

Recentering Justice¹

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The word I have for us is titled “Recentering Justice”—not *centering* justice, as if for the first time, but *recentering* it, putting it back in the place God always intended in our lives, as disciples and as leaders in particular.² I am going to begin by sharing the heart of my message right up front: recentering justice means that *biblically, justice ministry and spiritual health function together and depend on one another*. This is important for any of us who want to following Jesus faithfully, and especially important for those of us called to leadership. Our spiritual health—our right relationship with God, drawing our identity from Christ and living out of our belovedness in God—is always necessary for doing justice. And this spiritual health then bears the fruit of healthy justice ministry. The second part of the summary is this: *this*

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² I'd like to thank a few people. Cecelia Williams asked me to consider preaching, and I need to thank and honor her leadership as well as the entire Love Mercy and Do Justice staff. I also want to thank my predecessor as president of the Ministerium. It is because of the leadership of Catherine Gilliard that I am here tonight, so I thank and honor her. Learning from and watching other women superintendents, like Tammy Swanson-Draheim and Evelyn Johnson, is also part of why I can be on a stage like this. Thank you. I also want to thank the pastors and staff of Quest Church. Quest is a church that honors God, and our staff does this in a way that brings people back to the church. I meet people every week who say, “I gave up on church till I found you,” or “I didn't think I could fit anywhere and bring all of who I was until I came here.” I am grateful to serve with these people who shape me and shape the world. On behalf of Quest, I also want to thank those who reached out after we had a serious vandalism incident the Sunday before Christmas Eve. Thank you for your support.

truth always flows both ways. Our embodiment of biblical justice—having right relationships with others, both personally and systemically, caring for the vulnerable, the marginalized, fighting injustices in our world around race, gender, economics, immigration status, abilities, and many more—is always necessary for our spiritual health. Justice ministry, in turn, bears the fruit of a healthier relationship with God.

What this means practically is that if we have a rich prayer life, we will see injustices better. If we engage in advocating for the vulnerable, in dismantling racism and feeding the hungry and housing the homeless, we will see the Holy Spirit come alive in us. When we worship, lament, and confess, the closer we get to understanding our need for God, and we then understand our need for each other. Church, I'm convinced of this. It has been true in my own life. I have seen it in pastors I teach and coach. I've seen it in our congregation. I've seen it in your congregations. There is truth to look at here: that our spiritual health and justice ministries are always meant to go hand in hand. Recentering justice.

First I will briefly unpack the larger concept of what biblical justice is, looking at the rich biblical narrative that describes this. I'll then focus on the story of Hannah, comparing her to the priest Eli and his sons, because I think this story tells us something profound about whether or not we keep justice and spirituality together, especially as leaders. Throughout Scripture justice means a right relationship with both God and others; this concept is at the center of our faith. Keep this in mind, as you read the first section of our passage from 1 Samuel 2:

Hannah prayed and said, “My heart exults in the LORD; my strength is exalted in my God. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in my victory. There is no Holy One like the LORD, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God. Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the LORD is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed. The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil. The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn....He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor....The LORD! His adversaries shall be shattered; the Most High will thunder in

heaven. The LORD will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed.”
(1 Samuel 2:1–5, 8, 10)

This is the word of God for the people of God.

Our Biblical Witness: Centering Justice

Recentering justice: spiritual health and justice ministry, always together. I wonder if we really see this connection? I think too often we split our personal spiritual health from the social systemic realities that we refer to as “justice ministry.”

I grew up in a small church in southeast Minnesota, Salem Road Covenant Church. A church plant, it held worship services in a multi-purpose gym. It was not a church that talked about justice ministries, but it loved me well. It was like my second family. This church taught me that the Bible mattered for everything in my life, and this church taught me that Jesus loves me. So even though this church would not have used the words “justice ministry,” I want to go back and thank them—and blame them—because the reason that I did all of this school, all of this study, all of this pastoral ministry, all this community development, is because I learned about doing this from the word they taught me to value.

Did you know that justice is everywhere in the Bible? Because of the way I was formed in my church, I have to take biblical justice seriously. If we are people of the book who ask the question, “Where is it written?” we must acknowledge how central justice always has been in our Bible. Justice needs to be “recentered” because somehow in the development of our church, nation, and world it has become too common for us to imagine justice can be separated from the biblical narrative. Think about this connection every time you see the cross: the vertical direction stands for being in right relationship with God; the horizontal direction of the cross stands for being in right relationship with others. That is what justice is. That is how God intended all our relationships to be.

Many of you probably know the literally hundreds of verses that talk about justice and righteousness in the Bible. We know that Scripture often refers to the poor, the widow, the orphan, the immigrant—those most vulnerable groups without systemic power in their social settings, and those people groups who were always tied to God’s narrative of justice. You probably know that the Old Testament uses many words to teach us about this concept, *mishpat*, *tzedakah*, and others. You likely know

that Scripture often pairs “justice” and “righteousness” as well as “justice” and “mercy.” I love that the same Spanish word, *justicia*, is used for both “justice” and “righteousness.” By contrast, the concept of “righteousness” sometimes seems different than “justice ministry” in English. We need to recenter these words and their meanings.

Part of recentering justice is this right alignment with God—what we tend to think of as righteousness perhaps, that vertical connection of the cross. When we can say, “I am who you say that I am, God,” that is justice. Justice is knowing that I am in need of a God who is different from me—that God is God, and I am not—so I need to submit to God who knows all and sees all, who is holy, just, merciful, and compassionate. *This* God wants to line up with humanity, even with me. It is out of this freedom that I can fully be who God made me to be for others. Knowing who I am in Christ, my identity in the vertical aspect of the cross, fuels the horizontal aspect. The overflow of God’s lovingkindness and forgiveness in me, the freedom of knowing that I’m forgiven, chosen, and enough, enables me to see that kindness, freedom, and chosenness in others. After I’ve received life from God it overflows to my neighbor. I want life for my neighbor. I might even fight for life for my neighbor. I might interrupt personal or systemic realities that take life away from my neighbor.

Some of the most well-known verses on justice connect these two aspects clearly. In Micah 6:8 justice is connected to our spiritual health: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” Right before Amos exhorts, “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24), the prophet tells the people of God, “I hate, I despise your festivals. Take away from me the noise of your songs. I don’t want your worship. I don’t want your offerings. I don’t want you to do the things that would right your relationship with me. What is it that I want? Justice” (cf. Amos 5:21–24). Our spiritual health and our justice are connected biblically. They’re so connected that God doesn’t even want our worship without justice. I had read “let justice roll down” many times, but only as I read and studied more did I notice the section before. It blew me away how strong Amos’s language was in calling God’s people to justice. Has that ever happened to you that as you read a biblical text more deeply you realize that the whole story is more complex?

Another frequently quoted verse is Isaiah 58:6, “Is not this the fast

that I choose?” At Quest Church we begin each year with a fast. Fasting is one of the best ways to get in alignment with God. But here the prophet Isaiah tells the people of God, “I don’t want that fast you were doing. What is the fast that I want? I want you to unloose chains of injustice. Those who are tied, set them free. I want you to feed the hungry.” And then what does the prophet say will be the fruits of their justice? “Your light will shine. You’ll be refreshed. You’ll be watered.” This is a spiritual growth metaphor. The text is literally saying, don’t do spiritual growth practices without justice. And after you do justice, it is justice that will fuel and grow your spiritual life. Recentering justice ministry means that justice ministry and spiritual health belong together. They are not meant to be separated.

Just as there’s a whole lot in the Old Testament about centering justice, there is a whole lot in the New Testament. The one key text I want to weave in is the greatest commandment (Matthew 22:34–40; Luke 10:25–27). Here Jesus is asked what the greatest commandment is, and he turns the question on its head. The scribe who asks the question thinks Jesus will have to pick one of the Ten Commandments; he thinks his question will trick Jesus. What does Jesus answer? The greatest commandment on which hangs all the laws and all the prophets, all of the ways of spiritually lining up with God, is this: first love God. Be in right relationship with God with all of who you are—your mind, your body, your spirit. And then the second is like it: love your neighbor as yourself. First the vertical, love God, and then the horizontal, love your neighbor; they’re always connected. Jesus continues to be pressed in this story—well, how much do I have to love my neighbor?—and he answers with the example of an ethnic outsider. Jesus juxtaposes the “good Samaritan” with a Levite and a priest, those whom everyone would think of as the “good guys,” the religious insiders and leaders (Luke 10:29–37). Jesus’s very example of how to love God and love neighbor is doing justice work, crossing ethnic and privilege lines.

Our Work as Leaders: Spiritual Health and Justice Ministry

This is our work to do, church, and it includes two aspects. It’s likely we would all agree that our relationship to God is critical to our spiritual health. Yet I suspect that too often we don’t prioritize our spiritual health. And too often we see justice ministry as a peripheral or an add-on. Have you ever heard something like, “Well, justice ministry is just for those people who are called to it,” or for progressives, or maybe people of color,

or those in diverse neighborhoods? The connotation is that each of us can choose whether or not to engage in right relationships with others. But we need to recenter justice, my sisters and my brothers. This is not optional if we are people of the Book.

This is part of what I've been praying for you, leaders and people serving in our churches, whether you are part of the Covenant Ministerium or a leader outside of that formal body. All of us, as beloved in Christ, as disciples and leaders, know that ministry can be exhausting. It can be isolating. Ministry can even be deceptive, because in our near-constant press to give to others, we can forget that we need to receive first. Justice, remember, means being in right relationship with our God. We cannot do healthy, sustainable ministry unless we are first aware of our need for God and are receiving from God. Part of the beauty of tonight's worship songs is the truth that God sees us and knows us and has already called us. Right now, wherever you are, whatever season of ministry, whatever pain or challenges or high points, know that you are chosen. You are set free. You are already healed. You are already loved. You are a child of God. Do we as ministers need to hear that and receive it first before we preach it to others?

I confess I've had seasons in my life where I didn't believe I needed God in the way I now know I do. At times I even felt I was not encouraged to need God, where I was affirmed for doing more, where I even thought God might need me. I could help God because I had gifts and strengths. I was called, and people said I could do stuff, so I was going to help God by doing all these good things. But when you do that for too long, you can run out of gas because your fuel is not coming from the right place. It is dangerous too because in our churches and ministries, others are rarely going to tell you, "Stop doing a lot of things," or "You should go take some time off," or "You should go do stuff that we don't see the fruit of right away like aligning with God." It's a challenge.

It can also be difficult for our pride. It is a reminder to me that God does not need me. Leadership is a privilege. It is an invitation for me to walk with God, to be called by God, to live out the strengths and the gifts God has given me. That is a deep joy, but God does not *need* me; God invites me. This is good news: God does not need you! God is healing you and inviting you into what God is already doing in our world. God is already bringing justice across creation! God is already centering you in what God is doing in our world! God's already healing and calling people, and the Holy Spirit is doing things bigger than your or I could

ever ask or imagine! So why would we make such a small God where we think we're helping God when we do justice ministry? We need to recenter justice, church.

I had the honor of being in ordination interviews this past week, and I asked every candidate I interviewed these two questions: how do you intentionally steward growing your spiritual health, and how do you intentionally pursue justice ministry? I noticed their answers were connected, and I think that's true for all of us. I want us to think about what God is doing in our lives. How is it that God is reframing and reshaping and renaming us? How does that vertical identity work of our spiritual health propel us, demand of us, and encourage us to do our horizontal work, to do justice ministry?

Another thing I am praying for our church right now is that we would see and believe that justice ministries are not an add-on, not optional. They are not for some Christians to engage in. Church, hear this: justice is not a project. Justice is not a political affiliation. Justice is certainly not a resume-builder, something to enhance our image. Justice is not a three-step plan. Justice is not something we tweet, or where we say, "I'm not this, I'm not that." Justice, biblical justice, is an ongoing way of life. It is something followers of Jesus Christ are called to; it is central to our discipleship. When we engage in justice ministry it feeds back into our spiritual health, our relationship with God. The biblical witness tells us that we can't even worship God rightly without justice.

Recentering justice means that we allow God's justice—a right relationship with God and a right relationship with others—to reshape us. It has to rename and recenter us—maybe first as ministers, maybe first as leaders, maybe first as those who are trying to give and love and call others into ministry. Recentering justice.

Hannah's Example: A Leader Centered in Biblical Justice

I want to turn to 1 Samuel and Hannah's song, a beautiful and pivotal story, and look at how we see her as a leader. Hannah is an example of somebody centered in justice. She doesn't have to recenter it, because her life story, her obedience, and her faithfulness show that she is rightly lined up with God and with others.³ Hannah is the second wife of a faithful, God-following Israelite. Hannah is unable to have children, and she's

³ I want to thank Pastor Inés Velásquez-McBryde for helping me think about Hannah in this way.

actually bullied and tormented by another one of the wives because of this. But Hannah still faithfully worships. She follows the law, visits the priest, and makes sacrifices at the shrine at Shiloh. In deep lament, she throws herself in front of God, praying for a child. And God hears her. God answers, and Hannah promises to return the son she births to God. God hears Hannah and answers, and the possibility for new birth, which had been closed off, was opened.

I want to acknowledge that anytime we talk about the realities of pregnancy, infertility, or child loss, these verses can be painful for some, or reminders of difficult spaces in our own lives. I also want to say that Hannah's story does speak to the ways that God works in women through literal, miraculous physical childbirth, but it also communicates how God can see, hear, and deliver any of us who at times have felt forgotten, unseen, or unworthy. Both men and women are being called today, through this text, to birth new things and to bring new life to our world. How many of us are tempted to think that something that has been closed in our lives can never reopen? Hannah teaches us something about that kind of birth, too. Whether this is a literal or figurative word for you, I want you to hear that God sees your pain and your places of barrenness. And God's justice and God's right relationship with us informs the truth that we know, that God is still with us and still bringing new life.

In our story it is Hannah's spiritual health—her fasting, her worship, her dependence on God, even her desperation for God—that we learn about first. She didn't go home to wait, follow a ten-step plan, or ask somebody else to fix her need. She was so desperate for a connection with God that this fueled everything that she did. And out of this depth of her worship, God responded to Hannah's healthy spiritual dependence and gave her a son, Samuel. Hannah teaches us that God has new things to bring us if we keep praying and crying out. I know it is not easy to wait for the miraculous; I've been there, and I know that the waiting can be painful. But Hannah's story reminds us that God is birthing new things even in places where we never thought it could happen. Hannah even gives up the son God birthed in her. That is leadership. And it is only possible through right relationship with God.

Hannah's song of praise also shows clearly that she sees injustices. She sees the differences between systems and power. She names all of those broken relationships between people. She herself is in a category of vulnerability, so she understands injustice. And as soon as God's promise is fulfilled in her, what is her response? She is overwhelmed by praise.

She stops, she turns back, she acknowledges God. *The response to justice in our midst is praise, church!* Hannah's song says, "Thank you, I know that this was you, God. I know you're the one who is going to turn these systems over and bring those who were low, high." Then she names, "I will remember that this was you, God; this was not by my own strength or by my own hand." She knows she wasn't helping God. She has a right relationship with her place in relation to God.

And notice that Hannah is not even a formal leader. She's just a woman. She's a woman being oppressed and bullied. She's on the outside. She does not have power or means. She's a woman in her time and culture as well, so she hardly has a voice. But even in that space, with whatever she could do, she maintained a right relationship with God. She also saw the systems oppressing others and had a right relationship with them. This woman likely felt forgotten, abused, unseen, with nowhere to turn, but she knew to go to God. And God saw her.

Hannah's story reminds me of many men and women in our midst, people who have this kind of sacrificial leadership and whose spiritual health is so strong, whose connection with God and with others shapes their life and their witness. And their witness has shaped me. I think of people like Pastor Karen Brewer who will be ordained this summer. Spending decades in a difficult neighborhood and going through her own pain, her own suffering, she's still been witnessing to people for years. She's been changing her neighborhood not because she had a central place of power but out of a right relationship with God and others. I'm so thankful for her witness.

I think of people like Superintendent Curtis Ivanoff and other indigent leaders who are so close to the pain of displacement, the pain of loss of land, and even the invisibility of a people group. Being close to that pain does something rich in their spiritual health and their relational justice health. I'm so thankful for that witness.

I think of Pastor Dany Flores who I've gotten to know over the last ten years or so. Because of the pain of immigration and different policies, she's been separated from family all over the place, and yet she's been serving and leading and connected to God throughout. I am so thankful for her witness.

I think of Quest Church's founding pastor, Eugene Cho, and his wife Minhee Samonim. She is someone who is always behind the scenes, praying, delivering food, making jokes, dropping off gifts, seeing children with special needs whom others don't see. She sacrifices for others consistently.

She does this because she prays constantly, and she sees people around her who need justice and who need God. I'm so thankful for her witness.

And I think of Professor Richard Carlson. He was my seminary adviser, and he is part of the reason I stayed in seminary and in the church when I was so discouraged. I saw a lack of witness and a lack of justice, and I asked him, "If people love Jesus and read the Bible, why don't they act like it?" And Richard answered my questions with understanding and with his own stories of doubt and pain. He was a student organizer in the civil rights movement, a pastor and a professor in many contexts. He'd done church ministry decades longer than I had when I met him in my early twenties. I thought, if he had persevered, I could probably be a little more patient and keep doing this longer. I am so thankful for his witness.

There are so many more; many of you are here in this room. I couldn't name all of you who have witnessed centering justice and who have shaped our church and shaped me. I'm so thankful for your witness. Because when we are people of the Book and we are lined up with God and others, our life speaks of that. Others can feel it in your presence, your words, and your witness. And when it's missing, we feel that too.

Eli and His Sons: Leaders without Biblical Justice

After 1 Samuel tells the story of Hannah, the narrative turns to Eli and his sons, the priests at the shrine. In contrast to Hannah, they offer a powerful example of what happens when we are not rightly lined up and centered in justice.

Eli's sons were scoundrels; they had no regard for the LORD. Now it was the practice of the priests that, whenever any of the people offered a sacrifice, the priest's servant would come with a three-pronged fork in his hand while the meat was being boiled and would plunge the fork into the pan or kettle or caldron or pot. Whatever the fork brought up the priest would take for himself. . . . If the person said to him, "Let the fat be burned first, and then take whatever you want," the servant would answer, "No, hand it over now; if you don't, I'll take it by force." This sin of the young men was very great in the LORD's sight, they were treating the LORD's offering with contempt. But Samuel was ministering before the LORD—a boy wearing a linen ephod. Each year his mother made him

a little robe and took it to him when she went up with her husband to offer the annual sacrifice....Now Eli, who was very old, heard about everything his sons were doing to all of Israel and how they slept with the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting. So he said to them, "Why do you do such things? I hear from all the people about these wicked deeds of yours....If one person sins against another, God may mediate for the offender; but if anybody sins against the LORD, who will intercede for them?" His sons, however, did not listen to their father's rebuke, for it was the LORD's will to put them to death. And the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favor with the LORD and with people. (1 Samuel 2:12-14, 16-19, 22-23, 25-26, NIV)

This kind of leadership is evidence of what happens when we do not hold spiritual health and justice ministry together. Eli is at the end of his ministry, and he is literally and figuratively losing his sight. He's asleep at his post. He is not stewarding his role as a priest or as a father of his sons. He doesn't even hear from God anymore, 1 Samuel 1 tells us. He also did not recognize Hannah in his midst. He missed her giftedness, her connection with God, her faithfulness. He doesn't see God or intervene with his sons. He seems to watch injustice go by.

Do you think in our own time a leader like Eli would speak out when injustice happens? When things happen to embarrass Native American elders, when sentencing comes down that's not just, when immigration policies still separate families? Do you think a faith leader like Eli would have the courage to speak out for women being abused? Do you think someone who can't see would be able to act faithfully if his relationship with God and others was so broken? I think Eli represents passive injustice in leaders, a sleepy, blinded sense of, "Well, that's not my problem," or, "I'm not sure what I could do anyway." Men and women of God, if we find ourselves tempted to this posture or among others who are, we need to be reminded to start with confession, with lament, and with aligning ourselves with God and with others. Otherwise, listen to what happens from this not-centered-on-justice kind of leadership.

Eli's sons are the outgrowth, the progeny that thrives and grows out of a passive disengagement from God's justice and justice for others. His sons literally take for themselves the gifts that were offered to God. They assume they can take what they want. They have no regard for others.

They even take advantage of women who came to worship God. They use gifts given to God for their own enjoyment. They do not care about justice for others, and they clearly do not care about being lined up with God. This unbridled sense of power, even in the center of a religious place, leads to oppressive, unjust, and evil leadership. Eli's sons literally stick forks in the sacrifices made to God in order to self-satiate. They say, "If you don't give me what I want, even though that's meant to be unto God, I will take it by force!"

This is entitlement! This lack of the capacity to wait and listen for God, to steward their position as faith leaders, did you recognize that? These were not people who did not know better. These were leaders placed in the center of power who knew. Yet they used their unbridled power for themselves and harmed others along the way.

This example might sound harsh. It might sound far removed from us. But I suspect, sisters and brothers, we all have these tendencies. How do we pay attention if as leaders we are taking by force things we feel entitled to? How do we stop and ask God, is this right? How do we stop and look around and ask, am I paying attention to systems and injustice, to those who are not being seen? Do you realize Eli and his sons did not recognize what God was birthing in Hannah? The evil they committed in the center of worship blinded them to God's work right in front of them. Yet, when grown, Samuel will change the line of judges that ends with the leadership of King Saul; Samuel will be the one faithful leader as other leaders fall. We don't have Samuel unless we have Hannah.⁴ It is because of Hannah that Samuel will change the structure of religious power. We would not have the new thing God birthed for the people of God were it not for the faithfulness, pain, and obedience of this woman, Hannah.

The people in the center of the story didn't even notice this little boy. And isn't this what God does? Samuel came as this little boy on the side; all we read was that he was wearing a linen ephod, and his mom faithfully visited him and cared for him. He's a footnote in this story of power and blindness and lack of centered justice. And yet, Samuel will become the main event. How often, church, is God doing a new thing, birthing new life, bringing what we and the kingdom and the world most need, not in the center of attention, not in the centers of power, not in the place with the three-pronged fork to take what we want, but on the side, in the

⁴ On this point, too, I'm indebted to Pastor Inés.

faithfulness of a woman or a man who is obedient, even in pain, to say yes and to birth something new from God? Recentering justice, church. This right relationship with God and with others is at the core of our good news. And it's good news for us as leaders first.

Closing: Good News

Being filled, being known, being chosen, being enough in the sight of God, that is our fuel, our food. That is what satisfies and satiates, not food we take by force. When we are filled up and know who we are in Christ, this overflows in the ability to see and do justice and call others to it. None of us has to do all of justice, but all of us have to do justice—because justice and spiritual health, because right relationship with God and with others is at the core of the Bible. And my church taught me that the Bible matters. This is good news for us, church. Whether we feel unseen or are out of alignment with our God, it's never too late. The moment we ask for forgiveness and confess, the moment we turn and say, “God I want to be lined up with you and with others rightly; show me what I have to do,” that is where God meets us.

The good news for leaders, for ministers, and for all those you love and minister to is that God is always standing ready for us, saying, “You are my child. You are already chosen. You are already loved. You are already enough. Be in alignment with me. It could be costly. I will ask you to change things and give things up. I will not let unbridled power or entitlement or injustice flow. But I am a God who sees you, and I am a God of justice.” It's not by strength that we prevail. Remember from Hannah's song, those who oppose the Lord will be broken. The Most High will thunder from heaven. The Lord will bring justice to the ends of the earth. He will give strength to his king. He will exalt the horn of his anointed. God will always be a God of justice! Thanks be to God.