



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker
April 22, 2018 Sermon

Evidence of Eastertide: Justice

Scripture Lesson: Genesis 1:1-8; Amos 5:14-15, 18-24

I was disappointed, as disappointed as I'd ever been in a class—at least when it wasn't about a grade.

I was a sophomore in college, taking my first philosophy class, an introductory course. Looking back on it—I certainly wasn't aware of it at the time—the professor had taken a real risk in the way he structured the course. Rather than giving us the usual superficial survey with a smattering of bite-sized excerpts from many authors, he decided that we would read just one book, a big book, a classic—Plato's *Republic*—in its entirety, in-depth for the whole semester. However the other students may have felt about it, I loved it—ate it up with a spoon, thought I had died and gone to heaven. (I know, I know—nerd, geek—but I didn't care; having failed at being cool in high school, I was over it, praise God).

In case you've never read it, or it's been a while, the topic of Plato's *Republic* is justice—"What is justice?" My disappointment occurred when Socrates proposed his first answer to the question, "What is justice?" "Justice" he says, "is when everyone or everything is doing his, or her, or its job—that's justice: just do your job." Four weeks of reading and re-reading, outlining and re-outlining for *that*?!?! I expected something mysterious, deep, profound. And instead I got "Just do your job"—I mean, my father used to say that to me when I complained about having to mow the lawn!

What I didn't realize was that Socrates was setting up an analogy—actually, a series of interrelated analogies, beginning with this one: what health is to the body, so justice is to the soul.

Now, believe it or not, bodily health is not easy to define. We know it when we have it—or when we don't—but to say what it is, well, it isn't easy. The best definition is . . . well, when each part of the body is doing its job. The heart doing the job of the heart, the kidneys, the kidneys, the immune system, the job of the immune system, etc . . . Disease is when one or more parts no longer does its job—or in the worst cases, begins to do just the opposite of its job: the cells of the body that were meant to give life to the body, now turn against it to destroy it. And as with our physical bodies, so also with the body politic. A society is just, healthy, when all of its parts—individuals, groups, institutions—are functioning well, doing their jobs.

It's an old, old idea—and you can see it in the Bible, too. Start with Genesis 1: in the beginning, the earth was a formless void, and darkness covered the face of the deep. But then God created. And to create means to create order: separating the light and the darkness, the day and the night, the earth and the sky, the waters and the dry land. In the New Testament, you see it in the body of Christ—where Paul makes the metaphor explicit—saying the church is like the human body, comprising many different parts, each with its own unique job, all of them functioning together for the good, the well-being, the health, the flourishing of the whole.

To do justice, then, is to discern the natural, God-given order of things, and then to honor that order—to embody that order—in how we live our lives and organize our culture and our society. It's an old, old idea—the question is whether it has been damaged beyond all repair.

The injustices committed in the name of justice are titanic, monstrous, and legion. How many acts of prejudice, hatred, oppression, cruelty, and inhumanity have we human beings tried to justify by appealing to the supposed natural order of things, by saying that's just the way it is, that's the way the world works, that's the nature of things, that's the way God made the world. The examples—both historical and personal—are almost too numerous and too painful to give voice to, but I'll start with a personal one: I can't be the only one here who had a grandfather—an good and kind man—who said to his loving and beloved daughter, a daughter by the way who had far better grades than her brothers—“women weren't meant to go to college.” And to see the historical examples . . . well, just look. In the 20th-century, apartheid in South Africa was justified as God's will, as a social arrangement embodying the God-given order of things. And as for our own country . . . well, start with the phrase, “separate but equal”—a travesty of justice if there ever was one—and then go on from there to. . . well, the examples are almost too painful and too numerous to give voice to.

The injustices committed in the name of justice are titanic, monstrous, and legion. The best things when corrupted become the very worst. The higher and more valuable a thing is, the more numerous and difficult to distinguish will be its counterfeits.

Even the phrase, “Just do your job,” has often been used to get people to go along with injustice, to look the other way, not to concern themselves with the other human beings involved and their suffering—although I have to say, looking back on it, that my having to cut the lawn as a teenager was no great injustice, not that I thought that at the time, mind you.

The question is whether this old, old idea of a natural order of things has been so abused that it is damaged beyond all repair.

I raise this question today, because today—April 22nd—is Earth Day, first started in 1970 in an effort to increase awareness of the effects we humans have on our natural environment. And I raise it because, I believe, that if we are going to save the earth, we will need to appeal to that old idea of a natural God-given order of things that includes ourselves.

If you go the Bible, again to the early chapters of Genesis, you can see that God gives humans a natural role and responsibility: we are to be caretakers—stewards—of the earth. The earth does not belong to us—it belongs to God—but we are to take care of it. That's our job. As caretakers, we are to discern the natural order of things and then to honor that order in how we live our lives in relation to creation. In other words, our job is to make sure that the rest of creation can do its job, that is, live as God intended it to live—that it flourishes. It's an old, old idea—the question is whether it is has been damaged beyond all repair.

You know, it's a funny thing about Earth Day, that I'm sure the original founders did not intend, and probably only preachers have noticed: Earth Day almost always falls within Eastertide, that seven-week, fifty-day season on the church calendar, beginning with Easter Sunday, during which we celebrate Jesus' resurrection and “walk in newness of His life.” Which means there's hope for our ongoing efforts to do justice to creation, which brings me to *Charlotte's Web*.

It's a beautiful story, one I'm guessing you remember. But you may not remember that although it's Charlotte, the gray spider, who ultimately saves Wilbur's life (Wilbur's the pig), it's Fern, the eight-year-old girl, who first saves him. Wilbur is the runt of the litter, and the runt is nothing but trouble, born to die, but sometimes imperiling the lives of the rest until it does. So you need to kill the runt—that's what any good steward, would do. It's just the natural order of things. So that's what John Arable is going to do early one morning on the farm in Maine, when his daughter, Fern, catches up with him, and grabs hold of his ax. I put the scene on the front of your bulletin:

“But it's unfair, “ cried Fern. “The pig couldn't help being born small, could it? If I had been born small at birth would you have killed me?”

Mr. Arable smiled. "Certainly not," he said, looking down at his daughter with love. "But this is different. A little girl is one thing, a little runty pig is another."

"I see no difference," replied Fern, still hanging on to the ax. "This is the most terrible case of injustice I ever heard of."

A queer look came over John Arable's face. He seemed almost ready to cry himself.

"All right," he said. . . .

All right, the pig can live, but you have to take care of him, Fern. And she does, naming him Wilbur, and nursing him with a warm bottle as he sleeps in a box near the stove in the kitchen. And with time and Fern's love, Wilbur grows and thrives, first to live in the woodshed, then outside, and then in Zuckerman's barn, where Fern can visit him whenever she wants. (Homer Zuckerman, Fern's uncle, buys Wilbur for the grand price of six dollars).

It's in the cellar, the ground level, in the world of Zuckerman's barn, that the story—the magic—happens. The barn is still within the natural order of things: geese are still garrulous; sheep, clannish; pigs love their slop and their sleep, spiders still eat flies, and a rat is still a rat. But it is also invested with another, higher order: the animals talk; talk to one another; Fern can hear them; understand them, but not join in their conversations. And the talk is especially deep between Wilbur and Charlotte, who, despite their physical separation from one another (Wilbur in his pen; Charlotte, high above in her web) become friends—through their words.

And it's words that save Wilbur—Charlotte's words. It's early summer now, and Wilbur is growing at a marvelous rate, which for a spring pig means that he will make fine Christmas ham—it's the natural order of things. But when the old sheep somewhat maliciously informs Wilbur of his fate, Wilbur is beside himself. "I don't want to die!" Wilbur screams. "Save me somebody, save me."

"I don't want to die," Wilbur later moans, "I want to stay alive, right here in my comfortable manure pile with all my friends. I want to breathe the beautiful air and lie in the beautiful sun." (Wilbur thus showing himself to be not just every pig but everyman.)

And he doesn't die. Charlotte's words—the words she spins in her web—first, "SOME PIG," then, "TERRIFIC," then, "RADIANT," and then, finally, late summer, at the county fair, "HUMBLE"—Charlotte's words save him. People come from miles around to gawk at the miracle of the spider's web, and at Wilbur who, although really a very average pig, now does indeed seem to be something special, terrific and radiant, while still humble. They even give Wilbur a buttermilk bath to make him especially radiant so he wins a special prize at the County Fair. No pig that special can die to make Christmas ham. And Wilbur doesn't. At the end of the boo, we're told that, "Mr. Zuckerman took fine care of Wilbur all the rest of his days, and the pig was often visited by friends and admirers, for nobody forgot the year of his triumph and the miracle of the web."

But not Charlotte. Charlotte dies at the Fair, exhausted from her work in her web, both from her spinning words for Wilbur, and then from her spinning her last and greatest masterpiece, her egg sac. After that, and after she weakly whispers and waves good-bye to Wilbur,

She never moved again. Next day, as the Ferris wheel was being taken apart and the racehorses were being loaded into vans and the entertainers were packing up their belongings and driving away in the trailers, Charlotte died. The Fair Grounds were soon deserted. The sheds and buildings were empty and forlorn. The infield was littered with bottles and trash. Nobody, of the hundreds of people that had visited the Fair, knew that a gray spider had played the most important part of all. No one was with her when she died. And yet Charlotte is not forgotten, at least not by Wilbur. He has bribed Templeton, that self-interested, eter-

nally ravenous, rat to help him get Charlotte's egg sac back to the barn, and come the first warm wind of the next spring, all of Charlotte's children are born, much to Wilbur's squealing delight. Most of those children soon leave the barn, borne off on another spring wind—such is the order of things—but three stay to become Wilbur's friends—such is the higher order of things. And so Wilbur's—

Life in the barn was very good—night and day, winter and summer, spring and fall, dull days and bright days. It was the best place to be, thought Wilbur, this warm delicious cellar, with the garrulous geese, the changing seasons, the heat of the sun, the passage of swallows, the nearness of rats, the sameness of sheep, the love of spiders, the smell of manure, and the glory of everything.

Charlotte always held a special place in Wilbur's heart. As the last lines of the book put it: "She was in a class by herself. It is not often that someone comes along who is a true friend and a good writer. Charlotte was both."

Trust me, there are many, many worse things they can say at your funeral, and few better.

Charlotte's Web is about the natural order of things: Yet that natural order is also invested with another, higher order that promises the fulfillment—the life, the glory—of everything. A young girl's love for justice and for a pig, and for justice for a pig; a father's love for his daughter, and her love for justice; the love of a pig for a spider, and spider for a pig; even the incessant self-love of a real rat; the love of words; the need for, and the love of, friendship; a self-sacrificial death that overcomes death—greater love has no spider than this, that she lay down her life for her friend—all these things come together in gossamer thread to invest that natural order of Zuckerman's barn with another higher order, so that life in the barn flourishes, as it was meant to. If it is not quite the word become flesh, it is a wonderful image of it.

And so we can hope. We can, at least to an extent, discern the natural God-given order of things, and then honor that order—embody that order—in how we live our lives and organize our culture and our society. Justice is an ongoing effort, both personally and collectively, and we have all failed at it, and will continue to fail at it. But we have also learned, and changed things for the better. Jesus' resurrection—his self-sacrificial death that overcame death—promises us that the effort is not for naught. The promise of Easter is that we are not alone in our efforts, and that our failures are not final. God is with us. In the end, heaven and earth will flourish, together, forever. In the end, justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness will be like an ever-flowing stream. Of course, in the meantime, we have work to do—much repair work to do to undo the damage—and a good place to start is to learn to love the world as God's creation:

This warm delicious cellar, with the garrulous geese, the changing seasons, the heat of the sun, the passage of swallows, the nearness of rats, the sameness of sheep, the love of spiders, the smell of manure, and the glory of everything.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen