as likely to be watering the roots as it is picking the fruit. Discerning which season we're in can keep us from needless second-guessing and wasting time feeling guilty about not doing or being "more".

When we observe the work, we can see this happening. Communities of activists will be working for years to overturn racist laws and practices, without any apparent success. But then, something shifts – and let's be clear: it is often a violent death like George Floyd's that commands the requisite attention – and in the aftermath, the work that had gone years unrewarded is suddenly embraced and accepted, and change is made. Sometimes we're watering roots to keep the leaves from withering; sometimes we're picking the fruit.

What does this look like in a predominantly white church with a spotty history of active involvement in racial justice? Can we move into a season of active growth? Can we find the roots we're called to water and begin that work? "The time is always

ripe,” but what is the right thing we’re being called to do? Some of us collaborated with folks from five other churches this past spring in a class called “Dialogues On: Race.” We are scheduled to have a reunion picnic next Sunday to share what we’ve been up to since then. What will we be able to report? We decided that what we need is not a class or a committee, but a Working Group. Because we don’t want a tree that only has leaves; we want a tree that will, at least in some seasons, bear fruit – fruit that can bring life to those most impacted by systemic racism. But as we get started, we know that we will need to position ourselves so that our tree is close to that stream of Living Water, so that we don’t – to mix biblical metaphors – become like the seed sown on the rocks that falls away in the time of testing because our roots are shallow.

The seasons of righteousness pass differently for each of us. There’s another metaphor that’s been making the rounds in the past few years. We are reminded of how choral breathing works. When a choir is trying to sing a slow piece, with long sustained notes that aren’t supposed to have obvious breath breaks, each singer is supposed to take a breath at a different time. So the overall effect is that the note, the harmonies are sustained and unbroken, but nobody has to pass out for lack of oxygen for that to happen. We hold the note for one another so that each one, in turn, has a chance to catch their breath. This is how we keep the leaves from withering. When my watering pot is empty, you will sprinkle something from yours. When yours is empty, I will pour something from mine. If we all need to go down to the river

together to fill our cans, we will count on the work of the tree-waterers who went before us to keep the leaves green until we return.

The work of racial justice is hard and urgent and so over-due. The time is always ripe to chip away at it however we can. But any expectation that we must bear fruit 365 days a year is an ugly lie. That is not how God works in our world. That is not how justice is maintained, because justice does not demand productivity over abundant life. Sometimes we are just watering the roots, keeping the leaves from withering. Sometimes we're watering our own roots; sometimes we're watering others' roots. The tree of justice belongs to God. The time is always right to do what is before us to nourish that tree toward flourishing. Hallelujah and Amen.